Destructive Political Polarization in the Context of Digital Communication – A Critical Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

As an increasing amount of political communication takes place in a digital context, there is a heightened focus on the intersection of studies of political polarization and digital communication research. Digital communication research provides new opportunities for studying polarization in terms of traceable interactions and scale but adds further complexity to an already challenging concept. In this paper, we review literature from political science and media and communication studies, concluding that a large body of political communication research studies polarization without conceptualizing it from the perspective of media and communication. Similarly, the lack of conceptual definition in media and communication studies is reflective of disagreements in political science, and this can lead to common problems when applying the concept of polarization in a digital context. These problems include the conflation of different forms of polarization, the unquestioned adoption of technologically determinist perspectives, and the over-diagnosis of polarization. Building upon existing literature from both fields, we argue for a better demarcation of concepts when we study political polarization as a threat to democracy. We suggest calling this phenomenon destructive political polarization. We then discuss the concept with regard to studying its dynamics in a digital communication context, describing its recognizable elements as manifested in communication.

Keywords: political polarization, destructive polarization, literature review, digital communication

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Introduction

In recent years, political communication scholars have increasingly focused on studying societal and political polarization (e.g., Baum & Groeling, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2012; Yarchi et al., 2021). 'Polarization' has been turned into a new buzzword representing a potential threat to democratic societies, referencing different fields under one overarching umbrella. In political science, the conceptual debate has reached a certain level of maturity, crystallizing core disagreements and differences in definitions of political polarization (e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Lelkes, 2016). In media and communication studies, on the contrary, the field of political polarization research is still comparatively young. Therefore, there are few opportunities to build upon the attempts made to conceptualize political polarization through the lenses of media and communication (see e.g., Pfetsch, 2018; Yarchi et al., 2021). Instead, our discipline seems to borrow definitions from political science – with varying levels of care and accuracy – as it seeks to find empirical evidence for manifestations of political polarization within media and communication. Against this background, conceptual debates become even more blurry when it comes to understanding and exploring political polarization in the context of a digital public sphere (e.g., Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021).

In this paper, we argue that the field of political communication is well-equipped to revisit extant definitions of political polarization and theorize which types and forms of polarization undermine a functional public sphere and democracy. The lack of conceptual clarity in studying political polarization can lead to common problems when applying the concept in a digital context, stalling theoretical progress and practical interventions. In this paper we highlight some of the main challenges that the field needs to address in order to move past these obstacles.

Further, building on a critical literature review of previous polarization research, we argue that to avoid the indiscriminate use of the term 'polarization' to describe several distinct phenomena, the field should more clearly define and demarcate these concepts, and

focus on the types and forms of polarization that are destructive for functioning democratic societies. Media and communication studies currently tends towards presupposing that polarization is always negative for democratic communication; instead, it should work towards determining *when* this is the case.

We discuss previous attempts (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018) to do so, and identify the core elements of a definition of destructive political polarization online: the erosion of channels of interaction and trust, the erasure of differences, the allocation of disproportionate space to extreme voices, and an exclusion through emotions. Leading on from this, we discuss the concept of destructive political polarization in terms of studying its communicative dynamics in the digital public sphere, before concluding by identifying research gaps for further investigation. First, it is necessary to understand how political polarization has been defined previously.

Previous Definitions of Political Polarization

Defining polarization is complicated by the fact that the term is used in several disparate academic fields as well as being in widespread general use; the word is already burdened by multiple definitions and connotations. In the following, we outline some of the main uses of the term in political science as well as media and communication studies, though we must also remain aware of the interactions between these scholarly definitions and those in popular use.

Definitions in Political Science

Polarization has gained a negative connotation due to widespread concerns and media reportage that societies are becoming increasingly divided, or polarized, to a degree or in a way that is seen as destructive for functioning democracies. In popular use, the term builds on a blurry definition that encompasses a spectrum of political disagreement as well as an *a priori* negative or destructive connotation. By contrast, the social sciences have historically used 'polarization' in a neutral sense to refer to divisions between societal groups. These divisions can be understood as motivated by different attributes (e.g., ideologies, positions, issues, identities, values, affects, emotions), as operating at different levels (macro, meso, micro), and as focusing on different actors (e.g., politicians, political parties, citizens, journalists, media outlets).

