

THE DYNAMICS OF POLARISATION IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CASE OF IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a case study of a highly contested and polarising debate within Australia's socio-political domain. Through a mixed-methods investigation of conversations about the topic of immigration within the Australian Twittersphere, the authors examine the dynamics of polarisation in this space from a discourse-theoretical lens. The chapter uses this case as a pilot study for a broader and more systematic analysis of discursive struggles that lead to polarisation in social media. The study shows that the polarisation often observed in political debates on social media is not necessarily an effect of the technological structure of the platforms, but rather the result of the strategic engagement of users with the platforms' affordances, in a bid to participate in democratic processes online through the reproduction, promotion, and dissemination of their discourses.

The interrelationship of social media and democracy has been approached from widely different perspectives. Initially, the majority of views on the impact of social media on democratic discourse were quite optimistic, and pointed to the potential of the participatory web for the creation, promotion, and evolution of better deliberative and participatory opportunities, potentially enabling citizens to engage in various forms of

direct democracy (e.g. Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). A number of events around the globe, such as Iran's Green Movement in 2009-10, the Arab Spring in 2010-12, or Occupy Wall Street in 2011, appeared to support this view, at least temporarily: they were seen as substantially organised and popularised via social media, with platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enabling protesters and activists to bypass the censorship of oppressive political regimes or the disinterest from establishment media, and to highlight and pursue citizens' interests from the bottom up, even in political and media systems whose structures were designed to sideline and suppress such grassroots activism.

The initial success of such protest movements in these and other contexts appeared to confirm the hopes and assumptions of early Web 2.0 theorists that better opportunities for participation would produce better spaces for political deliberation, and thus better democracies (see, for example Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2011). Yet the subsequent faltering and failure of many such activities, due both to an inability of activists to sustain their protests over the longer term and to a concerted backlash from state authorities representing the status quo, called such hopes into question, and critics have pointed out that the simplistic characterisation of events like the Arab Spring as a "social media revolution" substantially underestimates the amount of conventional, in-person activism and organising that also fed into these protests (e.g. Morozov, 2011). In turn, however, outright dismissals of social media activism as mere "slacktivism"—a transient, inconsequential, and therefore meaningless expression of support via social media that does not translate into 'real' change offline, as Morozov characterises it—are similarly simplistic: more recent campaigns with a substantial social media presence, such as the global Me Too or Black Lives Matter movements, have not only served to substantially raise public awareness of sexual abuse and racial discrimination, but in a

number of instances also produced substantive change in the political, corporate, and societal domain.

The communicative landscape that has emerged, then, is considerably more complex and contradictory than early hopes and fears about the impact of social media on public debate and democracy may have anticipated. Increased participation through social media also means an increase in the range and variety of voices expressed online, leading to an increased fragmentation of participatory opportunities and platforms, “with public spheres veering toward disparate islands of political communication” (Dahlgren 2005: 152). In later reformulations of his ‘public sphere’ theory, Habermas himself included the notion of “issue publics” (Habermas, 2006, p.422), to account for the presence of fragmentation. Although one can argue that the ubiquity of social media did indeed lead to more participation—or at least more opportunities for participation—this did not necessarily translate into a net increase in the quantity or, more importantly, the quality of deliberation. A national or global public sphere in the Habermasian sense, now drawing on these latest and most inclusive platforms for public deliberation, did not emerge from the public embrace of social media as tools for public communication; instead, what resulted from the growing use of social media across society was increased fragmentation. This fragmentation produced a wide range of communicative spaces of variable size, lifespan, and publicness, described and theorised variously as public spheres (Bruns, 2008), public sphericules (Cunningham, 2001), *ad hoc* publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), personal publics (Schmidt, 2014), or privately public spaces (Papacharissi, 2010), to name just a few perspectives.

Although the theoretical and empirical works drawing on these and related perspectives to investigate the fragmentations and intersections of public discourse in various contexts

approach these issues from different conceptual and methodological traditions, a common thread among the majority of media and communication literature investigating the interrelationship of social media and democracy is a reliance on the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962; 2006), and with it, on the normative ideal of achieving democracy through consensus. In other words, the implicit end goal for such projects is to understand and resolve communicative fragmentation in ways that can reintroduce a form of political deliberation that would lead to agreement, and consensual decision-making.

Public sphere theory, however, has received its fair share of criticism, not least for its pursuit of this ideal state in preference over less ideal but more realistic and achievable models for meaningful deliberation in a fragmented mediasphere. Indeed, some scholars argue that the ideal public sphere has always been “a convenient fantasy” (Hartley & Green, 2006, p. 346); others point to the exclusionary presumptions underpinning public sphere theory, which traditionally centres on a male, homogenous, bourgeois population and sidelines the voices of women, minorities, and counterhegemonic voices (Ess, 2018; Fraser, 1992). In effect, the consensus sought in a deliberative democracy that is founded on Habermasian principles is built on exclusionary practices, and cannot be seen as inclusive of all societal perspectives (Smith, 2017).

