How social media fires people's passions – and builds extremist divisions

November 14 2017, by Robert Kozinets

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

The people of the United States continue to learn how polarized and divided the nation has become. In one study released in late October by the Pew Research Center, Americans were found to have become increasingly partisan in their views. On issues as diverse as health care, immigration, race and sexuality, Americans today hold more extreme

and more divergent views than they did a decade ago. The reason for this dramatic shift is a device owned by [more than three out of every four Americans](#).

As social [media](#) has emerged over the last two decades, I have been studying how [it changes innovation](#), and researching the effects of internet communications on consumer opinions and [marketing](#). I developed [netnography](#), one of the most widely used qualitative research techniques for understanding how [people](#) behave on social media. And I have used that method to better understand a variety of challenging problems that face not only businesses but governments and society at large.

What I have found has shaken up some of the most firmly held ideas that marketers had about consumers – such as how [internet interest groups](#) can drive online purchasing and the power of stories, utopian messages and moral lessons to [connect buyers with brands](#) and each other. In one of my latest studies, my co-authors and I debunk the idea that technology might [make consumers more rational](#) and price-conscious. Instead, we found that smartphones and web applications were increasing people's passions while also [driving them to polarizing extremes](#).

How social media divides people

When people express themselves through social media, they communicate collectively. Rachel Ashman, Tony Patterson and I studied sharing of images of food in an intensive three-year ethnographic and netnographic study of a variety of online and physical sites. We collected and analyzed thousands of pictures, conducted 17 personal interviews and set up a dedicated research webpage where dozens of people shared their "food porn" stories.

Our results indicate that people share images of food for a number of

reasons, including the desire to nurture others with photos of home-cooked food, to express belonging to certain interest groups like vegans or paleos, or to compete about, for example, who could make the most decadent dessert. But this sharing can become competitive, pushing participants to one-up each other, sharing images of food that look less and less like what regular people eat every day.

Here is how it works. Many people start by sharing food images only with people they know well. But once they broaden out to a wider group on social media, several unexpected and startling things begin to happen. First, they find sites where they can feel comfortable expressing their opinions to a like-minded "audience."

This audience creates a community-type feeling, expressing respect and belonging for certain kinds of messages and outrage or contempt for others. Communications innovators in social media communities often also create new language forms, such as the frustrated guys in men's-rights-oriented social media forums on Reddit bringing new life to the 19th-century word "hypergamy," or young people creating sophisticated emoji codes in their relationship texting.

Political Polarization of the American Public, 1994-2014
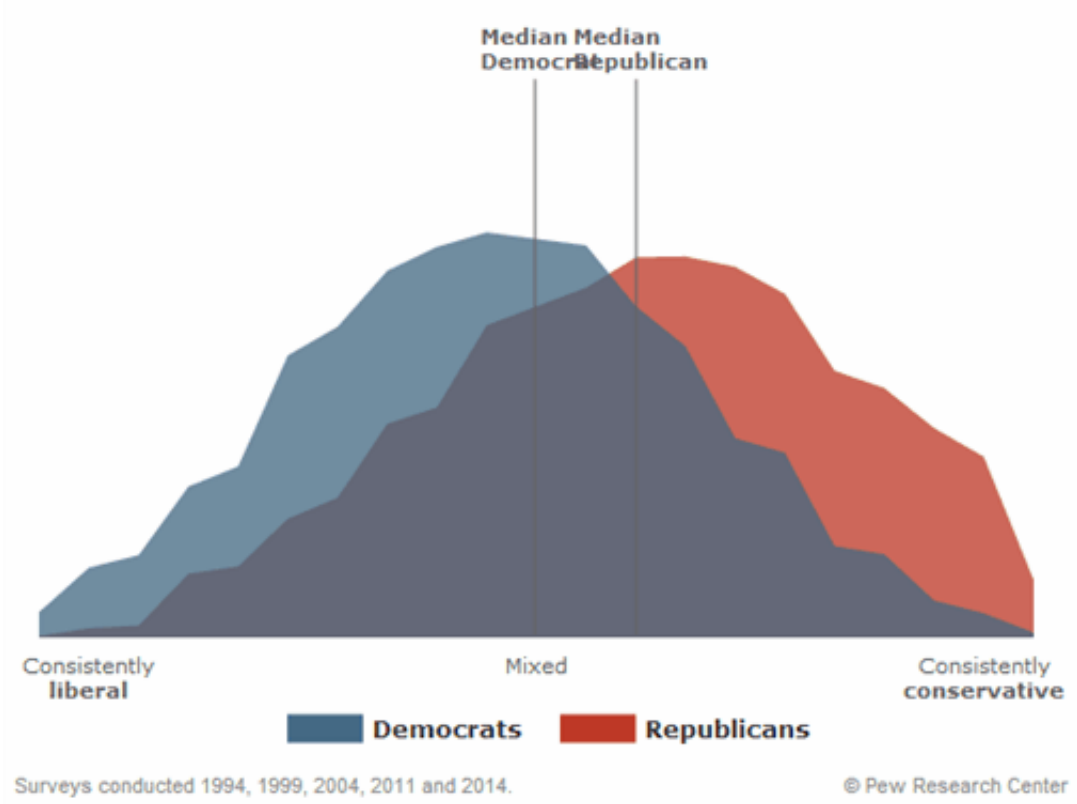
Americans' political beliefs have become increasingly polarized. Credit: Pew Research Center

