Destructive Polarization in Digital Communication Contexts: A Critical Review and Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

While the digital turn in communication research offers novel opportunities to study polarization at scale, it also adds complexity to a challenging concept. Ambiguities surrounding the conceptual understanding of polarization in different fields lead to problems in advancing the research in the digital context. The conflation of types and forms of polarization erodes the utility of the concept and opens the door to an uncritical proliferation of technologically determinist perspectives and solutions. We review literature from political, media and communication studies, revealing an increasing focus on polarization within media and communication without sufficient (re-)evaluation and conceptualization. To avoid future indiscriminate use of the term polarization, we advocate for precise delineations when studying polarization as a threat to democracy. We propose a concept of *destructive* polarization and discuss it with regard to studying its dynamics in a digital communication context, describing its recognizable elements as manifested in communication practices.

Keywords

political polarization, destructive polarization, literature review, digital communication

Introduction

In recent years, media and communication scholars have increasingly focused on studying polarization (e.g., Kreiss & McGregor, 2023; Marchal, 2022). 'Polarization' has become a buzzword, indicating a potential threat to democratic societies. While the conceptual debate within political science has achieved a certain maturity, clarifying key disagreements over the definition of polarization (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Lelkes, 2016), polarization research in media and communication studies is more nascent, with fewer opportunities for (re-)conceptualizations through this lens (see Pfetsch, 2018; Yarchi et al., 2021). Frequently, definitions from political science are borrowed with varying levels of care and accuracy while studying manifestations of polarization within media coverage and public communication. The complexity of digital communication further compounds the fuzziness of this conceptual debate (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

This article systematically revisits extant definitions of political polarization. We argue that engagement in this theoretical debate, which is prevalent in political studies, is also crucial for media and communication scholars. The lack of conceptual clarity in studying polarization can stall theoretical progress and practical interventions, particularly in the digital context. We theorize which communication practices can be associated with previously defined types and forms of polarization and identify the symptoms that indicate when they begin to undermine a functional public sphere and democracy. In doing so, we hope to move beyond the indiscriminate use of the term 'polarization' to describe several distinct phenomena, and to more clearly define and demarcate these concepts. In particular, while media and communication studies currently tend to assume that polarization is always problematic, we instead need to work towards determining when this is the case.

To that end, drawing from existing discourse (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Somer, 2001) and anchoring our discussion in a critical review of previous polarization research in political communication, in the second part of this article we identify five key symptoms of *destructive* political polarization: (a) *breakdown of communication*; (b) *discrediting and dismissing of information*; (c) *erasure of complexities*; (d) *exacerbated attention to and space for extreme voices*; and (e) *exclusion through emotions*. Finally, we highlight opportunities for future research in the field, including methodological approaches for studying the phenomenon online, and discuss implications for depolarization efforts.

Previous Definitions of Political Polarization

Defining *polarization* is complicated due to its use in various academic fields and its widespread general usage; the word is burdened by multiple, diverging connotations. In the following, we outline common uses of the term in political science and media and communication studies. This is informed by a systematic literature review of existing research on polarization. From the two largest databases for peer-reviewed literature, *Scopus* and *Web of Science (WoS)*, we collected all records published before April 2023 with "polarisation" or "polarization" in the title, abstract, or keywords. We did not extend our search to the terms "polarizing" or "polarized" to focus on the characteristics of the phenomenon itself and not on its preconditions or effects. We selected a total of 6,707 articles, books, and book chapters tagged and published in 'communication' (986 in WoS, 803 in SCOPUS), 'political science' (3150 in WoS), 3689 from 'sociology and political science' in SCOPUS), 'political science and international relations' (1458), and 'cultural studies' (639) journals, noting these categories overlapped. As we aimed to review the most prominent definitions of polarization, we analyzed the most cited titles, normalized by years since publication, and incorporated the most recent studies from the fields of digital and political communication research.

We manually reviewed 200 publications, evaluating each full text to determine the usage and definition of the term "polarization." Four co-authors each reviewed 50 publications. For our focus on digital and political communication, we conducted extensive annotation on the 50 most-cited articles from media and communications. When "polarization" was mentioned, we read the entire paragraph for context. We assessed the publications by asking: 'How is polarization defined?' and 'Are symptoms of destructive polarization mentioned?' Corresponding text examples were collected in a table and reviewed by all co-authors.