A further major criticism of such deliberative democratic models is made by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2000), who argue that consensus is a paradoxical situation in itself. Once there is consensus, there will be no further change, and societies will not progress. A consensus, furthermore, is always achieved against the backdrop of pre-existing power relations and hegemonic structures: thus, what might appear as consensus is in essence a consensus predominantly among the participants in hegemonic

discourse, and does not involve the contributors to all discourses in a society. Therefore, any such consensus is ultimately achieved through the exclusion of all other discourses from the social order.

Because of these inherent limitations in deliberative democratic models, Laclau and Mouffe call for a radical, direct model of democracy, built upon the assumption that discursive differences and struggles—antagonisms—are ineradicable (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1999). In this view, therefore, the “task of democracy” should not be to eliminate antagonism altogether in order to achieve a lasting but lifeless consensus; rather, it should be to “transform antagonism into agonism” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 24). In other words, an antagonistic struggle between *enemies* should be transformed into an agonistic struggle among *adversaries*, who acknowledge that their differences may never be resolved, but come together to achieve a common goal, usually against a common enemy. In a fragmented or polarised political or communicative setting, therefore, this pluralistic model of democracy does not aim to piece the fragments of ‘the’ public sphere together and make them whole again; it accepts that to do so is impossible, and thus futile. Instead, the aim is to bring the fragments together in a way that puts them next to each other, connects them, and facilitates interaction between them, but without merging them. In this setting, the discourses that may occur in each fragmentary space for public deliberation continue to maintain their identity, their values, and their norms, but they come together to achieve a shared goal. This interconnection is the fundamental building block of an agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013).

We suggest that this pluralistic model of distributed deliberation with its agonisms and antagonisms among and between shifting combinations of discursive groups and communities maps remarkably well onto the communicative realities of contemporary

national and international mediaspheres. Since the heyday of Habermasian public sphere theory in the second half of the twentieth century, when print and broadcast mass media still commanded large national audiences that could be considered as credible if incomplete approximations of ‘the’ public sphere—providing an arena for public deliberation between political and societal elites to be played out before the masses—changes in technology, economy, politics, society, and culture have contributed to a steady and irreversible fragmentation of these mediaspheres, offline and online (cf. Katz, 1996); indeed, online, web-based media were always fragmented by design, and such fragmentation has only continued to increase with the growing take-up of web-based, digital platforms.

Notably, this is true even in spite of the overwhelming market position of leading social media platforms like Facebook: while these provide a unified institutional structure, user experience, and communicative framework, that very framework is designed to be fragmented by default. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms do not serve as single, unified communicative spaces where users are able to observe everything posted by everyone else (even if a very early version of Twitter once provided users with the opportunity to follow the global ‘firehose’ of all tweets, before this grew too voluminous to be intelligible; cf. Burgess & Baym, 2020). Instead, they provide the tools for users to replicate their offline or establish new online social networks, which determine how information and communication flow between individuals and across the platform, and they offer a range of mechanisms for creating and maintaining small or large, temporary or permanent, private, semi-public, or fully public groups and communities, through the use of profiles, pages, groups, hashtags, direct messaging, and other affordances—and the specific implementation of these communicative features constitutes a chief point of distinction between these social media platforms.

The myriad groups, communities, and publics that have emerged on these platforms with the help of such affordances represent a wide spectrum of interests, values, beliefs, and ideologies; among this multitude, few are overtly and explicitly political, but (since they must necessarily define and express a shared identity, however implicit and normalised) all represent a politics, and serve occasionally as a ‘third space’ (Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2016) for political discourse. Habermas himself appears to acknowledge the “wild flows of messages” and the “everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society”, but locates such activities “at the periphery of the political system” (2006: 415-6)—we would argue, however, that the widespread use of social media as platforms for everyday communication (including but not limited to explicitly political discourse) has shifted the centre of gravity of the overall system, or indeed fragmented the system to such an extent that a centre can no longer be easily located.

Instead, then, the inherently fragmented and networked structure of communicative spaces in social media (on individual social media platforms, and in the interconnections between them) presents a microcosm and an incomplete yet still instructive representation of the similarly fragmented and networked structure of communicative spaces, offline and online, across society—a structure that, from an all-inclusive perspective, has perhaps always existed, but that had been obscured by the Habermasian ideal of the unified, all-encompassing national public sphere. As this simplified projection of the more complex structure of communicative and deliberative structures in overall society, then, social media as such, and even individual social media platforms in isolation, present a crucial opportunity to empirically observe the agonistic and antagonistic processes postulated by Mouffe and Laclau in action. For any issue or topic of sufficient controversy, in other words, it should be possible to identify the key antagonists and their discourses—further, in different contexts such antagonisms may continue and even deepen without resolution,

or may gradually, and perhaps only temporarily, transform into agonistic engagement that continues to acknowledge diverging views yet does not allow deliberative progress to be stymied by such differences.