On the macro level of a political system, societal groups can be 'polarized' on a spectrum (e.g., far left to far right, liberal to conservative) in relation to a certain attribute (e.g., political position, issue, value) that has two or more 'poles' or extremes. Accordingly, ideological polarization can be understood in one sense as the 'distance' between positions. Traditional definitions in political science focus on elite or mass polarization through political ideology, capturing (a) the level of agreement or disagreement with specific positions on political or societal issues; or (b) the placement in a broader ideological spectrum. From a *divergence* perspective (Lelkes, 2016), the distribution of ideologies is considered polarized when there are two blocks of positions far from each other (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), that is, when the distributions can be characterized by *bimodality* and *dispersion* (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). However, ideological polarization can also be defined as *alignment* or *consistency* (Lelkes, 2016). This definition refers not to the degree of ideological difference but the degree to which party identity matches ideology and attitudes become more internally consistent (Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015). Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) argue that "political polarization constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities" (p. 409). With this understanding, political polarization has been, for example, measured as correlations between issue positions held by individuals and party identification (e.g., Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006; Abramowitz, 2010).

Political polarization at a macro level is also understood through concepts other than ideology. The most prominent are identity and affect: the idea that polarization is created through affect and emotions towards in- and out-group members, such as hatred and contempt directed at out-group members (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015; Hobolt et al., 2021). Previous empirical studies suggest that affective polarization can increase even while ideological differences remain static (e.g., Iyengar et. al., 2012; Lelkes, 2016).

The increased focus on affect and identity has encouraged an important turn within polarization studies. Political polarization has come to be understood through a relational approach (Somer & McCoy, 2019): besides their ideological positioning, it matters how opposing individuals and groups perceive and interact with each other in the context of their own political identities (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018; Settle, 2018). Through the idea of *perceived* (Lelkes, 2016) or *psychological* (Settle, 2018) polarization, scholars argue that, in addition to the differing ideological positions themselves, polarization resides also in the way these divisions are apprehended, as they show how citizens "view themselves and

view others in the political landscape" (Settle, 2018: 5). Further, the extent to which citizens believe that polarization is present in their nation, regardless of what is happening, exceeds actual polarization and has an impact on the erosion of social trust (Lee, 2022). People's perceptions of polarization contribute to shaping the reality of polarization dynamics.

In line with this relational turn, one way to investigate political polarization is through the lenses of media and communication. From this perspective, divisions between societal groups become manifest in the private and public communication of group members and can be empirically analyzed in terms of their communication content and communicative relations. Such analytical work also attempts to define polarization, and not always in ways that are analogous to those found within the social sciences as we have outlined them above.

Definitions in Media and Communication Studies

Despite its growing prominence, the theoretical concept of polarization is poorly defined in media and communication studies (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Yarchi et al., 2021). In the recent literature, different forms and types of polarization have been diagnosed in the context of (digital) media and communication, sometimes interchangeably. These types of polarization include, but are not limited to ideological, issue, positional, policy, and affective polarization (e.g., Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2020). Although some important systematic attempts to conceptualize and define political polarization online have been made (see Yarchi et al., 2021), in many cases it seems that political science concepts of polarization are implicitly assumed, but not explicitly operationalized. As we have shown, there is already disagreement within political science about how polarization should be understood and measured. This disparity is only compounded when the same terminology is imported into another field without sufficient attention to proper definitions. To begin to address this lack of clarity, in this section we outline the ways polarization is investigated in existing media and communication research.

Some studies, while not redefining polarization from the perspective of media and communication studies, at least work closely to political science definitions. Their main goal is to determine the impact of communication on levels of political polarization. To do this, they test the effects of opinion expression, exposure to news and cross-cutting discussion on the level of polarization using established definitions and measures like for example ideological divergence and alignment (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2021; Wojcieszak, 2010). For example, some studies use the concept of ideological *divergence* and measure the impact of

sharing political content (Valenzuela et al., 2021) or the impact of participation in online radical groups (Wojcieszak, 2010) on the extremity of issue positions. Still at the ideological level but through *consistency*, Cho et al. (2018) assess the impact of political expression on the level of alignment between partisan identification and issue positions.