We found that only 18 of the 50 titles (36%) included an explicit definition of polarization, whether specific to communication or from political science. Seven articles (14%) distinguished negative aspects of polarization, with only two (4%) deconstructing the term in detail. These seven articles focused on various empirical contexts, including Hungary, Denmark, the United States, a comparison between Hungary, the United States, Turkey, and Venezuela, a cross-national study of 50 countries, a systematic literature review, and a conceptual deconstruction of the term. All were published after 2018.

In the following sections, we identify the prevalent definitions and usage of polarization found in this literature, first in political science and then in media and communication studies.

Definitions in Political Science

In popular use, the term *polarization* builds on a vague metaphor that envisages a spectrum of disagreement, and often carries an *a priori* negative connotation – it contrasts with a vision of a harmonious society where political disagreements are few and politicians work together for the common good across party lines. By contrast, the more neutral, descriptive use in the social sciences refers to divisions, not necessarily extreme or destructive, between societal groups. These divisions can be understood as motivated by different attributes (e.g., ideologies, positions, identities, values, affects); as operating at different levels (macro, meso, micro); and as focusing on different actors (e.g., politicians, political parties, activists, citizens, media outlets).

Societal groups can be polarized on a spectrum (e.g., far left to far right), in relation to a certain attribute (e.g., position, issue, value) that has two or more poles. Accordingly, ideological polarization traditionally refers to a divide between groups holding diametrically opposed beliefs and partisan identities (Yarchi et al., 2021). Definitions in political science focus on the polarization of elites or masses through political ideology, either on specific positions on issues or through their overall placement in a broader ideological spectrum. However, perspectives differ on which dynamics to emphasize (Lelkes, 2016). The *divergence* perspective examines the distance between positions on a given issue, seeking to identify a bimodal distribution to indicate polarization (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). The *alignment* perspective examines the consistency of individuals' ideological positioning across issues, where those who strongly support a party's perspective on one issue are also likely to fall in line with its other views (Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015). Here, polarization can be measured as correlations between issue positions and party identification (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006), and understood as "a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities" (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008, p. 409).

Political polarization 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 contempt and hatred directed at out-group members (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). Empirical studies suggest that affective polarization can increase even while ideological differences remain static (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lelkes, 2016).

This 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 intrinsic 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). Through the concepts of *perceived* (Lelkes, 2016) or *psychological* (Settle, 2018) polarization, scholars argue that polarization resides not only in ideological differences but in how these are apprehended, as they show how citizens "view themselves and view others in the political landscape" (Settle, 2018, p. 5). The extent to which citizens believe that polarization is present in society, beyond any empirical measures, may exceed actual polarization and thereby accelerate the erosion of social trust (Lee, 2022). Perceptions of polarization thus contribute to shaping the reality of polarization dynamics.

This shift in polarization research, from a focus on individuals' and groups' intrinsic political positioning to a consideration of their extrinsic relationships with and perceptions of others, also foregrounds the importance of media and communication research. Divisions between political and societal groups become manifest in the

private and public communication of group members and can be analyzed empirically in terms of their communicative content and relations, directly or indirectly. These dynamics are also documented (and potentially deepened) by media coverage, and divergent patterns in such coverage may also be examined empirically. The analytical work emerging from these approaches also provides definitions of polarization, and not always in ways that are compatible with those we have outlined above.

Definitions in Media and Communication Studies

Despite its growing prominence, the concept of polarization remains poorly defined in media and communication studies (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Although some attempts to conceptualize and define polarization in the context of digital communication have been made (see Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2021), it often seems that political science concepts of polarization are implicitly assumed, but not explicitly operationalized. Types of polarization addressed in media and communication research include, but are not limited to ideological, issue, positional, and affective polarization (e.g., Hart et al., 2020; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). As we have shown, there are core definitions for polarization in political science, but also entrenched disagreements about their validity and applicability; these complexities are only compounded when such terminology is imported into another field without sufficient care. To address this lack of clarity, we outline here how polarization has been investigated in media and communication research.

Some studies focus on investigating how communication affects polarization, thus working closely with established definitions without redefining them from the perspective of media and communication. They examine the effects of exposure to news, expression of opinions, and engagement in cross-cutting discussions by using established definitions such as ideological divergence and alignment. For instance, Valenzuela et al. (2021) examine the impact of sharing political content, while Wojcieszak (2010) explores the influence of participating in radical online groups on the extremity of issue positions, both within the framework of ideological *divergence*. Cho et al. (2018) examine the *consistency* of political expression and its impact on aligning partisan identification with issue positions.

While these studies primarily view communication as a driver of polarization, it can also be viewed as a symptom. More recent studies provide new perspectives by considering communication as a distinct domain for polarization, necessitating a more tailored definition. In the next paragraphs we discuss studies that directly observe how individuals comprehend and interpret information, and how they communicate with one another, shedding light on the level of political polarization.

