

Social media and internet not cause of political polarization, new research suggests

February 22 2018



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The argument against echo chambers is well documented: helped by social media algorithms, we are increasingly choosing to interact in safe

spaces, with people who think and act like us - effectively preaching our opinions to the converted. As a result, this behaviour is distorting our world view and, in the process, our ability to compromise, which in turn, stimulates political polarisation. However, new Oxford University research suggests that social media and the internet are not the root of today's fragmented society, and echo chambers may not be the threat they are perceived to be. In fact most people use multiple media outlets and social media platforms, meaning that only a small proportion of the population, at most, is influenced by echo chambers.

While the [internet](#) is of course the home of social media, it is also a hub of other media choices. These include online news websites and links to print newspapers and magazines, as well as offline media such as TV and radio platforms. Many of our conversations with friends and family also take place online, via our social media and email platforms.

Using a random sample of adult internet users in the UK, researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute and the University of Ottawa examined people's media choices, and how much they influenced their interaction with echo chambers, against six key variables: gender, income, ethnicity, age, breadth of media use and political interest. The findings reveal that rather than encouraging the use and development of echo chambers, the breadth of multimedia available actually makes it easier for people to avoid them.

Dr Grant Blank, co-author and research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, said: "Whatever the causes of political polarisation today, it is not social media or the internet. "If anything, most people use the internet to broaden their media horizons. We found evidence that people actively look to confirm the information that they read online, in a multitude of ways. They mainly do this by using a search engine to find offline media and validate political information. In the process they often encounter opinions that differ from their own and as a result

whether they stumbled across the content passively or use their own initiative to search for answers while double checking their "facts," some changed their own opinion on certain issues." The research shows that respondents used an average of four different media sources, and had accounts on three different [social media](#) platforms. The more media outlets people used, the more they tended to avoid echo chambers.

While age, income, ethnicity nor gender were found to significantly influence the likelihood of being in an echo chamber, political interest significantly did. Those with a keen political interest were most likely to be opinion leaders who others turn to for political information. Compared with the less politically inclined, these people were found to be [media](#) junkies, who consumed political content wherever they could find it, and as a result of this diversity they were less likely to be in an echo chamber.

Dr Elizabeth Dubois, co-author and Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa, said: "Our results show that most people are not in a political echo chamber. The [people](#) at risk are those who depend on only a single medium for political news and who are not politically interested: about 8% of the population. However, because of their lack of political engagement, their opinions are less formative and their influence on others is likely to be comparatively small."

Provided by University of Oxford

Citation: Social media and internet not cause of political polarization, new research suggests (2018, February 22) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-02-social-media-internet-political-polarization.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