The body of research described above investigates communication dynamics only as drivers of polarization, though they can also be symptoms; however, there are more recent studies we would like to highlight which consider communication as its own domain for polarization, requiring a more tailored definition. The next paragraphs show how the level of political polarization has been assessed by directly observing how people understand and interpret information and how they interact with each other. Media and communication scholars provide an important new perspective by studying polarization in the context of communication practices.

Polarization can be understood through the influence of partisan identity on the perception and use of information sources, such as news media content (Recuero et al., 2022), scientific research (e.g., Allcott et al., 2020; Calvillo et al., 2020), and opinion polls (Su & McLeod, 2022). A large body of research has shown, for instance, how ideological or partisan identities shape the ways individuals perceive journalistic content (e.g., Recuero et al., 2022). Polarization, in this sense, is defined by the extent to which partisans believe only in information that aligns with their in-group's ideology and values. These non-partisan contents (e.g., journalism, science, and polls) are rejected because they are classified as out-group content (Su & McLeod, 2022).

One research strand in media and communication studies approaches political polarization specifically through discourses. Within this broader concern, different conceptualizations of political polarization can be found. Some studies examine how the communication content and discourse produced by different actors (e.g., news media organizations, political elites, citizens) use polarizing rhetoric. Political polarization here can be defined as the manifestation of "Us vs Them" rhetoric in public discourse as studied in Pakistani Facebook groups (Zahid Ali et al., 2022) and American politicians (Gardner & Russell, 2022). Other studies focus on violence and negativity inter-group communication (Yarchi et al., 2021; Marchal, 2022). Yarchi et al. (2021) use the term *affective polarization*: but instead of measuring affective polarization through surveys, they measure the prevalence

of negative and positive sentiment in online discussions. Polarization, in this sense, is defined by discursive hostility towards out-group members.

Finally, a few studies evaluate the networks of communication to determine the patterns of interaction between opposing groups (which Yarchi et al., 2021 term *interactional polarization*), such as studies of climate change discussions on Twitter (Williams et al., 2015) and Reddit (Treen et al., 2022). Polarization here is defined by the absence of interaction between opposing sides.

These studies of polarization all concern themselves with media and communication. However, as with the studies we looked at earlier, specific methods and frameworks differ – and so, again, do their understandings of polarization. This leads to the next issue we want to address how lack of definition affects research progression.

The Problems with Definitional Slippage in Polarization Research

This lack of explicit, precise theoretical definitions of polarization in media and communication studies presents challenges for the advancement of polarization research in a digital communication context. In particular, the importation of an already disputed term from another body of research by media and communication scholars only serves to further muddy the waters. Our understanding of the term gets even murkier when it is used without direct reference to a particular conceptualization of polarization that is being employed in a specific study. In this definitional vacuum, more 'commonsense', or popular media understandings of the term are read into the research, and there is a reliance on polarization as a metaphorical or figurative description of a spectrum of communicative behaviors without a corresponding empirical basis. Much the same has occurred with another term that is overused in both generalist and scholarly literature yet has remained similarly underdefined: 'filter bubbles' (cf. Bruns, 2019). In this section, we outline three major concerns that flow from this state of affairs: over-diagnosing polarization, conflating different forms of political polarization, and over-relying on technologically determinist explanations.

The over-diagnosis of polarization creates difficulties in identifying relevant research and building on previous conceptual work. First and foremost, research which over-uses the term 'polarization' without meaningful conceptual engagement – using the term as no more than a buzzword – dilutes the quality of the available body of work. It conflates principled scholarly uses of the term with vague popular uses to the point that it becomes unclear what

the term means. Even research that does engage conceptually with polarization, but without explicitly aligning itself with any one definition, distorts the field by providing findings that are not easily attributable to any theoretical framework. This is especially problematic since, despite broader and more loosely focused ongoing debates, there has been significant research that focuses specifically on the different recognizable forms of polarization we have outlined here. But the conflation of different forms of polarization in otherwise rigorous and empirical research may mean that the conclusions have little to offer the ongoing conceptual advancement of the field. In 2021, Kubin and von Sikorski found that only one-third of papers explicitly included their definition of political polarization, with many not differentiating their use of either ideological or affective polarization. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) state that the generic, and implicit, use of the term 'polarization' to cover both these types of polarization "makes the field's understanding of political polarization muddled due to a lack of consensus in definitions" (p. 192).

