

The whisper room: Moderates on Twitter are losing their voice

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Michael Kearney, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, found that while partisan users form highly partisan social networks on Twitter, moderate users -- or those less politically engaged -- continue to avoid politics, potentially creating an important void on social media. Credit: University of Missouri

With the growing popularity of social media, Twitter has become a

prominent place to voice opinions on both ends of the political spectrum. With the ability to follow those who only argue one side, voices of people who are in the middle, disinterested in politics or use social media solely for entertainment purposes might be getting drowned out amidst the political noise.

Michael Kearney, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, found that while partisan users form highly partisan social networks on Twitter, moderate users—or those less politically engaged—continue to avoid politics, potentially creating an important void on social media.

"We are not necessarily getting farther and farther apart—it's just the people in the middle are becoming more quiet and withdrawn," Kearney said. "If you fail to consider all the people in the middle who do not care about politics as much, it seems like there is a more clear division when there is not, so social media might be artificially creating this sense that we are becoming more polarized."

Kearney found that rather than increasing exposure to diverse viewpoints or sheltering users with self-reinforcing filter bubbles, social media simply amplifies and reflects the trends found in broader [media](#) environments. This was the first study of its kind to examine change in real-time behaviors of political polarization by looking at who Twitter users choose to follow during a general election.

Using software that he created himself, Kearney examined the user networks of 3,000 random followers of well-known partisan and entertainment-oriented accounts. Data was collected over six months leading up the 2016 [general election](#), beginning shortly after Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump became the two major party nominees. Kearney found that as the election drew nearer, Democrats followed more Democrats, Republicans followed more Republicans, and

moderates did not greatly expand who they followed on either political side.

"Whenever using Twitter or any type of [social media](#), it is important to double check and validate the information you are receiving," Kearney said. "Twitter allows us to connect with a lot of people and gain access to information, but users should not assume that the information is representative or an accurate reflection of the public."

More information: Michael Wayne Kearney, Analyzing change in network polarization, *New Media & Society* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1461444818822813](#)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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