The balance between steadfast antagonism and discursive agonism on any one platform is likely to be determined by a combination of underlying factors, including the identity and internal dynamics of participating users and groups, and by the wider societal and political environment within which their discursive struggle unfolds; but also by the suitability of the specific communicative affordances offered by the social media platform for meaningful and productive discursive engagement between groups, and the groups' adeptness at utilising such affordances. In other words, it is possible and indeed likely that some social media platforms lend themselves considerably more easily than others to a discursive engagement between antagonists that might gradually transform into a more constructive agonism among them, and also that some discursive enemies are significantly more prepared to become mere adversaries who acknowledge the other side's genuine commitment to the greater societal good even if they continue to disagree with their chosen path towards that goal.

The observation of such antagonistic and agonistic struggles on social media, and of the adversaries' use of social media affordances in the process, then, can shed important new light on the conditions under which constructive agonism—positioned here as generally preferable to steadfast antagonism—can thrive. This chapter presents a case study of antagonistic and agonistic discourses in the Australian Twittersphere as a model for this approach, focussing on highly contested public debates related to the country's immigration policy; while in isolation its ability to determine the most promising set of conditions for such agonistic engagement remains limited, of course, it nonetheless serves

as a pilot study for a broader and more systematic survey of antagonistic and agonistic struggles that could extend across a wider set of issues and topics, a greater number of social media platforms, and a broader range of national contexts.

IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE IN AUSTRALIA

Although it is also home to the longest continuous Indigenous culture in the world, Australia has been dominated and shaped by migration throughout colonial and post-colonial years. Following the initial waves of British convict and free settler occupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and an influx of migrant labour from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East during the Australian gold rush era in the mid-1800s, growing calls for a restriction of migrant inflows to selected ‘desirable’ ethnicities eventually resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act, passed in 1901 as one of the first pieces of legislation of the newly formed Australian nation state. This enshrined what has become known as the ‘White Australia’ policy, favouring a higher proportion of immigrants from Britain and Europe, and implementing cultural assimilation policies designed to protect the ‘British’ character of the new nation (Clarke, 2002). These policies were relaxed gradually only after World War II, to accommodate post-war refugees and general migration, and were formally replaced by a merit-based immigration policy in 1972. Further, the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 outlawed any official form of discrimination based on ethnic identity.

Australia’s official immigration policy since then has been multicultural, though this has been interpreted and implemented differently by governments of different ideological persuasions. In particular, the comparative prosperity of the country, its strong economy, and displacement of populations as a result of wars and natural disasters around the world—including the Vietnam war, conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East, etc.—

have meant that groups of people from the various affected regions have chosen Australia as a destination for seeking asylum. Such refugee groups, often attempting passage by ship across the comparatively narrow seas between Australia and its northern neighbours Indonesia and Papua New Guinea and sometimes referred to as ‘boat people’ even in official texts (Parliament of Australia, 2001), remain a matter of substantial controversy in Australian politics.

Public debate about the country’s policies towards asylum seekers is especially heated when global events result in increased numbers of refugee arrivals on Australian shores; increasingly, as is the case in other nations that are significant refugee destinations, public anxieties about the country’s ability to cope with such a heightened refugee influx have also been exploited by right-wing political actors in order to gain an electoral advantage especially at the federal level. Both major sides of Australian politics have at times courted such anxieties: in 2001, the conservative Liberal/National Party Coalition introduced the so-called ‘Pacific Solution’ to what was described at the time as a ‘refugee crisis’, establishing detention camps in the Pacific nations of Papua New Guinea and Nauru to which it would relocate refugees arriving in Australia while their asylum claims were processed; subsequent governments led by the centrist Australian Labor Party first dismantled these camps, and then re-opened them in 2012; since 2013, finally, the returning Coalition government has enforced a zero-tolerance border protection policy that has resulted in the mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seekers in offshore camps (Federal Register of Legislation, 2013). Current Prime Minister (and former Immigration Minister) Scott Morrison is well known to display a plaque in the shape of a boat in his office, bearing the inscription “I Stopped These” to commemorate his role in the implementation of this policy (Davidson, 2018).

Although not unpopular with a substantial subset of the Australian population, the country's treatment of refugees remains the subject of much controversial debate. The complex and multifaceted nature of the discourse on immigration in Australia is reflected in social media conversations about this issue as well. Citizens interested in politics, activists, partisan groups, civil society organisations, and political actors express their views in their social media posts, and promote news and opinion articles and other materials that support their political stance. As a platform especially suited to public rather than private debate, and one known to be widely used for ongoing political discussions in the country (Sauter & Bruns, 2015), Twitter plays a particularly prominent role in such discourse. This chapter, then, explores seven months of these conversations in the Australian Twittersphere.

Of course, the choice to study Twitter also introduces certain limitations. One such limitation is that Twitter is not necessarily the most popular platform in or beyond Australia, with the number of users on platforms such as Facebook often surpassing Twitter's. Additionally, data gathered from public conversations in the Australian Twittersphere necessarily include information drawn only from those users who chose to participate in these online debates, and indeed only from those who used the keywords employed in the data collection.

