POLITICAL POLARISATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Arisekola I.S.

Corresponding author**-** ibraheem.sarafadeen3048@fcesoyo.edu.ng 08134540586

Department of Social Studies
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo.

Abstract

Digital age refers to the current era marked by the widespread use of digital technology and the internet and characterized by the rapid shift from traditional industry that the industrial revolution brought through industrialization to an economy based on information. Political polarization connotes the increasing divergence of political attitudes and beliefs between individuals or groups with different ideological perspectives within a society. Political polarisation in the digital age is driven by complex interactions between digital media, psychological biases, and social factors. Therefore, this paper examines political polarisation in the digital age: Causes and consequences. The paper specifically examines the concept of political polarisation, causes of political polarisation, consequences of political polarisation and strategies for mitigating political polarization. The paper concludes that the digital age has fundamentally altered the landscape of political discourse, presenting challenges that require multifaceted solutions. It is recommended among others that government should compel the social media companies to modify algorithms to prioritise diverse perspectives and reduce the visibility of highly emotive or divisive content. Also, government and other stakeholders should educate people about media literacy and critical thinking so as to enable them recognise and resist polarising contents.

Keywords: Political polarisation, Digital age, Causes, Consequences

Introduction

The term digital age, also known as the information age or computer age, refers to the current era marked by the widespread use of digital technology and the internet. It also connotes a historic period in the 21st century characterised by the rapid shift from traditional industry that the industrial revolution brought through industrialization to an economy based on information technology. The Digital Age began in the late 20th century and continues to evolve rapidly. Wikipedia (2024) explains that the information age is a historical period that began in the mid-20th century and characterised by a rapid shift from traditional industries, as established during the industrial revolution, to an economy centered on information technology. The onset of the information age has been linked to the development of the transistor in 1947 and the optical amplifier in 1957. These technological advances have had a significant impact on the way information is processed and transmitted. The components of digital age include digital

communication, information technology, digital media, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and machine learning, cyber security, internet of things, big data, virtual and augmented reality and digital education

Political polarisation refers to the increasing divergence of political attitudes and beliefs between individuals or groups with different ideological perspectives within a society. It is characterised by the growing divide between individuals who identify with opposing political parties or movements, often resulting in heightened partisanship and reduced willingness to compromise. In the context of the United States, political polarisation has become a prominent and concerning trend over the past few decades. The United States is experiencing a period of intense partisan polarisation in the mass public. People who identify with one party are likelier to dislike and distrust those in the other party. This polarisation is reflected in various aspects of American politics, including policy preferences, voting behaviour, and even social interactions (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Political polarisation often results in a deepening divide between individuals or groups with opposing political views, making it difficult to find common ground or engage in productive political discourse. This phenomenon is not limited to Western countries but is also observed in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to data from the Afrobarometer (2020), which is a widely recognised source for public opinion data in the region sub-saharan Africa has witnessed significant instances of political polarisation in recent years.

One example of political polarisation in sub-saharan Africa can be found in the case of Kenya. The 2017 presidential election in Kenya saw a sharp divide between supporters of the incumbent president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and his main opponent, Raila Odinga. The political polarization was evident in both the pre-election and post-election periods, with violent clashes between rival supporters and allegations of electoral fraud (Afrobarometer, 2018). The Afrobarometer survey data indicated that a substantial proportion of Kenyan citizens perceived the country as being politically divided along ethnic and party lines, contributing to the polarization (Afrobarometer, 2018). In recent years, trends of political polarization in Sub-Saharan Africa have been on the rise. Data from the Afrobarometer reveals that in several countries, citizens increasingly view their societies as politically polarized. For instance, in South Africa, a country known for its complex political landscape, polarization has been exacerbated by factionalism within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) (Afrobarometer, 2020). This has led to deep divisions among ANC supporters, which are reflected in the broader South African society. Political polarization in Sub-Saharan Africa has significant implications for the region's stability and governance. As polarization intensifies, it can contribute to social unrest, political violence, and hinder the functioning of democratic institutions. For instance, the political tensions in countries like Nigeria have resulted in protests and conflicts, making it challenging to achieve peaceful and inclusive governance (Rotberg, 2018). Such tensions can also undermine trust in electoral processes, which is crucial for the legitimacy of governments in the region.

Political polarisation in sub-saharan Africa is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with implications for the region's political stability and governance. Examples from countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria illustrate the growing divide among citizens with different political affiliations. The Afrobarometer provides valuable survey data to track these trends in the region (Afrobarometer, 2020). As polarisation continues to be a concern in Sub-Saharan Africa, addressing its root causes and finding ways to promote constructive political discourse and reconciliation is crucial for the region's political future.