The over-diagnosis of polarization by media and communication scholars also manifests in studies that merely find evidence of convergent or divergent group behaviors but discuss them in the language of polarization and thus introduce harmful or negative connotations into the study of ordinary community dynamics. This further confuses our conceptual understandings and encourages the adoption of simplistic popular media understandings of the term that see any formation of in- and out-groups as inherently problematic. This undermines the utility of the term 'polarization' as a distinct concept in principled social science research.

These challenges have already been experienced in the adjacent conceptual debates about 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles'. Lacking any precise definitions, these terms were used in media and communication studies, and more widely in mainstream discourse, as generic 'commonsense' metaphors with inherently negative connotations. Their definitional fluidity enabled their ready use in techno-determinist fear-mongering and normative hand-waving (e.g., Habermas, 2022; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001) while subsequent empirical research has comprehensively failed to produce any evidence for the supposed deleterious effects of these phenomena on social and societal cohesion. The substantial work by Bruns (2019) in outlining empirical definitions for these terms, and testing them against the extant literature, offers an exemplar for what is needed in studies of polarization in digital communication as well. The arc of these terms thus also points to another consideration: the common presence of technological determinism in the problematizing of polarization online.

Digital communication scholars' imprecise use of under-defined terms like political polarization can be distorted in media reporting to further stoke public fears about the impact of new technologies. A deeper engagement with previous research, and a more precise use of central definitions of political polarization in its various forms serves as a defense against and response to such technological determinism, which both blames technology as the sole origin or major accelerant of polarization, and hails technological solutions as a panacea to polarization.

The above considerations illustrate the risks of continuing, as a field, on our current path without developing clearer definitions of polarization and show the need for further specificity regarding different forms of polarization – especially when considering at what point polarization is recognizable as destructive.

Destructive Political Polarization in the Context of Digital Communication

Having reviewed the complex and contrasting conceptualizations of polarization in political science and acknowledged the lack of theoretical focus in current media and communication research into polarization, in this section we firstly introduce a demarcation of destructive political polarization, then describe elements of how this polarization manifests in digital communication. These elements are intended as illustrative examples that we consider to be common traits but are not meant as an exhaustive list.

Efforts have been made in recent years to clarify what types and forms of polarization threaten democracy. For example, McCoy et al. (2018) argue that, although some political and societal polarization is beneficial to a functioning democracy (e.g., by enabling political parties to define their distinct positions on key issues and thereby offer a clear choice to electors), once a level of "*severe polarization*" is reached democratic societies will struggle to maintain productive political processes. This builds on the assumption that when competing political groups develop mutually exclusive identities and fail to agree on common rules, a peaceful resolution and coexistence can no longer be achieved (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Somer, 2001). At the heart of this seems to be a process in which societal groups suppress differences amongst in-group members and reduce what would otherwise be "multiple and cross-cutting intergroup differences into one single difference that becomes negatively charged and used to define the 'Other'" (McCoy et al., 2018: 18). Similarly, Finkel et al. 2020 introduce the concept of "*political sectarianism*" to describe a type of polarization in

which a partisan "mega-identity can grow so powerful that it changes other identities" (p. 534). Consequently, the authors argue, the public sphere is no longer a forum for the contest of ideas and is used instead for "dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party" (p. 533).

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that democratic systems do not exclusively rely on consensus. Democracy also requires antagonistic relations or, in other words, an us/them differentiation of political identities in order to identify competing groups (Mouffe, 1993). The main challenge here, according to Mouffe (2014), is how to deal with those potentially dangerous, but unavoidable, antagonisms in constructive ways that maintain democratic stability instead of threatening it. In fact, intergroup competition has been identified as a factor that increases citizen engagement (McLaughlin, 2018). Further, Le Bas (2018), introduced the notion of *generative conflicts* to name a specific type of conflict that can contribute to democratic consolidation (e.g., strengthening of democratic institutions, political mobilization). She argues that long-term, "slower-moving and more substantial processes that diffuse power and check its arbitrary use" (p. 60) are relevant for democratization, because the possibility of being completely excluded from having access to power can work as an incentive for elites and mass constituencies to restrain their ambitions, bargain, undertake reforms and develop solid structures of mobilization.