One way to understand polarization is through the influence of partisan identity on the utilization and perception of *information*, such as news content (e.g., Recuero et al., 2022), scientific research (e.g., Calvillo et al., 2020; Rekker, 2021), and opinion polls (e.g., Su & McLeod, 2022), especially around specific topics such as climate change (e.g., Bolsen et al., 2019). In this sense, polarization is defined by the extent to which partisans exclusively choose, use, and believe in information that aligns with their in-group's ideology and values (*selective exposure*), and/or disregard other information because they see it as out-group content (*selective avoidance*).

A different strand of research focuses on polarization through the lens of *discourse*. Such studies explore how communication generated by various actors, such as media organizations, political elites, and citizens, employs polarizing rhetoric. In this context, polarization can be defined as the presence of 'us vs. them' rhetoric within public discourse (Masroor et al., 2019; Zahid Ali et al., 2022). More recent studies concentrate on violence and negativity in inter-group communication (e.g., Marchal, 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021). Yarchi et al. (2021) employ the term *affective polarization* and assess the prevalence of negative and positive sentiments in online discussions. In this perspective, polarization is characterized by the manifestation of discursive hostility towards members of the out-group.

Communication *networks* provide another lens for understanding patterns of interaction between opposing groups (e.g., Treen et al., 2022; Urman, 2020). Yarchi et al. (2021) refer to this as *interactional polarization*, examining the extent to which individuals involved in a debate engage with like-minded individuals while withdrawing from those with differing views. Here, polarization is understood as the absence of meaningful

discursive interaction between opposing sides: this might manifest as a lack of communicative engagement, or a reduction to dysfunctional communication only (e.g., personal attacks).

The media and communication research we have highlighted here differs in its objects of study (information, discourse, networks), in its methods, and in its understanding of polarization (selective exposure/avoidance, affective polarization, interactional polarization). These properties are shared with political science, but where political science has a firmer grasp of definitions, this clarity is still lacking in the field of media and communication. We will now address how this absence and divergence of definitions affects research progress.

The Problems with Ambiguous Terminology in Polarization Research

The range of adjectives and qualifiers that we have outlined above demonstrates that there is no dominant conceptualization of polarization. Even within subfields, a surge in research activity does not necessarily result in greater specificity: Kubin and von Sikorski's 2021 review of social media and polarization research found "a steep increase" in the number of studies yet noted that "many did not make distinctions between ideological and affective polarization" (p. 192), describing both simply as polarization. In a definitional vacuum, popular assumptions about the nature of polarization may creep into the research, conflating diverse communicative behaviors without building on a rigorous empirical basis. This may result in practical and conceptual challenges, both in the advancement of polarization research and more broadly for social conflict and public discourse studies.

For polarization research, ambiguities in terminology create difficulties in identifying relevant research and building on previous conceptual work. First and foremost, research which over-diagnoses polarization without conceptual engagement – using the term as a buzzword – dilutes the quality of the available body of work. This tendency can be seen in mentions of polarization only in the contextualizing sections that introduce articles, using other terms when specificity is required in methods and results sections. Compounding the conflation of distinct types of polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), there is uncertainty about its subjects: for instance, whether claims reference polarization amongst politicians or the general populace (Hetherington, 2009). Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) state that the generic, implicit use of polarization to cover affective and ideological types "makes the field's understanding of political polarization muddled" (p. 192). More broadly, "different definitions produce different conclusions" (Hetherington, 2009, p. 447), which is especially problematic for research that seeks to evaluate or measure polarization over time across contexts.

The over-diagnosis of polarization also manifests in studies that merely present convergent or divergent group behaviors but define them as polarization, and thereby introduce negative connotations into the study of ordinary community dynamics. This further confuses our conceptual understandings and promotes simplistic popular media conceptions of the term that see any formation of in- and out-groups as inherently problematic; it undermines the utility of the term 'polarization' as a distinct concept in principled social science research. Additionally, this oversimplification creates opportunities for ambiguous scapegoating and 'solutions' that are rooted in technological determinism: blaming existing technology as the sole origin or major accelerant of polarization while hailing new technological solutions as a panacea. Digital communication scholars' imprecise use of under-defined terms can be distorted to stoke such fears, as we have seen also in the debate around 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' (cf. Bruns, 2019).