The notion that social media may fuel political polarisation has been at the forefront of popular and scientific debate for some time now. There is empirical evidence to suggest than usage of some social media platforms may elevate polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Garimella & Weber, 2017; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). However, evidence is mixed and other studies even suggest that social media use may attenuate polarization (Barberá et al., 2015; Beam et al., 2018; Semaan et al., 2014). Still others have concluded that the rise of the Internet, and social media in particular, likely plays a limited part in polarization processes vis-à-vis other social and political forces (Boxell et al., 2017; Prior, 2013). Included within these are increased polarized rhetoric among political elites in the competition for voters' attention and the increase in a more partisan set of voting options (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). To date, considerable disagreement thus persists regarding the nature of this relationship, not least in countries beyond the United States and in multiparty contexts in general.

Tucker, Guess and Barbera (2018) investigated the prevalence and factors influencing the dissemination of fake news on the social media platform. Employing an experimental approach, they manipulated the exposure of simulated news articles in a controlled environment. The findings revealed that the dissemination of fake news was less prevalent than previously perceived, with only a small fraction of users sharing such content. Moreover, the study identified individual factors, such as age and digital media literacy, as predictors of susceptibility to fake news dissemination. The authors recommended targeted interventions and digital literacy campaigns to mitigate the spread of fake news on social media, emphasizing the importance of fostering critical thinking skills and awareness among users. Mare & Adi (2019) investigated the impact of social media on political polarization in the context of Sub-Saharan African countries. Employing a cross-national analysis and examining social media usage patterns during election campaigns, the researchers found compelling evidence that social media played a substantial role in fostering political polarization across the region, particularly during election periods. The study's recommendations underscored the importance of promoting digital media literacy and fact-checking initiatives in emerging democracies within Africa to counteract the polarization exacerbated by social media platforms. This research contributes valuable insights into the intersection of social media, politics, and polarization within non-Western contexts, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of political discourse in the digital age.

In a nutshell political polarization is reaching unprecedented levels worldwide, exacerbated by the influence of digital platforms. The Digital Age continues to transform how we live, work, and interact, driven by ongoing technological advancements and innovations. This paper therefore examines political polarisation in the digital age. The paper specifically examines the concept of political polarisation, causes of political polarisation, consequences of political polarisation and strategies for mitigating political polarization

Concept of Political Polarisation

Political polarisation refers to the division of society along ideological lines, where individuals and groups hold strongly contrasting political beliefs and values. It is characterised by an increasing ideological distance between political factions and a reduced willingness to find common ground or engage in constructive dialogue (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Additionally, Polarisation often occurs between political parties, with members of each party becoming more ideologically homogeneous and viewing the other party with skepticism or even hostility. This division can lead to increased partisanship and a focus on party loyalty rather than issue - based decision - making. Equally important, the Polarisation can result in the rise of ideological

extremism, where individuals and groups adopt more extreme positions and reject compromise or moderation. This can lead to a lack of willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and can hinder effective governance. Moreover, with the arrival of social media and mass - produced news consumption, polarisation can be fuelled by creating compelling sounds that people are more likely to be accessible to information and viewpoints that align with their existing belief, reinforcing their ideological position and limiting the contact with alternative perspectives. Furthermore, Social, political and cultural identity in political polarisation can be influenced by shared identities, such as race, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. People may align their political beliefs with their social identities, leading to heightened divisions and a focus on group interests rather than shared goals. Finally, it is essential to note that political polarization is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and implications, and its signs can vary across different countries and contexts. Therefore, addressing political polarisation requires efforts promoting respectful dialogue, bridging divides, and fostering a sense of shared values and objectives.

Causes of Political Polarisation in the Digital Age

1. **Influence of Social Media Algorithms:** Social media algorithms are designed to optimize user engagement, frequently prioritizing content that elicits strong emotional reactions, which can amplify partisan divides. Studies suggest that these algorithms can create "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" where users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically similar content. This process reinforces existing beliefs and limits exposure to opposing viewpoints, exacerbating political polarization (Boxell et al., 2017).

2. **Identity-Driven Polarization and Group Affiliation:** Political identities are increasingly aligned with personal values and cultural beliefs, making political affiliation central to individual identity. Social media intensifies this effect by fostering in-group solidarity while reinforcing negative views of out-groups, leading to greater hostility across political lines. Research shows that social media identity-driven polarization by creating spaces where individuals define themselves in opposition to perceived out-groups

3. **Emotional Content and Moral Outrage:** Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook favor content that is emotionally charged especially content involving moral outrage, as this type of information is more likely to be shared widely. This creates an environment where users are consistently exposed to emotionally heightened and polarized content. Studies indicate that such content deepens ideological divides and heightens hostility, as seen in the 2016 U.S. election and subsequent political cycles (Pariser, 2023).

