The science of political polarization and social media

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Jaime Settle, the David and Carolyn Wakefield Term Associate Professor of Government at William & Mary, is an expert in interpersonal interactions in terms of how people communicate about politics. Credit: Stephen Salpukas, 2018

To better understand how politics play out online, W&M News spoke with Jaime Settle, the David and Carolyn Wakefield Term Associate Professor of Government at William & Mary. She is the director of the Social Networks and Political Psychology Lab and co-director of the Social Science Research Methods Center. She also serves as the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Data Science Program. Her book,

[Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America](#), was published by Cambridge University Press in 2018.

For those who are unfamiliar with your work, can you briefly describe your research background?

Sure. My expertise really has to do with [interpersonal interactions](#) in terms of how people communicate about politics, whether that's in face-to-face interactions or interactions on social media. I'm most interested in the social dynamics of those interactions, thinking about how the psychological and physiological experience of those sorts of conversations affect what people say and how they behave in interactions. Then, in the social media space, I am interested in how they interpret other people's political identities and choose to express their own.

What have you found about the way people discuss politics online?

What a lot of my research suggests is that, even though there is the potential for [political communication](#) across lines of difference that can lead to more toleration, there's also the possibility that it furthers polarization and reinforces a lot of the stereotypes that we have about people whose political views we don't share.

Come to think of it, I'm not even sure if "discussion" is the right word to use in this case.

I think you're right. I mean, there are some similarities to what we mean by a "discussion" in a face-to-face context, but as I talked about in my book, there are all these ways in which discussion online looks very different.

Can you give us some examples?

Primarily, what's going on in the social media space, particularly on a site like Facebook with features like profile pages and the newsfeed, these companies are trying to encourage people to reveal information about their lives. So, what you're really seeing is a lot of inadvertent and intentional signal sending about our political identities.

On the one hand, you have people like our outspoken friends and family members, who are very comfortable and enjoy having a platform to share their political views and to provoke others into discussion with them. They're not going for nuanced policy evaluation. They are trying to identify themselves and find other supporters to cheer for their team. That really is kind of a turnoff for a lot of people who don't want politics interfering in their social spaces, so those people may have opinions, but they're not sharing or engaging with others.

What are some of the consequences of that?

I think what many people don't realize is that they themselves are signaling their political identities, even when they don't think that they are, because of the way that our political identities—and so many of our other social identities—are sorted online.

When you're talking about your hobbies, or your religious life, or the kinds of foods you eat, you're also reinforcing other people's notions of what kinds of people are Republicans and what kinds of people are Democrats. In this environment that is all about the expression of political identity, it's very easy for dialogue to devolve into unproductive conversations that really have nothing to do with politics.

I have a bit of a meta question for you, if that's

alright. What is it about the online environment that exacerbates polarization and leads to these kinds of communication breakdowns?

I think it has a lot to do with the lack of nonverbal cues online. Talking about politics is social communication and humans evolved alongside communication. It was vital to our survival as a species, so we are very good at recognizing what other people are feeling based on how their face is responding and what their body language is. That's much harder to do online.

The other thing is that most political discussion that happens in a face-to-face context is among a very small number of people, so there's not the idea of having a soapbox to broadcast information. Whereas on social media, these sites are designed to be able to amplify your words to be able to reach not only all of your friends, but also your friends of friends. They're meant to help you connect with those weaker connections, your weaker social ties.

When you are aware of the possibility of your words spreading, you communicate in a way to try to get people to engage with what you've written, and try to make your ideas viral. That reinforces what we know tend to be polarizing forms of speech.

As an expert, what is on your radar in terms of the way people behave online?

In large part, what has made social media sites so problematic is that every facet of your identity, every component of who you are, is bundled into this online persona that you have on a particular platform. So, if we see people, turning to lots of different platforms for lots of different kinds of communication, I think you'll end up seeing different sorts of

problems on different platforms, depending on who's using them.

I get into this a bit in my book, but I'm thinking about the particular features of a platform and the norms that develop around those features. That should help us think about what kinds of behavior we might expect to emerge in the future. And I really do think that will matter, if we start seeing fragmentation online.

I'll also say that one lasting legacy of this pandemic is that it's accelerated a lot of trends that were already underway. I think the turn towards [social media](#) and enhanced digital communication is something that's going to stick around once we're all able to climb out of our Zoom boxes and get back to a somewhat normal life.

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