To be clear, we do not outline these issues to advocate for abandoning the concept(s) of polarization altogether, nor for emphasizing one form of polarization above all others; rather, we suggest that it is critical to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the major forms of polarization that have been identified in past research, and to deploy their definitions more systematically in the design of empirical studies and the reporting of their findings.

The above considerations illustrate the risks of continuing, as a field, on our current path: they highlight the imprecision surrounding research objects and forms of polarization, and raise the question of when, precisely, such polarization is destructive of political and societal processes. This vacuous ambiguity is clear in Kreiss and McGregor's (2023) evaluation of the field's weak engagement with questions of power and inequality, and

particularly in their observation that "whether polarization is necessarily a democratic concern, however, is often not addressed" (p. 16). In the following, we therefore suggest a way forward in tackling the problem of what is destructive in (some) polarization.

Destructive Polarization in the Context of Digital Communication

Having reviewed conceptualizations of polarization and acknowledging the lack of theoretical focus on its specific harms, this section begins by introducing a demarcation of destructive political polarization. It then proceeds to describe symptoms of how this polarization manifests through communication practices in online spaces. Instead of introducing yet another type or form of polarization to those discussed above, this demarcation is centered around identifying when polarization, as manifested in media and communication, reaches a harmful configuration that can be deemed problematic. This is an important first step towards the comparative measurement of destructive polarization dynamics (e.g., across issues, groups, or countries), and the development of effective depolarization strategies.

Recent efforts have tried to clarify what kinds of polarization threaten democracy. McCoy et al. (2018) argue that when a level of "*severe polarization*" is reached, democratic societies will struggle to maintain productive political processes. This suggests that when competing political groups develop mutually exclusive identities and fail to agree on common rules, peaceful coexistence can no longer be achieved (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Somer, 2001). Following the alignment perspective, detailed above, a societal group may suppress differences amongst its members and collapse "cross-cutting intergroup differences into one single difference that becomes negatively charged and used to define the 'other'" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18). Similarly, Finkel et al. (2020) describe "*political sectarianism*", where a partisan "mega-identity" (p. 534) can overwhelm other identities, and the public sphere is no longer a forum for the contest of ideas, but instead used for "dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party" (p. 533).

However, democratic systems do not exclusively rely on consensus. Democracy also requires antagonistic relations or, in other words, an *us/them* differentiation between the political identities of competing groups (Mouffe, 1993). Intergroup competition can promote citizen engagement (McLaughlin, 2018). Le Bas (2018) highlighted that *generative conflict* emerging from polarization can contribute to democratic consolidation. 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 complete exclusion from power can work as an incentive for elites and mass constituencies to restrain their ambitions, bargain, undertake reforms, and develop solid structures of mobilization. Therefore, the main challenge, according to Mouffe (2014), is how to deal with these potentially dangerous but unavoidable antagonisms in constructive ways that maintain democratic stability instead of threatening it.

Clearly, then, polarization should not be seen in simplistic terms as universally negative. Instead, we propose a concept of *destructive* political polarization as manifested in and through communication. We agree that the polarization we are concerned about is "*relational* and *political* in nature" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18; emphasis in original) and should be studied from a dynamic perspective over longer periods of time (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Somer & McCoy, 2019). The crucial innovation for the field 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 process. In order to study this, we need defined indicators; correspondingly, we focus 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).

Building on our systematic literature review, therefore, we propose five key symptoms of destructive polarization in communication, detailed with references to past studies in the following discussion. This list is not exhaustive or definitive; we encourage further debate about whether these symptoms are sufficiently distinct and precise for empirical research. Given the evolving nature of populist, authoritarian, and

antidemocratic communication strategies, this list may need periodic revision. Nonetheless, we suggest that a focus on these five symptoms provides a useful point of departure for the study of destructive polarization.

The five symptoms we have identified are: (a) *breakdown of communication*; (b) *discrediting and dismissing of information*; (c) *erasure of complexities*; (d) *exacerbated attention to and space for extreme voices*; and (e) *exclusion through emotions*. We stress here that not all these symptoms need to be present for polarization to be destructive: the extreme presence of one or two symptoms alone, even in the absence of others, may already be enough to undermine more productive public debate. However, we posit that if one of these symptoms is substantially present, it is likely that others are as well, as they are related and connected in complex ways. For instance, the emergence of highly emotional distinctions between in-group and out-group members (*exclusion through emotions*) may itself build on an oversimplification of individual and group identities (*erasure of complexities*), and in turn lead to a decline in inter-group engagement (*breakdown of communication*). Furthermore, 'destructive' is itself dependent on perspective; in the longer term, what we identify here as destructive to the processes of democratic society may eventually be constructive if it produces strong responses in defense of democracy.