4. **Cognitive Biases:** Confirmation and motivated reasoning confirmation bias and motivated reasoning are critical psychological mechanisms that fuel polarization. Social media platforms facilitate selective exposure, where individuals gravitate towards content that aligns with their views. Users are more likely to trust and engage with information that confirms their beliefs, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that limits critical engagement with opposing ideas (Sunstein, 2023; Pariser, 2023).

5. **Role of Weak Ties and Strong Ties in Polarisation:** Social network theory suggests that "weak ties" (loose social connections) can expose individuals to diverse perspectives, potentially moderating extreme views. However, the current design of social media favors strong ties (close connections), which may reinforce ideological beliefs and reduce cross-group engagement. Studies find that weak ties are essential for ideological

diversity, but they are underutilized in polarized online communities (Mare, & Adi, 2019).

Consequences of Political Polarisation

1. **Erosion of Democratic Norms and Institutional Trust:** Increased polarisation is linked to decreased trust in democratic institutions. As divisions deepen, citizens become more skeptical of political institutions and democratic processes. Polarization often leads individuals to view democratic outcomes as illegitimate if they oppose their partisan affiliation, thereby destabilizing democratic norms (Mare, & Adi, 2019).

2. **Increased Political Violence and Radicalization:** Political polarisation can lead to radicalization and an increased risk of political violence. Online spaces that promote extreme ideologies enable rapid dissemination of violent rhetoric, which can escalate offline confrontations. The digital environment fosters echo chambers where extremist views become normalized, contributing to a rise in incidents of political violence (Mare, & Adi, 2019).

3. **Decline in Cross-Partisan Dialogue:** The lack of exposure to diverse perspectives contributes to a breakdown in constructive dialogue across partisan lines. This decline in cross-partisan communication fuels mistrust and reinforces negative stereotypes, making collaborative policymaking challenging. Research shows that social media platforms, which emphasize in-group communication, play a role in limiting opportunities for constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints (Sunstein, 2023).

Strategies for Mitigating Political Polarization

Political polarization can be mitigated through the following strategies:

1. **Algorithmic Adjustments to Promote Diversity:** Social media companies could modify algorithms to prioritize diverse perspectives and reduce the visibility of highly emotive or divisive content. Such adjustments can foster a more balanced information environment, potentially moderating extreme views (Pariser, 2023).

2. **Education in Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking:** Educating users about media literacy and critical thinking can empower them to recognize and resist polarizing content. Programs that encourage "actively open-minded thinking" have shown promise in reducing susceptibility to confirmation bias and improving engagement with opposing views (Bail et al., 2018).

3. **Promoting Intergroup Dialogue Initiatives:** Encouraging face-to-face interactions and online initiatives that bring together individuals from different ideological backgrounds can reduce polarization. Evidence suggests that intergroup contact, when structured around shared goals, reduces prejudice and fosters empathy, counteracting the divisive tendencies of online spaces (Rotberg, 2018).

4. **Enhancing Platform Accountability and Transparency:** Policymakers can work with social media companies to improve transparency and accountability regarding algorithmic processes. Regulatory frameworks could require platforms to disclose how content is created, providing users with better tools to understand how their information environments shape their perceptions (Garimella & Weber, 2017).

Conclusion

The digital age has fundamentally altered the landscape of political discourse, presenting challenges that require multifaceted solutions. Understanding the dynamics of social media-induced polarization is essential for fostering a more informed and cohesive society. By implementing platform-level changes, promoting digital literacy, and encouraging intergroup dialogue, society can work toward mitigating the adverse effects of polarisation and preserving democratic health.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made

1. The Government should compel the social media companies to modify algorithms to prioritise diverse perspectives and reduce the visibility of highly emotive or divisive content.
2. Government and other stakeholders should educate people about media literacy and critical thinking so as to enable them recognise and resist polarising contents.
3. Intergroup dialogue initiative should be promoted various stakeholders in politics and digital age by encouraging face-to-face interactions and online initiatives that bring together individuals from different ideological backgrounds can reduce polarization. It is believed that intergroup contact, when structured around shared goals, reduces prejudice and fosters empathy, counteracting the divisive tendencies of online spaces.
4. Policymakers should work with social media companies to improve transparency and accountability regarding algorithmic processes.

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