Clearly, it is not possible to see polarization in simplistic terms, nor as unilaterally good/bad or positive/negative. We therefore draw on these previous definitions to propose a concept of *destructive political polarization* as manifested in communication. We agree with previous scholars that political polarization should be studied from a dynamic perspective over longer periods of time (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Somer & McCoy, 2019). Moreover, we agree with McCoy et al. (2018) that polarization is "*relational* and *political* in nature" (p. 18). However, the crucial innovation for the field of political communication is our focus on defining destructive polarization through observing communication, with a specific focus on the complex, interconnected and hybrid communication systems of digital media environments (Author, forthcoming; Chadwick, 2017; Settle, 2018). Observing polarization through communication requires a relational approach as communication itself is a relational concept. Our definition, correspondingly, focuses on types, forms, and characteristics of political polarization that damage "the condition of our public sphere and, more specifically, the mechanisms by which the citizens communicate with each other" (Evans & Nunn, 2005, p. 6).

We propose the following key elements of destructive polarization in communication: (a) *breakdown of communication*; (b) *discrediting and dismissing of information*; (c) *erasure of complexities*; (d) *exacerbated attention and space for extreme voices*; (e) *exclusion through emotions*. As noted, this is not an exhaustive or definitive list, nor do all these elements need to be present for polarization to be destructive. However, we posit that if one of these elements is present, it is likely that others are as well, as they are related and connected in complex ways.

Breakdown of communication

Homophily (e.g., McPherson et al., 2001), selective exposure (e.g., Sears & Freedman, 1967; Stroud, 2010), and social distance (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012) are core concerns in some political communication research, as contact with disagreement and cross-cutting content is a central aspect for the construction of democratic communication (Mutz, 2006). Some social distance and homophily research show how, in certain contexts, citizens in one group start to avoid social interactions with the opposite group, through their circles of friendship, marriages, and neighborhood choices (Iyengar et al., 2012). Selective exposure and news audience research shows how, in certain contexts, citizens of one group can start to actively avoid journalistic content that is different from their political ideology (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

This kind of concern has been at the center of polarization research in online environments in the last decade, often leading to the diagnosis of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' (Bruns, 2019). But at the same time, research has shown high levels of cross-cutting contact in online environments (Barberá, 2015), the lack of a connection between selective exposure and selective avoidance (Weeks et al., 2016) and incidental exposure to a more diverse range of news sources for active social media users (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). However, such exacerbated exposure to differences can be problematic (Törnberg, 2022). As Settle (2018) argues, involuntary exposure to divergent positions is a key problem that may lead to further polarization, as such content is considered to originate from "unpleasant Others".

Although online environments promote increased access to divergence, aversion to this type of interaction can lead actors (citizens, activists, etc.) to seek to avoid, actively ignore, or shut down channels of inter-group contact and interaction. We understand this as an element of destructive polarization in communication. Empirical studies show that 10% to

20% of online users use unfriending and unfollowing as a strategy for managing their engagement with others (e.g., Zhu et al., 2017), and these practices are often in response to unwanted cross-cutting exposure (e.g., Bode, 2016). Although these percentages might be considered relatively low (Bode, 2016), the impact of such disagreement avoidance on polarization cannot be dismissed. Moreover, although they might not always reach the point where they explicitly unfollow or unfriend another account, users can also simply ignore or skip unpleasant political posts (Bode et al., 2017), with similar consequences. The extent to which divergent interactions are being avoided or ignored therefore needs to be understood beyond the friendship or follower connections between accounts that can be observed in the digital trace data.

Discrediting and dismissing of information

When exposed to the communications of heterogeneous others, we evaluate them through our own ideologies, values, and identities. If we are dealing with discourses that go against what we believe in and identify with, we can find it difficult to accept them as correct, right, and true (Habermas, 1984). As such, it makes little sense to expect people to look at discourses with completely unbiased minds, ready to reflect on and accept the other side's views. However, a destructive type of polarization manifests when information provided by others is being dismissed or discredited just because they are considered to belong to an out-group. Taken to extremes, even content that could be interpreted as non-partisan (e.g., scientific research) can be discredited and dismissed for not fitting the way a certain group sees the world, or for belonging to the opposite ideological or partisan identity. This has been a key concern in recent years, especially regarding health and environmental issues: divisions along ideological or party lines have shaped the way issues like the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Allcott et al., 2020; Calvillo et al., 2020; Recuero et al., 2022) and climate change (Finkel et al., 2020) are perceived by the broader public. As ideological and partisan divisions might prevent the objective consideration and reflection of scientific knowledge, "preventive actions such as wearing a mask, social distancing, and getting a vaccine might be interpreted as ideological actions" and therefore deeply problematized (Recuero et al., 2022, p. 166-167).