Breakdown of Communication

Contact with opposing views and disagreement is essential for a healthy public sphere (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Stromer-Galley et al., 2015). This has led political communication research to focus on concepts like homophily (e.g., McPherson et al., 2001), selective exposure (e.g., Stroud, 2010), and social distance (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012). These processes describe how, for example, members of one group can start to avoid social interactions with opposing groups, through their circles of friendship, marriages, and neighborhood choices (Iyengar et al., 2012), or how individuals can start to actively avoid journalistic content that contrasts with their political beliefs (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Such concerns have been at the center of polarization research in online environments in the last decade, also often leading to a problematic diagnosis of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' (Bruns, 2019). However, research also shows high levels of cross-cutting contact in online environments (Barberá, 2015), the lack of a direct linkage 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) – though such increased exposure can itself be problematic (Törnberg, 2022). As Settle (2018) argues, involuntary exposure to divergent positions is a key problem that may lead to further polarization if such content is considered to originate from unpleasant others. When conceptualizing destructive polarization, we therefore cannot only focus on the *existence* of contact between diverging individuals and groups without considering the *quality* and *dynamics* of that engagement.

Dehghan's (2020) research on antagonistic immigration policy debates in the Australian Twittersphere demonstrates both forms of the breakdown of communication we describe here. On the one hand, he notes that the "Hard Right" of Australian politics uses aggressive @mentions of its opponents to orchestrate its "active confrontation with the discourse of the Other-enemy"; on the other, "the Progressive cluster does not reciprocate this confrontation", and instead refuses to participate in any direct engagement with hard-right accounts. Both communication tactics represent a breakdown of communication, however: while one side effectively trolls its antagonists with attacks and accusations, the other simply refuses to acknowledge such dysfunctional communication altogether.

We thus understand the process of avoidance of contact with divergent others as only one symptom of destructive polarization in communication. Although online environments enable and even promote increased access to divergence, aversion to this type of interaction can lead actors to devote little time and attention to such engagement, or to shut down channels for inter-group interaction altogether. In response to undesired cross-cutting exposure, users may employ tactics such as "active passivity" (Dehghan, 2020), unfriending and unfollowing (e.g., Bode, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017), or decide to skip past unpleasant political posts (Bode et al., 2017). However, when they do engage with those they disagree with, this adversarial communication can be so negative that participants promptly decide to end it (Marchal, 2022), resulting in very short interactions with no

substantial reciprocal contact (Author, 2022). The mere existence of users with opposing opinions in the same thread, group, or follower network, therefore, does not guarantee that meaningful and constructive interaction will take place. *Breakdown of communication* as we conceptualize it here thus refers to the severe qualitative deterioration or complete absence of communication with other perspectives due to an aversion to those perspectives, and it can manifest variously as an inward-centered 'talking only with one's own group', a non-reciprocated and asymmetrical 'talking at the other', or an unproductive and aggressive 'talking past each other'.

Discrediting and Dismissing of Information

The processing of information is influenced by ideologies, values, and identities. Individuals employ cues and heuristics to filter information and uphold consistent worldviews that align with their social identity and cultural context (Gastil et al., 2011). Furthermore, the perceived ideology, identity, or motivation of a source can strongly influence how information is received and processed (e.g., Colvin et al., 2019; Kahan et al., 2012; Sylvester et al., 2023). This leads individuals to more readily accept information that aligns with their worldviews and dismiss information that does not. While these heuristics are commonplace across the political spectrum (Washburn & Skitka, 2018), a more destructive manifestation is seen when information is discredited outright purely because of the perceived out-group nature of its source. Expanding upon this phenomenon, the discrediting process extends beyond sources that unquestionably belong to an out-group, encompassing intentionally non-partisan sources, including scientific research, if they are perceived as tainted by association (Fasce et al., 2023; Rekker, 2021).

Coan et al. (2021)'s work on the dismissal of climate change information provides a useful example. It catalogs common 'climate contrarian' claims used to dismiss the scientific consensus on the climate crisis, and develops a computer-assisted process for their identification and classification. Their work documents various categories of climate denialist claims, from outright denial ('global warming is not happening') to subtler arguments ('current climate solutions won't work'), and traces their prominence over time as the effects of climate change become harder to deny and other delay tactics become more prevalent.