However, such limitations apply to any case study of public communication on social media platforms. In Australia and elsewhere, Twitter has nonetheless proved to be a fruitful venue for research into political debates; this is due mainly to its public nature, and its historical position as the platform of choice for responding to public issues (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Orellana-Rodrigues, Greene, & Keane, 2016), dissemination of emerging and/or critical news (Hermida, 2010),

activism (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van't Haar, 2013; Grant, Moon, & Busby Grant, 2010), or protests (K. Clarke & Kocak, 2018; Ess, 2018; Murthy, 2018). Importantly, too, Twitter more than Facebook is where public debates between journalists, politicians, activists, and other stakeholders have commonly unfolded (e.g. Parmelee, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The underlying structure of the Australian Twittersphere (Figure 1) is comparatively well understood: by searching the entire population of Twitter at the time for accounts presenting as Australian, Bruns et al. (2016) developed a national database of accounts, and collected the tweets posted by these Australian Twitter accounts on an ongoing basis. Further, they conducted a large-scale network analysis of follower/followee relationships between these accounts, resulting in a comprehensive map of the Australian Twittersphere (fig. 1) and identifying the dominant clusters of highly connected, interest-driven communities in the overall network (Bruns et al., 2017).

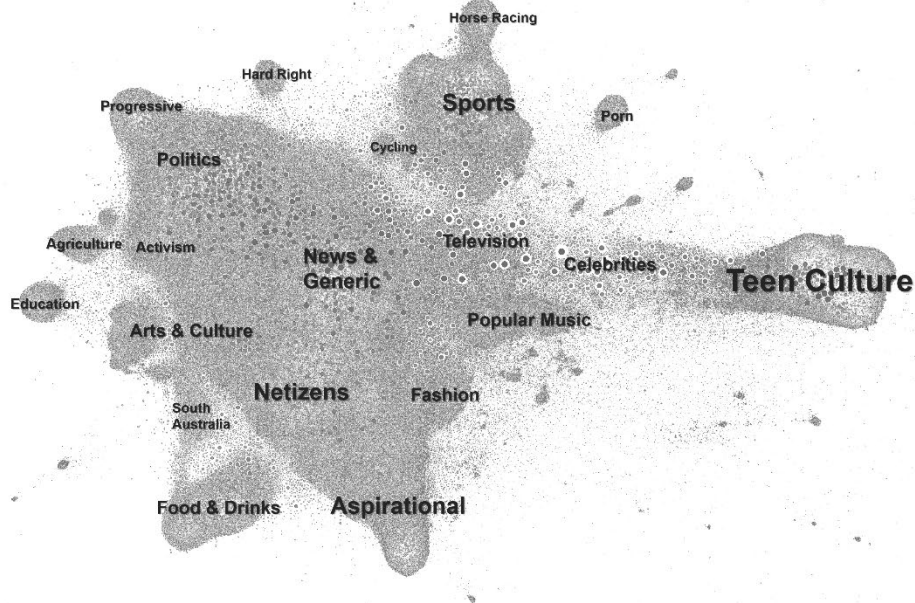


Figure. 1: structure of follower/followee relationships in the Australian Twittersphere, as of 2016.

The continuous collection of tweets from Australian accounts in this network provides a consistent and coherent dataset of specifically Australian Twitter activity. Initially encompassing tweets on any topic addressed by Australian accounts, it can be filtered for specific keywords and hashtags, and patterns of activity within such topical discourses can be mapped against the underlying network structure of follower relationships within the network to examine which pre-existing communities emerge as especially active participants in such discourses, and whether information and communication flow across the boundaries between these communities.

The dataset for the present study was extracted from the overall Australian Twittersphere collection. The authors queried this dataset to collect tweets containing one or more keywords and hashtags related to immigration discourse in the Australian Twittersphere. The terms used for this process were immigration, migration, immigrants, migrants,

asylum, refugee, boat people, boat person, Manus, Nauru, people smuggler, CloseTheCamps, BringThemHere, illegal arrivals, and illegals. This resulted in a dataset of 1,028,955 tweets posted between 22 February and 18 September 2018. The collected data was then analysed using a recursive methodological pipeline, developed by Dehghan et al. (2020), starting from the examination of overall patterns of activity, moving on to processes of interaction and community building, and using the insights from these steps to perform an in-depth, qualitative, discourse-analytical investigation of key communicative events during this timeframe.

The initial steps in the methodological pipeline involved the use of advanced social media analytics to identify the dynamics of tweeting over time, the use of secondary hashtags, the presence of outside information sources, and the role of opinion leaders. Social network analysis of retweet and @mention networks further documented the formation of communities and clusters in the network, and traced the dynamics of information flows within, among, and beyond these clusters. This was done using Krackhardt's E-I index (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988), which provides a normalised comparison of the number of internal interactions *within* a cluster with the number of external interactions *between* the cluster and outside communities.

