Different social media platforms foster different levels of segregation in online communities

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A team of researchers from Ca'Foscari Univerity of Venice, the Institute for Scientific Interchange Foundation, the University of Brescia and the

Sapienza University of Rome has found that different kinds of social media platforms foster different levels of segregation in online communities. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* the group describes their study of millions of online posts on several leading social media sites and what they found.

It has been noted in [mainstream media](#) that [social media sites](#) tend to foster idealistic [segregation](#)—leading to so-called "echo chambers," in which people with the same views on certain topics gather and support one another, a process that some have suggested leads to increased polarization in politics. In this new effort, the researchers wanted to verify such reports using actual data and also to find out if different types of sites lead to different levels of segregation.

The work involved analyzing 100 million pieces of content concerning controversial topics on four of the most popular social media sites: Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and Gab. The researchers specifically looked for known controversial topics such as gun control and abortion. They also tried to measure each data point by how much of an echo chamber surrounded it.

In looking at their data, the researchers found differences in levels of segregation. They found it highest on Facebook. They also found a clear difference between sites where users could tweak their feed to edit the kinds and amounts of posts they saw—more tweaking tended to mean less segregation. Facebook, notably, does not have such an option, while Reddit's tweaking options are very strong.

The researchers also conducted a simulation of the four social networks to learn more about how information spreads—they used a model similar to that used to study disease spread. The model showed that users with particular views on certain hot topics were much more likely to come into contact with other users who felt the same way on Facebook and

Twitter; they were less likely to have similar contacts on Reddit or Gab.

The researchers suggest that different types of [media](#) sites have different levels of segregation, and that such differences can be associated with the degree to which users can modify what is shown to them.

More information: Matteo Cinelli et al. The echo chamber effect on social media, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2023301118](#)

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