Partisan sorting processes may also be of concern, where groups accept and promote information and sources due to their perceived in-group alignment alone, regardless of the quality of the information they provide. This effect is at its clearest for topics with strong mainstream reliance on established science, and as such has been a key concern in recent years for health and environmental issues. Divisions along ideological or party lines have shaped the way issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Calvillo et al., 2020; Recuero et al., 2022) and climate change (e.g., 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 become deeply problematized and politicized (Recuero et al., 2022, pp. 166-167). This snowballing, polarizing effect can lead to the formation of ideological groups with a diminishing overlap not only in their political positions, but even in their perceptions of observable reality or their ways of knowing (Fischer, 2019). These groups can be understood as polarizing or polarized and may initially represent a multi-polar diversity of ideological positions; however, over time and through processes of party sorting they may also be subsumed into larger ideological blocs that exhibit an internal logic which exemplifies our next symptom, the erasure of complexities.

Erasure of Complexities

In the process of communicating with others, individuals navigate a complex social landscape by cultivating multiple identities and ideologies. However, under certain circumstances these can be amalgamated and oversimplified into a single dimension – leading to an understanding of the individual's in-group as opposing and opposed by everyone else, or the perception of political processes as naturally defined and dominated by two overarching and inescapable, opposing partisan identities. This can happen both as the result of long-standing ideological alignment or sorting, or because the key distinction becomes so prominent that it subsumes all other

identity and ideological characteristics, leading groups to identify each other "exclusively by the characteristic that makes them classify as different" (Braga, 2020, p. 19), or become absorbed into all-encompassing identities of "extreme partisanship" (Finkel et al., 2020) aligned with political standpoints. The popular tendency to understand polarization solely through binary frameworks can be considered a manifestation of this phenomenon.

This erasure of complexities – in both public thought and scholarly research – is exemplified by studies such as a Pew Research Center survey showing that as of 2019, 71% of Democrat voters in the United States would not consider dating a Trump voter (Brown, 2020). Here, partisan alignment within the U.S. political system appears to dominate even romantic choices, which are usually governed by a more complex set of considerations. Over time, this could lead to significant demographic and geographic sorting. However, the situation is more complex than such headline statistics suggest: Democrats were more open to dating generic Republicans than Trump voters, and Republicans were generally more open to dating Democrats. Media reports that highlight these stark statistics without context risk contributing to further erasure of complexities, adding to the *perceived* polarization their audiences may already experience.

Where it does occur to a substantial extent, however, this collapse of multiple and pluralistic individual identities into a simplified bipolar structure characterized by an overarching antagonism between two apparently unified groups is driven by its utility in public communication: it enables ordinary citizens as well as activists, politicians, party members, and journalists to reduce complex and multifaceted debates to a simple choice between left and right, Republicans and Democrats, Leavers and Remainers, city and country, etc. Yet this collapse is anything but natural, even if it is familiar from the outsized number of studies examining polarization in the bipolar political system of the United States: polarization also readily occurs in non-binary constellations, where it better reflects the complexities of human social structures, interactions, and dynamics. The study of polarization in multi-party systems highlights these non-binary perspectives (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021), and shows the value of refusing the erasure of complex polarization and the collapse into hyper-partisan shorthand.

As such deceptively straightforward choices of identity and ideology become established as commonsense tropes in public discourse, they may lead from a *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, for example immigration policy, partisans may also begin to adopt what they understand to be their side's dominant positions on matters on which they had not yet developed a strong opinion themselves. Similarly, partisans may also oppose ideas originating from an opposing side, even when such ideas are ideologically congruent with their own position, simply because of the source of these ideas (Kam, 2020). 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 identity as much as ideology.

Exacerbated Attention to and Space for Extreme Voices

The attention given to extreme voices in a public sphere can produce destructive consequences by distorting perceptions of societal polarization. Rather than reflecting actual divisions amongst the population, polarized public communication is often shaped by citizens' subjective interpretations (see Lelkes, 2016, for a review). When individuals and groups with extreme political views gain outsized prominence in public discourse – through their own communicative efforts, the editorial choices of news organizations, or excessive amplification by digital platform algorithms – their excessive presence can increase public perceptions of extreme polarization, and in turn undermine the influence of more moderate perspectives.

In online spaces, the disproportionate visibility and influence of a small fraction of highly active users is one of the key factors driving the perception of extreme polarization. Only 7% of social media users actively contribute to political discussions (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Earlier studies on the digital divide (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Norris, 2001), coupled with more recent evidence on online participation and interactivity (e.g., Author, 2022), also underscore the unequal distribution of voice and attention in online spaces. Distorted perceptions are further heightened by the excessively vocal nature of extreme individuals, as those with stronger ideological

or partisan views are more inclined to create and circulate political content online (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017; Hong & Kim, 2016; Settle, 2018). Consequently, the exacerbated presence of extreme voices, and the attention they generate, overshadow more nuanced perspectives, reinforcing existing beliefs and impeding public engagement.