Once the dynamics of interaction within and among communities were established, the analysis focussed on the original tweets posted by each community, and used a combination of qualitative and computational textual analysis methods to examine the discourses in each cluster. The profiles and top tweets of the most active accounts in each community were examined qualitatively, and the corpus of tweets posted by each cluster underwent a keyword analysis (Baker, 2004). Such keyword analyses are often used in corpus linguistics: they compare a small sample corpus (in the present case, tweets from

a particular cluster) against a larger reference corpus (all tweets in the dataset) and identify words that are more likely to occur in the distinct sample corpus. Once these keywords were identified, the authors then manually investigated the tweets containing these keywords to determine their discursive context and operationalisation.

FINDINGS

Given the significance of the topic of immigration for a multicultural society like Australia, it is not surprising that a large number of Australian Twitter accounts tweeted about this topic ($n = 67,928$). The location of these accounts in the underlying map of the long-term follower network of the Australian Twittersphere (fig. 1) reveals that several of the communities in this network tweeted significantly more actively than the rest of the Australian Twittersphere. Apart from ‘political junkies’ from across the Australian political spectrum, other communities that actively tweeted about immigration-related matters included groups focussed on issues such as education, literature, law, journalism, etc. More than 20% of the accounts in these clusters tweeted about immigration-related issues during the data collection period.

An examination of the most prominent hashtags used by the members of each community demonstrates how the different groups involved in these conversations about immigration in the Australian Twittersphere connect that discourse to the other issues, debates, and discourses that they deem relevant, and points to the diverging standpoints from which they approach the immigration debate. This interdiscursivity manifests itself in the use of secondary hashtags within tweets. For instance, hashtags like #BringThemHere, #EvacuateNow, or #HumanRights are among the top secondary hashtags used in immigration-related tweets by communities that represent progressive political perspectives: in using such hashtags, they call for the closure of Australia’s offshore

detention centres. In stark contrast, accounts in the staunchly right-wing community cluster in the Australian Twittersphere predominantly draw on secondary hashtags that connect the domestic immigration debate to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ experienced by European countries during the timeframe covered by the dataset, and thereby frame the issue of immigration mostly from a national security perspective.

This argument is further strengthened by an observation of the themes, topics, and arguments put forward by each of the communities involved in the conversation. An analysis of the original tweets posted by accounts in each cluster shows that different communities in the overall immigration debate frame the issue from the perspective that is most discursively resonant for them. The community of lawyers and legal scholars, for instance, mainly addresses whether Australia’s immigration policies are constitutional, or whether they violate human rights. Educators and teachers mostly focus on the fact that children held in offshore detention centres do not have access to sufficient, quality education. Medical professionals in the Australian Twittersphere raise the fact that asylum seekers in these centres are in dire need of medical treatment. Contrary to these various pro-immigration discourses, meanwhile, the hard-right community takes a different approach and mainly embraces a national security perspective, arguing that some asylum seekers might be members of extremist and terrorist organisations and should not be allowed into the country.

A similar pattern is evident in the information sources on which the different communities rely, and which they amplify by sharing their content on Twitter. Content from mainstream media, such as the public service media organisation *ABC News*, is shared by almost all communities involved in the conversation, but content from media and websites with a more explicit political positionality, such as *Buzzfeed*, *The Guardian*, and

GetUp.org (generally progressive), or *Breitbart*, *Daily Mail*, and *The Herald Sun* (generally conservative), is shared very predominantly only by communities that hold discursively resonant views.

The overall tendency of different accounts and communities to amplify information and discourses that resonate with their pre-existing worldviews is also evident in how they give visibility to other accounts and communities. An examination of the retweet network shows distinct clusters of accounts that actively retweet each other, and thereby endorse one another's messages and give further visibility the discursive positions that such messages represent. From an overall perspective, the retweet network shows a polarised structure, formed by two major camps that represent pro- and anti-immigration discourses, respectively. At a more granular level, however, it is possible to observe a greater number of more distinct communities. Each smaller cluster in this network points to a particular discourse community. By qualitatively examining the profile information and tweets posted by the core—that is, the most active or most retweeted—accounts in each cluster, and also by locating these accounts in the follower network map of the Australian Twittersphere, it is possible to qualitatively interpret and label these discourses. From this process, it emerges that the anti-immigration discourse in this network is exclusively comprised of accounts from the hard-right cluster in the Australian Twittersphere, without significant further subdivision. The pro-immigration camp, however, shows a greater diversity amongst its constituent communities. Figure 2 shows the most active communities in this network.