Through language and example, community members educate one another. They reinforce each others' thinking and communication. Members of social media communities direct raw emotions into particular interests. For example, a general fear about job security might become channeled through the feedback loops on Facebook into an interest in immigrant jobs and immigration policy.

Those feedback loops have even more sensational effects. People use social media to communicate their need for things like money, attention, security and prestige. But once those people become a part of a social

media platform, our research reveals how they start to look for wider audiences. Those audiences show their interest and approval by liking, sharing and commenting. And those mechanisms drive future social media behavior.

In our study of food image sharing, we wondered why the most popular food porn images depicted massive hamburgers that were impossible to eat, dripping with bacon grease, gummy worms and sparklers. Or super pizza that contained tacos, macaroni and cheese and fried chicken. The answer was that the algorithms that drive participation and attention-getting in social media, the addictive "gamification" aspects such as likes and shares, invariably favored the odd and unusual. When someone wanted to broaden out beyond his or her immediate social networks, one of the most effective ways to achieve mass appeal turned out to be by turning to the extreme.

Taking an existing norm in the community (massive burgers, say) and expanding upon it almost guaranteed a poster a few hundred likes, a dozen supportive comments and 15 minutes of social media glory. As each user tried to top the outrageous image of the user coming before, the extremes of food porn ratcheted toward ever more sensational towering burgers and cakes. Desire for what was once the extremes began to seem normal. And the ends separated farther from the few who remained in the middle.

The extreme state of the world

In our research, we suggested that the exact same mechanisms are at work in general society. As the [Pew research](#) revealed, American beliefs have become more partisan and more extreme. Religious beliefs are more fundamentalist. Political figures around the world are more polarized. Language is more crude.

Although the divided state of Americans is a bellwether for some of these unwelcome developments, the phenomenon seems to be global. A recent Mashable article blamed social media for fueling the horrific ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, a country where Facebook viewed on mobile devices has become for many people the sole source of news. Hate speech on social media has been a major and growing problem in Europe and Africa for several years now. Around the world, social media is feeding strong partisan talk with attention. Moderation and a balanced approach to ideas and discourse seem to be fading away.

The fault for these developments lies, at least in part, in people's consumption of technology. Even without foreign interference, our research demonstrates that social media is built for polarization and extremes. The basic engagement mechanisms of popular social media sites like Facebook drive people to think and communicate in ever more extreme ways.

As people experience how these technological and social changes play out online, they will have to figure out how to adapt and change their behaviors – or risk becoming increasingly divided and driven to extremes.

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