This phenomenon is not limited to online or social media but extends to traditional media. Politicians and journalists embracing or otherwise commenting on polarizing content can propagate more extreme views than are present within society (Wagner & Gruszcynski, 2018). A media climate that favors extreme views can incentivize political actors to adopt a more polarizing rhetoric, further exacerbating perceived extreme polarization. This prevents citizens and governments from accurately assessing the full extent of disagreement within society.

The news media phenomenon of 'bothsidesism' or 'bothsiderism', where opposing viewpoints with vastly different empirical support receive equal coverage, illustrates this symptom. Aikin & Casey (2022) provide a detailed discussion of the argumentative fallacy that supporters of the weaker case exploit as they demand equal treatment in public debate, and show that the resulting "discursive inclusion" of such fallacious positions (in journalistic coverage and elsewhere) can have severe consequences: for instance, "including testimony from climate change deniers not only misrepresents the state of play in the critical discussion over the science, but it impedes decisive action in light of what those discussions have shown": "the audience … infers from the fact of disagreement that the issue is not closed by the evidence" (2022: 267). The same strategy is summarized more succinctly by far-right agitator Steve Bannon's avowed intention to "flood the zone with shit": that is, to overload mainstream journalistic coverage with a steady flow of deliberate disinformation (Stelter, 2021).

While extreme voices should not simply be ignored, then, a media climate that portrays extreme political polarization while the actual balance of opinions in society is considerably less polarized is destructive, especially when voices from the center are underrepresented, ignored, or feel unwanted, and therefore lose the motivation to position themselves as a distinct group in between the more extreme poles of the political spectrum. These dynamics will be especially pronounced when an erasure of complexities has already led to the emergence of clearly distinct ideological blocs, weakening the political influence of centrist, consensus-oriented groups and creating additional communicative space for extreme voices. The resulting perception of extreme polarization can then also induce further breakdowns and disruptions in communication.

Exclusion through Emotions

There is a growing consensus among political communication scholars that *affective polarization* is on the rise and that it is more problematic than other forms and types (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2019). Animosity towards opposing parties becomes problematic when policy beliefs reflect feelings toward 'the other' rather than an understanding of the issues themselves (Druckman et al., 2021). The expression of emotions within communication has its pitfalls, especially when disagreement and competition are involved. However, the *affective or emotional turn* in political theory, psychology and media studies adds complexity to this by highlighting the fundamental role of affect and emotion in *any* political thinking, behavior, and communication (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Nussbaum, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Although 'affect' usually denotes broad internal bodily states in psychology and 'emotions' imply more defined mental configurations in political science and communication, we don't strictly separate them. Instead, we argue that affective and emotional engagement during public communication is necessary and not problematic per se (see also Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). However, if utilized against political others, affect and emotion can become destructive forces.

Such use of affect and emotion is now a common component of political campaigning toolkits. During Australia's 2023 constitutional referendum on the greater recognition and consultation of Indigenous peoples in political decision-making processes, for instance, news reports showed that lobby group Advance, supporting the No campaign, had explicitly instructed its volunteer call center workers "to use fear and doubt rather than facts to trump arguments used by the Yes camp" in their phone conversations with prospective Yes voters (Sakkal, 2023). As Advance national campaigning chief Chris Inglis put it, "this is the difference between facts

and figures or the 'divisive Voice' [fear campaign]. … That feeling of uncertainty, of fear or doubt, that stays. That lasts for a very, very long time" (Inglis qtd. in Sakkal, 2023).

While negative emotions are often labeled as more problematic, the expression of both positive *and* negative emotions can have constructive or destructive effects on subsequent engagement (Author, 2022). Emotional valence can be directed towards in-group members and out-group members alike (Ahmed, 2004). Consequently, it appears that the target of the expressed emotion is more significant than the valence of the emotion itself. Emotions directed at political opponents via communication seem particularly problematic (e.g., Author, 2023; Walton 1992). Further, group affect and emotions become destructive when political opportunists use them to shut down voices and instrumentalize them to humiliate out-group members.

In online political interactions, the way individuals encounter and respond to unpleasant others can vary and range from mobilization to destructive emotional harassment. To understand the point at which affective polarization becomes destructive, we must understand how affect and emotion are used and responded to in political communication. This goes beyond categorizing affect and emotion as inherently polarizing or promoting social cohesion; emotions can be drivers of compassion as well as tools for exclusion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Instead, we should consider the nuances of how affect and emotion are employed in interactions that appear to be polarized or polarizing. We suggest that the central focus in this research should be how and to what extent emotions are used to exclude others from meaningful participation in public communication.