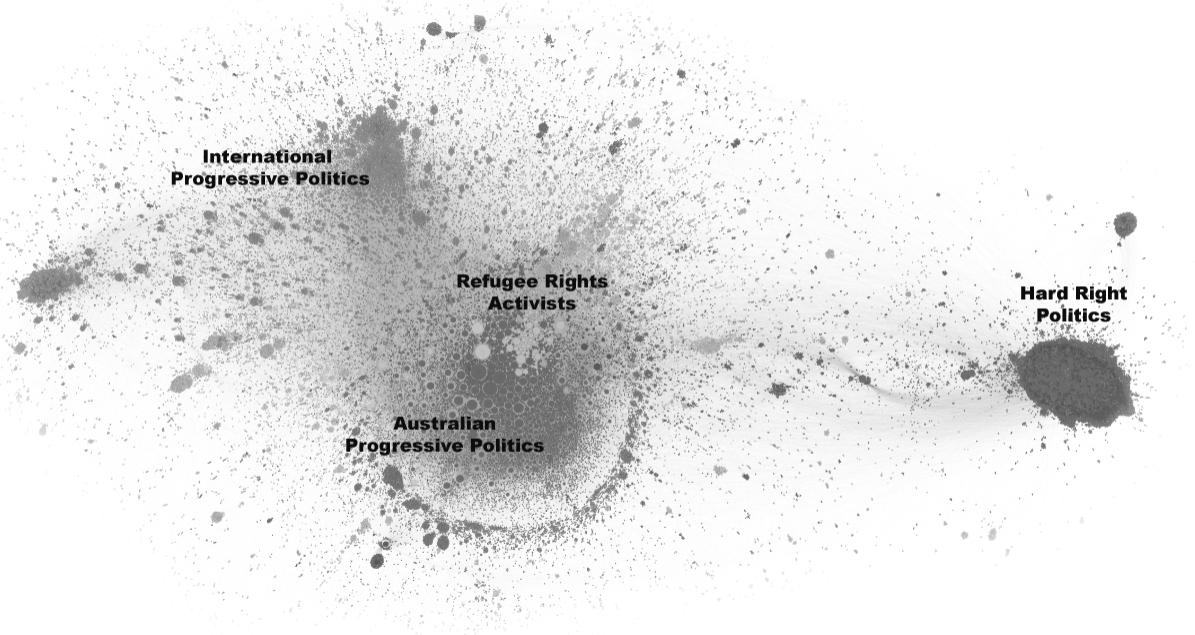


Figure. 2: clusters in the retweet network for immigration-related tweets in the Australian Twittersphere.

Each cluster in this network has its own central accounts: these are its opinion leaders or, as Papacharissi calls them, “crowd-sourced elites” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 46), whose tweets are more widely retweeted than those of ordinary community members. Accounts within each cluster actively retweet these opinion leaders, and each other, to express their community membership and disseminate the community’s views across the wider Australian Twittersphere, and beyond. At the same time, however, a substantial amount of retweeting also occurs between communities that hold discursively resonant views: that is, users from one community retweet those from other communities, and in doing so form a tentative discursive alliance between the two. Such alliances grow stronger with repetition: the more often members of two communities retweet each other’s messages,

the more they express their discursive alignment both to their fellow community members in each group, and to the Twittersphere at large.

Comparing the level of retweeting within and among clusters, it becomes evident that almost all communities in the retweet network display a mostly outward-facing retweeting behaviour: the number of retweets that amplify tweets from accounts outside the cluster generally exceeds that of retweets of accounts within the cluster. The exception to this overall pattern is the progressive politics cluster, which shows an almost equal number of intra- vs inter-cluster retweeting.

Further scrutiny of intra- and inter-cluster retweeting patterns also reveals that the two more extreme ends of the political spectrum in the Australian Twittersphere, the communities representing progressive and hard-right politics, have a higher tendency to amplify only those voices that are discursively resonant. In other words, although they show significant connection, via retweeting, to outside communities, such connections are predominantly to discursively similar communities beyond the Australian Twittersphere (such as international progressive or conservative communities on Twitter). *Within* the Australian Twittersphere, however, these overtly political communities' tendencies to amplify outside voices through retweeting no longer hold. The progressive community receives a large number of retweets from other communities in the network, which seek to ally themselves with progressive accounts by retweeting them. But this alliance is not necessarily reciprocal: while almost every other cluster in the network, except for the members of the hard-right cluster, retweets progressive accounts, the progressive community largely fails to return the favour and instead prefers to retweet its own members. The hard-right cluster, meanwhile, is even more isolated: no cluster within the

Australian Twittersphere retweets its posts extensively, nor do its members retweet posts from other clusters.

These retweeting behaviours show that the interaction of discourse participants with the affordances of the platform constitutes a strategic discursive action. Each retweet represents a strategic choice, resulting from a decision- and meaning-making process that must consider whom to give visibility to, what to amplify, and whom to form an alliance with. The emergence of the different clusters in the retweet network, therefore, does not occur simply and straightforwardly as a result of particular platform design choices or algorithmically determined information flows. Rather, it is mainly due to the strategic discursification of the affordances of Twitter by its users: that is, it results from the intersection of platform designs and affordances with the individual and collective agency of users in adopting and adapting these technosocial frameworks for their own discursive purposes.

