

The Effect of Social Media on Polarization

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Introduction

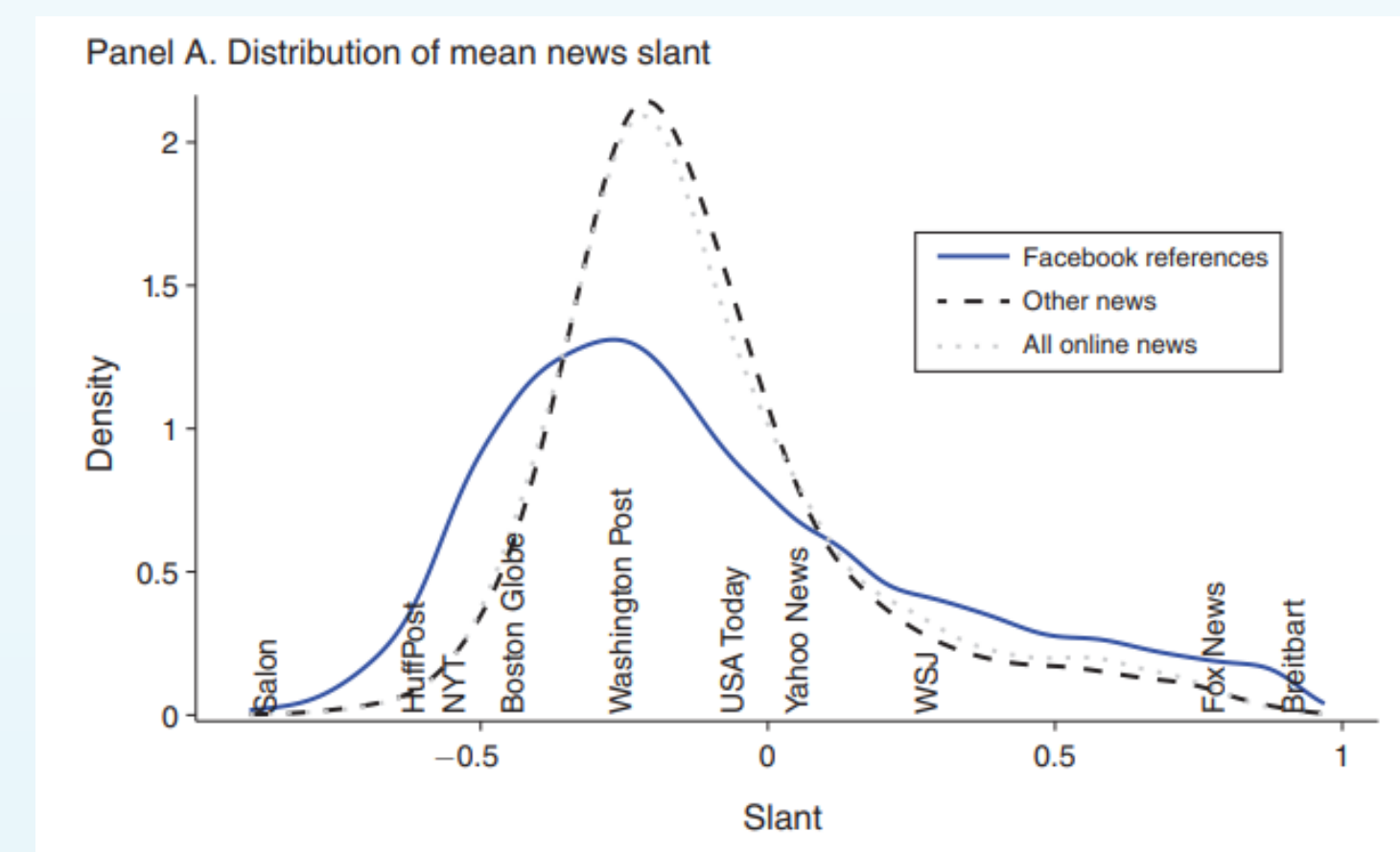
This poster attempts to look at the impact of social media on political polarization in the United States. Since the 2016 elections, there has been a shift in the political parties and their constituencies away from the center. Some have argued that a large part of this is due to the algorithms that social media use.



<https://businessclan.com/which-social-media-platforms-will-work-best-for-my-business/>

Example

Specifically, the purpose of Facebook's algorithm is to maximize user engagement. This helps increase their profits through ad revenue. Then to maximize user engagement, the algorithm puts similar content to your likes and shares on your feed. Then people will most likely see posts similar to their political views. A study by Ro'ee Levy found that this leads to an increase in polarization.



<https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20191777>

This graph from Levy's study (2021) shows the difference between the range of political news shown between Facebook and other news sights. As you can see, Facebook shows more news on the extremes of both political sides.