Conclusion

In this article, we have defined five symptoms of destructive polarization that are expressed through distinct communicative practices. Individually or in concert, their configuration of communication dynamics erodes channels of interaction and trust, dismisses information from 'other' sides, erases complexity and fine differences, gives disproportionate space to extreme voices, and uses emotions to exclude ideological opponents. Such explicitly *destructive* polarization is distinct from other, broader definitions of polarization that political science and media and communication literature have defined in a variety of sometimes contradictory ways. We propose the concept of destructive polarization in order to distinguish its *qualities* from other manifestations of polarization that are less inherently destructive, or that potentially even contribute positively to public debate and democratic processes – it is not intended as yet another type of polarization alongside the ideological, issue, affective, perceived, and other types that we have identified in the literature, but as a measure of when benign polarization turns problematic for democracy.

Our framework highlights the importance of this narrower focus on *destructive* polarization and its five symptoms, and provides the first steps towards its operationalization. We acknowledge our approach does not resolve the conceptual confusion that arises from the proliferation of different polarization types in the literature; however, any empirical evaluation of the symptoms of destructive polarization as we have defined them within the context of a concrete case study will also shed new light on the specific types of polarization that are prominent in this context, and thereby produce new evidence about the role of such types in destructive polarization dynamics.

The symptoms that we have outlined here were formulated with a view to their operationalization in empirical studies in media and communication research. The next steps are to test this proposed framework using content from online, offline, and hybrid media and communications spaces across various topics and geographical locations. Methodologically, both information-sharing and discursive patterns and tactics need to be studied, which lends itself to mixed-methods approaches. These can combine digital trace data from news and social media with quantitative and qualitative data from content analysis (including Large Language Model-assisted analysis). Mixed-methods approaches are well suited to both understanding the communicative dynamics at scale and investigating the drivers of polarization in detail.

For instance, social media analytics may be used to examine patterns of interaction and engagement, or their absence, among and between polarized groups. Further, computational and manual content analysis can investigate the language that partisans use in talking about their own and opposing groups, and – paired with

manual and computational sentiment analysis – it can also examine the role of affective, emotional, 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. Finally, combinations of social network and frame analysis can illustrate how specific sources are discredited and dismissed by partisan groups.

These approaches need to be adapted and applied to different communication spaces and platforms to account for varying affordances, logics and power dynamics, and bolstered with surveys and interviews to achieve further clarification as needed. Such work may result in an expansion or refinement of the elements we propose. Additionally, this work also needs to take into account the specific societal, cultural, and historical contexts of any given empirical case: these and other factors will affect interpretations of whether and how strongly each of the five symptoms of destructive polarization can be identified in any specific case. A second limitation of the framework we have presented in this article, therefore, is that the label 'destructive', and the symptoms of destructive polarization, are implicitly defined here in relation to a general ideal, rather than to a more explicit context. For instance, the point at which the mere use of emotional language in political rhetoric turns into a destructively polarizing *exclusion through emotions* may differ from one country to the next, due to established political practice or broader cultural factors. However, while this means that the thresholds for a transition from benign to destructive polarization may be different for each case, this does not invalidate the symptoms of destructive polarization themselves.

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 quality that represents an especially problematic subset of the broader, more nebulous, and often ill-defined concept of polarization as such. With the often-implied understanding of polarization as always negative, we suggest that *destructive* polarization is what most researchers mean when they use 'polarization': being explicit about this adds clarity and demarcates this research interest from other, more neutral, understandings of the term.

This still leaves unaddressed the challenge of determining exactly when benign or neutral polarization turns destructive, however, and we acknowledge as a third and final limitation of this article that for each of the five symptoms we cannot pinpoint a simple threshold value at which the polarization indicator enters into the red zone. Instead, we stress again that an abrupt state change is highly unlikely: rather, the transition from benign through neutral to destructive will occur as a gradual process, and the symptoms are designed to enable the development of empirical measures for the quality of public debate along the five dimensions they emphasize. Such quality assessments may then be compared – with due care for the specific contexts of each case, as we have stressed – across topics of debate, over time, and between countries.

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 emerging 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 enables the operationalization of polarization in its various aspects in empirical research.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. These data were derived from resources available in the public domain as a systematic literature review of documents in Scopus and Web of Science.

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