Erasure of complexities

We navigate the social world through multiple identities and ideologies, each of us belonging to different social groups and holding different political opinions at the same time. However, these differences can be reduced or oversimplified to a single dimension – for

instance, to two opposing partisan identities. When this happens, the two groups demarcate this difference as a unitary element that summarizes their complex social relationships. This can happen both because there was an alignment or sorting, or because the key distinction that separates the two groups becomes so prominent that other identity and ideological characteristics are ignored, making the two groups see each other "exclusively by the characteristic that makes them classify as different" (Braga, 2020, p. 19).

Such a de-complexification of multiple and pluralistic individual identities into a simplified bipolar structure characterized by an overarching antagonism between two apparently unified groups is almost certainly also driven by its utility in public communication: it enables ordinary individuals as well as activists, politicians, parties, and journalists to reduce complex and multifaceted debates to a simple choice between left and right, Republicans and Democrats, Leavers and Remainers, and so on. But as such deceptively straightforward choices of identity and ideology become established as commonsense tropes in public discourse, they may also lead from the *rhetorical* erasure of complexities to the *actual* erasure of complexities: attempting to fit in with their perception of the in-group identity they have selected in relation to one major issue (e.g. immigration policy), partisans may now also begin to adopt what they understand to be their side's dominant positions on matters on which they had not yet adopted a strong opinion themselves. In this case, the erasure of complexities becomes self-perpetuating, and entrenches a deep and destructive polarization between two diametrically opposed partisan blocs that are defined by ideology as much as by identity.

Exacerbated attention and space to extreme voices

More than political divisions in "empirical reality", polarization can also be understood as citizens' perceptions of these divisions (Settle, 2018, p. 5; see also Lelkes, 2016, for a review on *perceived polarization*). Thus, while the individuals and groups fostering the other elements mentioned here may be in the minority, they become a problem when they dominate public attention, creating a heightened perception of extreme polarization. This has been observed for example with politicians on Twitter (Hong & Kim, 2016) and in news articles (Wagner & Gruszcynski, 2018) receiving more attention for more polarizing content, suggesting political actors may be "incentivized to proclaim polarizing rhetoric" (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, p. 193). While extreme voices should not simply be ignored, a media climate that presents a picture of extreme polarization when the actual

balance of opinions in society is considerably less polarized can be destructive, as voices in the middle may feel underrepresented, ignored, or unwanted, and may thus lose the motivation to position themselves as a distinct group in between the more extreme poles on the political spectrum.

Exclusion through emotions

There is a growing consensus in political communication research that affective polarization is on the rise and that it is problematic (e.g., Druckman et al., 2021). However, the literature seems less clear on why affective polarization is more problematic than other forms. Like all areas of social reality (e.g., Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996), political polarization has an affective and emotional dimension (Iyengar et al., 2012). On an interpersonal level, emotions enable social relationships (Fischer & Manstead, 2016) and provide an understanding of others' beliefs and intentions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Furthermore, political psychologists have argued that emotions are foundational for political thinking, behavior, and communication (Marcus et al., 2000). For example, anger can stem from conflicting interests or values, and angry communication partners can engage in prosocial argumentation, just as social change movements can originate in outrage over injustices (Author, 2019).

However, as there is a bright side to the role of emotions in public and political debate, there is also a dark one: emotional communication has its pitfalls, especially when disagreement and competition between rival groups are involved. Emotions do not always open the potential for understanding and problem-solving but can also undermine communication processes and steer them in undesirable directions. Political opportunists may use group emotions to shut down voices (Hoggett and Thompson, 2002), and emotional communication can have the effect of humiliating others, especially problematic when such feelings reproduce social inequality (Saam, 2018).

Emotions in communication seem to be particularly problematic when they are directed at political 'others' (Author, 2022; Krause, 2008; Walton, 1992). In political communication research, there is a tendency to label negative emotions as problematic. However, both positive and negative emotions can be constructive and destructive (Author, 2022). We suggest that it is not a simple matter of negative emotions on one side and positive on another; either mode of affect can be directed towards in- as well as out-groups, in general or on an individual level. For this reason, we caution against equating negative valence with

destructive polarization, and instead advocate for greater attention to how and to what ends affect and emotion are employed as we consider their roles in destructive polarization.