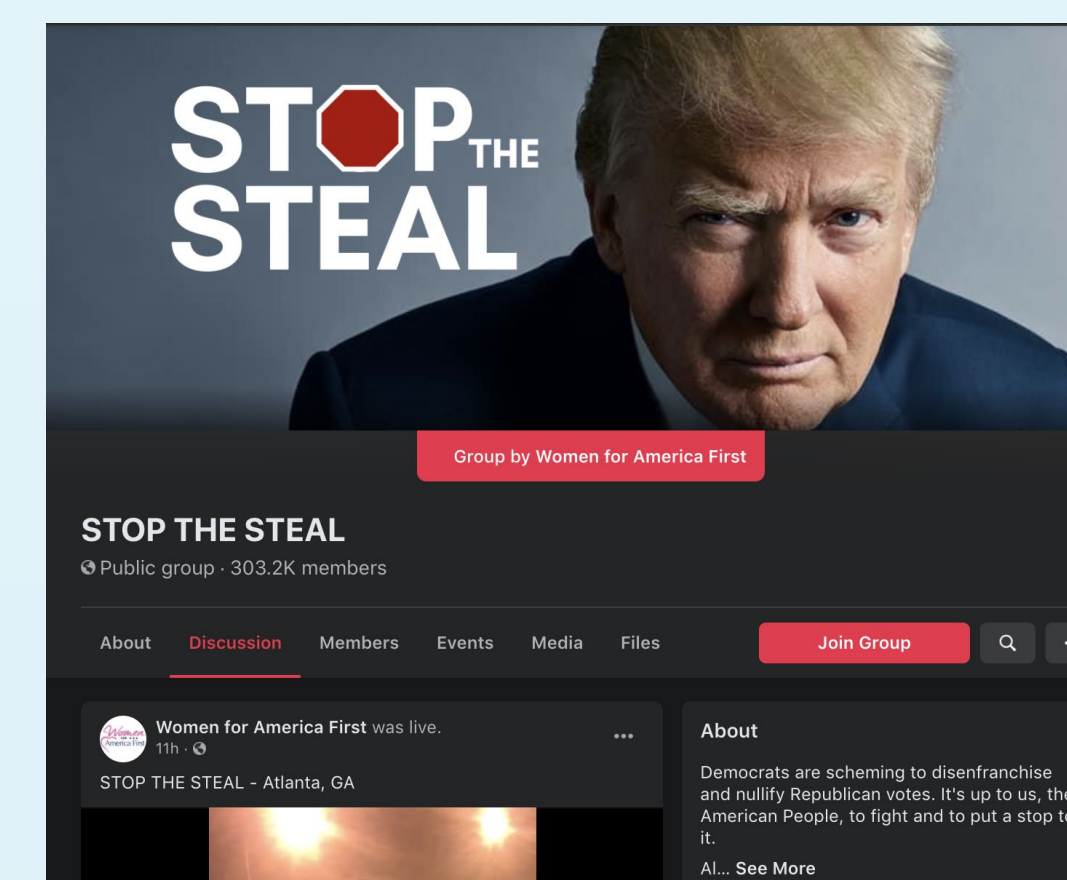
Facebook has failed to address many of their issues related to the spreading of false news and increase in polarization stemming from their algorithm. Moreover, the government has done little to step in to address this problem.

Resolutions

- Potential government responses
 - Force companies to share more about algorithm
 - Incentivize better business models
 - Investigate effects of social media on riots
- Potential company responses
 - Adjust algorithm, hire more people to moderate apps and websites
 - Be more transparent with their algorithms and attempt to identify more sources of false news

The Big Picture

The If we let this continue to be a problem, it could lead to more events like the January 6 riots. Leading up to the 2020 election, a task force was made to combat the spread of misinformation. Shortly after the election, the task force disbanded, allowing groups to reform and grow.