From this perspective, the patterns observed in the analysis of retweeting behaviours become especially interesting. Retweet functionality is explicitly designed to share and thus amplify the visibility of existing posts on the platform. Further, however, this also means that implicit in its design is the fact that retweeting will be more useful *between* than *within* the discursive communities that exist on the platform (cf. Bruns & Moe, 2014): if users are aware that, especially through their follower/followee relationship choices, they are part of an already well-connected community of interest on the platform, then to retweet a post by a member of that community produces little added visibility or amplification, since they can assume that other members of the community will already have seen the post in their own Twitter feeds. Conversely, the utility of retweeting is considerably greater for posts that originate from accounts that users do not consider to

be part of their home community: by retweeting such posts from the outside, they make them available, highlight, and endorse them to members of that home community, thereby introducing new and previously potentially unknown information to the group (and possibly also increasing the retweeting user's status within their own community if this increases their perception as a source of valuable information).

On balance, then, it should be expected that retweet patterns in any community will always be more outward-focussed (not least also in comparison to @mention patterns: conversations via @mentions can be expected to occur more predominantly within rather than across communities). This expectation is met by most of the communities observed in the present retweet network, with the notable exception of the two most explicitly ideological groupings: these are either highly inward-focussed, with members mainly retweeting each other (in the case of the hard right), or at best display a balanced retweeting behaviour that does provide some amplification to outside accounts via retweeting, but directs that favour mostly to fellow travellers in the international Twittersphere, rather than to other Australian accounts outside its own community. For these highly politicised groups, then, retweeting primarily appears to be a tool for increasing the volume of their own voices, rather than a mechanism for facilitating their engagement and alliance with other discursive communities.

Perhaps in part as a result of this tendency not to acknowledge other, potentially politically aligned, communities within the Australian Twittersphere, the staunchly conservative side of the debate thus consists of only one discursive cluster that is unified in its support for and framing of the country's current immigration policies. The situation on the progressive side is more complex, however: here, the largest and most overtly political cluster exists alongside a number of more thematically specific, smaller

communities that each frame the immigration debate from distinct and different perspectives but are aligned in their opposition to the current policy regime. This imbalance means that the larger, more generic progressive politics cluster exerts a certain hegemonic power, which also makes a discursive alliance with its community attractive for the smaller groups: even in spite of their potential disagreements on specific aspects in the immigration debate, they therefore engage with the larger cluster in agonistic discourse rather than antagonistic struggle. Such engagement remains unequal, however, as the retweet patterns between these groups show: while the smaller groups demonstrate their willingness to suspend differences and form alliances by retweeting the content posted within the dominant progressive community, that community does not depend on such alliances to the same extent and therefore fails to reciprocate by retweeting the smaller groups' posts with comparable enthusiasm; its hegemonic position amongst the network of progressive communities remains secure without such efforts at further agonistic alliance-building. In turn, however, this uneven alliance of progressive forces is firmly united in its antagonism towards the hard-right community in the Australian Twittersphere, and barely even acknowledges its existence through direct engagement even though it is clearly aware of the opposing side in this debate; this demonstrates the deep and thus far unresolvable polarisation of Australian public debate on the issue of immigration.

DISCUSSION

The polarisation currently observed in various online settings is not simply a technological artefact: the communicative affordances offered by Twitter certainly provide the space for both antagonistic polarisation and agonistic alliance-building, as this chapter has shown. Rather, it is a social, human issue, caused mainly by the strategic discursive choices that

participants in online discourse make at an individual and communal level, and expressed in part in how they discursify the affordances of any given platform. To be clear: this argument does not discount the role of platform algorithms in recommending discursively resonant content to users, and in thereby promoting certain discursive choices available to users over other directions they could take, but it would be overly simplistic to shift from acknowledging that role as a contributor to polarising tendencies to placing the blame for such tendencies squarely or even solely on technological factors.

Instead, it is evident that different communities do in fact come together to form discursive alliances, at least temporarily and in the context of specific events and issues, as a result of their strategic interactions with platform affordances. Our analysis of the information flows among and within the communities in the Australian Twittersphere that addressed the country's immigration policy shows that the members of these communities are indeed aware of the presence of other voices and perspectives, and show a level of awareness of the themes, topics, and arguments presented by other groups involved in the conversation. They do not exist in algorithmically created echo chambers or filter bubbles that prevent them from developing any awareness of converging or diverging views outside of their immediate community; yet they may actively choose to refrain from engaging with such groups in order to maintain an antagonistic stance, as the progressive and hard-right groups in this case study were observed to do; Dehghan (2020) describes this as a strategy of "active passivity". However, if there is some level of discursive resonance, alliances can and do form. Further, depending on the hegemonic position of a community within the platform's broader communicative space, such alliances may turn out to be uneven, with less powerful groups seeking to join forces with the dominant community, but not the other way around.