Positive emotions can help to build social bonds and contribute to group cohesion, but if exclusively expressed to members of the in-group they can also function as mechanisms to exclude out-group members. From a feminist cultural studies perspective, Sara Ahmed's (2004) work shows that emotions play an important role in constructions of in- and out-groups. Even happiness can be a potentially destructive emotion that excludes those not perceived as belonging to the group (Ahmed 2010); human beings turn towards that which makes them happy, and away from everything not included in what makes them happy. Similarly, Ahmed (2004) shows the use of love as a way for hate groups to rebrand or reinterpret themselves – for example, not as hating people of color, but as loving the "white race". These constructions of inside/outside, them/us, we/other function on interpersonal as well as societal levels.

This means that we must reconsider when polarization becomes destructive in its appeal to affect. This moves beyond a categorization of affect or emotion as *a priori* polarizing or promoting social cohesion. Instead, we propose to consider in more detail how affect and emotion are operationalized in political communication that appears to be polarized or polarizing. The shift from disagreement, antagonism, or co-existent hate to destructive polarization lies more in how people, collectively as well as individually, engage with heterogeneous others. Even staunch sports fans who hate (and love to hate) the "other" teams and their fans also need those teams to exist, and as Jones (2015) has shown, anti-fandom is equally as engaging and community-building as "positive" fandom. In online antagonistic behavior, there are differences in how one meets the "unpleasant other" (Settle 2018) and responds to them. The contrast between mobilizing to change a behavior one disagrees with – for example, an utterance that provokes calls for apologies and changed behavior – to destructive responses, for example in the form of emotional harassment.

Conclusion

In this article, we define five elements of destructive polarization through distinct communication practices and interactions: this form of polarization that erodes channels of interaction and trust, dismisses information from the 'other' side, erases differences, gives disproportionate space to extreme voices, and uses emotions to exclude. Such explicitly

destructive polarization is distinct from other, broader definitions of polarization that the political science and media and communication studies literature defines in a variety of more or less consistent or contradictory ways, and that describe forms of polarization that may be less inherently destructive, or possibly even productive, in their impact on public debate and democratic processes.

The five elements that we have outlined here were formulated with a view to their operationalization in empirical studies in media and communication research. While the remaining space available in this article does not permit us to outline a full methodological framework for the study of such destructive polarization through the systematic detection and evaluation of its five elements (and while we also note that the list of elements that we have identified here may not be exhaustive), it should nonetheless be obvious that current mixed-methods approaches in media and communication studies, combining digital trace data from news media as well as social media with quantitative and qualitative data from content analysis and participant engagement, are well-suited to the study of these elements. For instance, social media analytics may be used to examine patterns of interaction and engagement, or their absence, amongst and between polarized groups; computational and manual content analysis can investigate the language that partisans use to talk about their own and opposing groups; paired with manual and computational sentiment analysis it can also examine the role of affective and emotive language in such discourses; content and frame analysis of both news and social media can determine the extent to which extreme voices are present in the discourse, and how they are presented; and network as well as frame analysis can demonstrate how specific sources are discredited and dismissed by partisan groups.

Research that employs these and other methodological approaches, as well as research that continues the definitional work that we have sought to encourage here, should generally aim to pursue the conceptual development as well as empirical validation of the idea of *destructive polarization* as a distinct phenomenon that represents an especially problematic subset of the broader, more nebulous, and ill-defined, concept of polarization as such. The focus on such destructive polarization is urgent and important in light of current challenges to democratic processes and political legitimation in many established and emergent democracies around the world; it will also benefit from internationally comparative studies that treat the United States as the exceptional and unrepresentative case that it is, rather than as a normative model against which other democratic systems should be compared. Overall, we suggest that the path forward in polarization research is through a careful integration of

political science and media and communication studies concepts and approaches that pays particular attention to the explicit definition of polarization in all its facets, rather than using the term as a catch-all that means vastly different things in different contexts. Only this principled focus on definitions also enables the operationalization of polarization in its various aspects in empirical research.

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