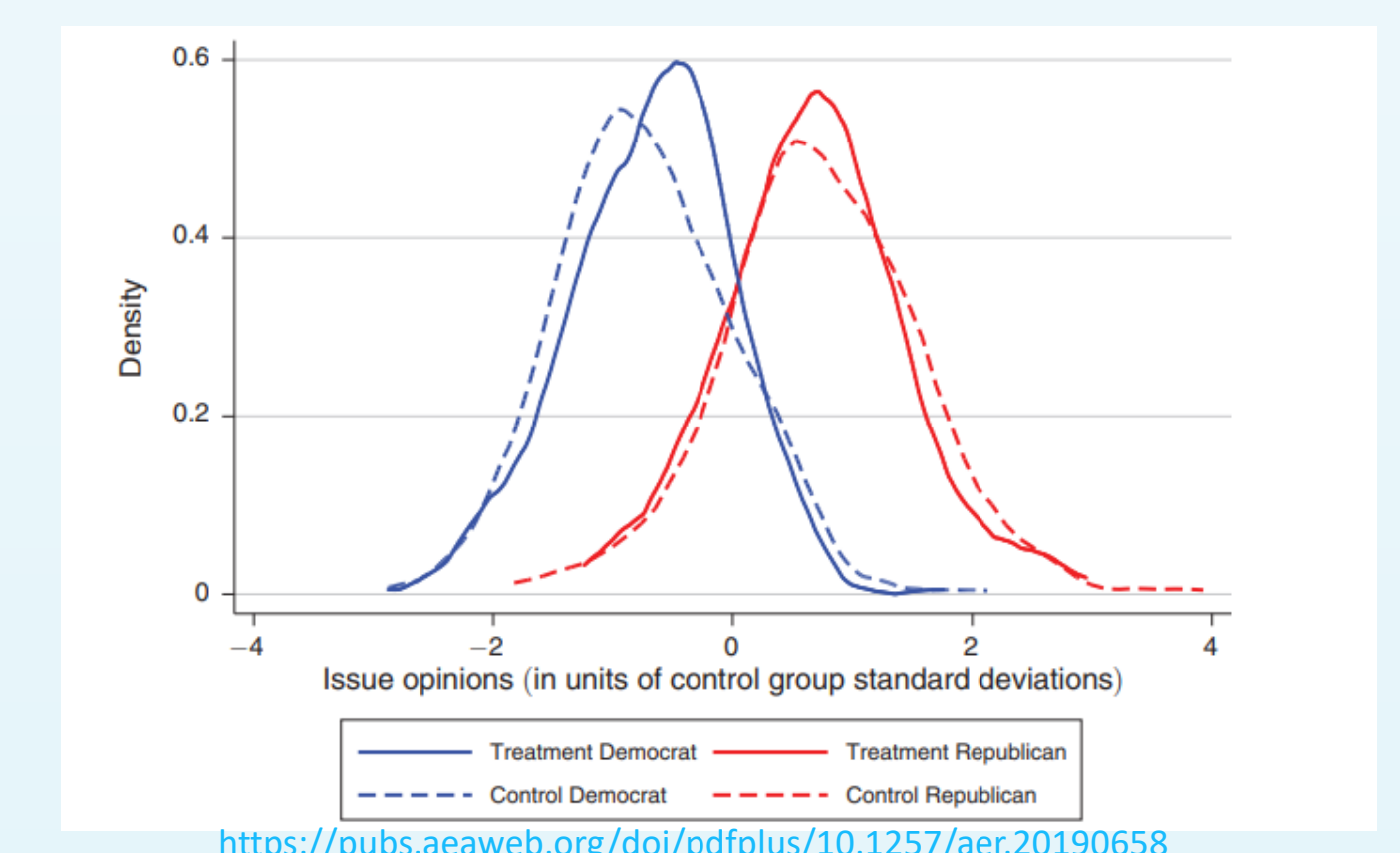


<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/facebook-internal-metric-violence-incitement-rising-vote>

While Facebook took this group down, others spawned in place and grew at a rapid place. They spread misinformation and threatened violence against the capital. The events at the capital shortly followed.

Conclusion

There has been a lot of evidence that social media is leading to more political polarization. However, the good news is that this polarization is reversible. Adding some of these resolutions and continuing to monitor social media platforms will help to undo some of the damage. Furthermore, using social media less can also help to reduce polarization. A study by Allcott, Braghieri, Eichmeyer, and Gentzkow found that deactivating social media 4 weeks before the election reduced polarization by about 8%.



<https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20190658>

This graph from "The Welfare Effects of Social Media" shows the distribution before and after deactivating social media for 4 weeks before the election.

References

- Barrett, Paul M., Hendrix, Justin, Sims, J. Grant. 2021. "Fueling the Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization – And What Can Be Done About It." NYU Stern, September 2021.
- Levy, Ro'ee. 2021. "Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment." *American Economic Review*, 111 (3): 831-70.
- Allcott, Hunt, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer, and Matthew Gentzkow. 2020. "The Welfare Effects of Social Media." *American Economic Review*.

The Algorithm

An algorithm is defined as a set of rules to be followed in a calculation or other problem-solving operation. Many social media platforms use an algorithm in their decision-making processes to see what sort of posts and information that you would like to see on your feed. This poster focuses on the algorithm on Facebook and its potential impacts on political polarization.

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Facebook's News Feed Algorithm

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