These observations demonstrate the potential inherent in applying an agonistic model of democratic deliberation to the discourses observable on social media. The affordances of platforms, and their technological designs—with all their flaws and biases—still allow for the formation of larger alliances of users with similar discursive positions. Agonism, however, does require a large degree of effort. If the communicative polarisation of discourses on social media platforms is to be eliminated, or at least mitigated, the communities of users that exist on such platforms will need to engage with the antagonistic ‘other’, however different those opposing groups may be. A strategy of avoidance, elimination, or silence—Dehghan’s “active passivity”—might help, up to a certain point, in cementing one’s own in-group identity, but eventually also deepens polarisation. In the Australian example, for instance, the bitter debate about the country’s immigration policy will not resolve itself if the two antagonistic sides in the debate simply continue to ignore and talk past each other’s positions.

Similarly, external interventions such as the modification of platform algorithms in order to expose users to the discourse of the other might at first appear useful, but are likely to backfire if they are implemented too simplistically and heavy-handedly: if users are unwillingly exposed to a dissonant discourse, they are likely to exercise the strategic choice not to interact with it, silence it, block it, or simply ignore it. In a more extreme scenario, already dissatisfied communities might even choose to, or be forced to, move to other platforms; this has been the tendency, at least amongst some members of the hyperpartisan right of US and international politics, that drove the temporary popularity of minor alternative social media platforms such as Gab or Parler, and the growth of ‘dark web’ spaces for even more extreme political groups.

Some argue that deplatforming strategies—temporarily or permanently banning users from a platform—can work (Rogers, 2020), and will indeed reduce the reach and visibility of certain problematic users, groups, and discourses. Yet this approaches the problem with the logic of mainstream social media platforms, which assesses the visibility and impact of users and discourses predominantly through a quantitative lens: the more retweets, shares, followers, likes, and comments an account has amassed, the more influence it is assumed to have. However, in the context of polarisation, depth is as important as breadth: it is true that deplatforming, or forcing problematic users to migrate to other spaces, deprives them of a more extensive reach in mainstream social media spaces, but it may at the same time lead to them accumulating a smaller, yet much more radical and extremist fanbase elsewhere. This could produce a real, and far more dangerous, echo chamber, where different hyperpartisan platforms cater for ideologically pure populations: some for the ‘lefties’ and ‘normies’, some for the ‘right-wingers’ and ‘alt-right’.

Although mainstream spaces will continue to attract the largest and most diverse userbases, and thus provide an opportunity for agonistic and antagonistic engagement across ideological lines, these smaller and much more dedicated, often largely unmoderated communities of ideologically united users therefore present a significant danger to mainstream society as they may promote further radicalisation, further polarisation, and further extremism. Some such spaces have already risen to substantial popularity: not least as a result of the considerable political antagonism of recent years, platforms such as Parler, Gab, and 4Chan have seen notable increases in their number of users. For many such users, being banned or blocked on Twitter or Facebook is in itself a marker of righteousness: they gain their social capital by referring to the fact that they are there because the mainstream platforms took away their accounts. In other words, they argue

that they were silenced, so they must have spoken the truth. And on these platforms, amongst like-minded hyperpartisans, nobody is likely to disagree with that view.

At most, the deplatforming of such extremists, and their departure to dedicated, minor, hyperpartisan social media platforms where their ideologies continue to fester undisturbed, can therefore only ever constitute a temporary solution in the battle against the further polarisation and dysfunction of societal discourse. Polarisation cannot be reversed by simply excising more and more of the community from the mainstream; taking to its logical conclusion, this trajectory would only lead to the disappearance of mainstream discourse altogether, and the fragmentation of society into a myriad of individual groups and communities, each on their own bespoke platforms, which no longer interact with each other in any meaningful way.

Some critics may claim that this irreversible fragmentation of society is already underway, and that irreconcilable polarisation and antagonism is an inevitable outcome of the decline of the Habermasian public sphere and its replacement by a multitude of publics, yet as the pluralistic model of deliberation proposed by Laclau and Mouffe suggests, and as this chapter has demonstrated, constructive agonism and the formation of discursive alliances between agonistic adversaries are also a common feature even of highly polarised debates. Such alliances form an at least temporary bridge between different groups, communities, and publics, and hold the potential for the development of longer-term cooperation even between partners whose views on many issues diverge—and the analysis in this chapter shows that the technosocial features and affordances provided by social media platforms do not inherently privilege antagonistic over agonistic engagement, or vice versa.

Instead, then, it is the choice of social media users themselves whether they want to contribute to polarisation and fragmentation—by actively antagonising their opponents,

or simply by choosing to ignore and exclude them—or whether they want to engage them as agonistic adversaries rather than outright enemies. Admittedly, as noted, this requires much additional energy and commitment especially from those who are prepared to take the first steps towards their enemies, and will be considerably more difficult in the context of some topics and issues than others—but it will be crucial in any attempts to reverse the severe polarisation that now threatens many political systems. But to take those first steps, then, does not require better algorithms or other technological solutions; rather, it needs better strategies for turning antagonists into agonists.

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