The Challenges of Communication in the Era of Social Media: Perspectives from Media Studies

Francis L. F. Lee

[Abstract] Communication scholars have spent much research effort on understanding the role of social media in various problematic phenomena in public communication and public opinion formation in the contemporary world, including the trend toward affective polarization and the spread of disinformation. Meanwhile, media organizations and civic associations have engaged in various efforts to counteract problematic online contents and promote more healthy communication on the Internet. Drawing upon the extant literature and the author's own works, this paper presents an overview of the possible negative impact of social media on public communication and the efficacy of counteracting efforts. On the one hand, the digital and social media environment does contain the affordances that facilitate the emergence of various problematic phenomena. These affordances include how digital and social media speed up the flow of information, weaken the gatekeeping role of credible news media, fragment the process of public communication, and facilitate the formation of filter bubbles. The commercial imperatives behind the operation of digital media corporations have aggravated the problems. On the other hand, much research has suggested that not all social media sites have the same consequences, and the influence of social media is context-dependent. The problematic impact of social media use can be alleviated where high levels of institutional trust and a strong social fabric are maintained. The paper then points to the utility as well as limitations of current fact-checking and content moderation practices. Overall, while not underestimating the challenges brought about by digital and social media, the impact of social media is ultimately dependent on user practices.

Introduction

We are living in the age of social media. This is not merely to point out the simple fact that various social media sites or apps – Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, TikTok, WeChat—have very high levels of penetration; this is also to point to how social media platforms have become fully integrated into people's daily lives and shape the ways people access information, interact with others, and relate to the world at large. To use the news media as an example, in contemporary advanced societies more and more people do not access the news through watching prescheduled TV newscasts or going to specific news sites; they see the news as they are using social media platforms, often incidentally. As some communication scholars describe the phenomenon: it is not that people find the news; it is that news finds people.[1] In other words, social media changes the way people connect with the news media, and social media can have similar impact on various aspects of people's everyday life.

It is easy to point to the various advantages and utilities of social media. They allow us to stay connected with friends and relatives; they are particularly good for the maintenance of "weak ties;" they are a good source of information and materials that interest us; they allow us to express ourselves and be heard whenever we would like to. But not unlike the popularization of internet technologies in the 1990s, the proliferation of social media has brought with it a series of challenges and certain problematic phenomena. Two issues have received an especially substantial amount of research attention in the field of media and communication studies: the echo chamber thesis and the fake news problem. The former refers to the presumed tendency for people to connect overwhelmingly with like-minded others, thus leading to the fragmentation of the social sphere into silos that do not communicate—or do not communicate well—with each other. The latter refers to the perceived proliferation of rumors, misinformation or disinformation in the social media arena, leading to the difficulties in agreement upon facts and thus eroding the basis for meaningful communication. Underlying both issues is the concern of people's capability to communicate across differences, and by implication capability of addressing and resolving conflicts.

As a media scholar, my aim in this paper is to provide a brief overview of existing conceptual and empirical knowledge regarding the two aforementioned challenges, including the factors contributing to the challenges, critical evaluations of how serious the challenges actually are, and efforts to address the challenges (as well as the

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[1]   H. Gil de Zuniga & T. Diehl, "News Finds Me Perception and Democracy: Effects on Political Knowledge, Political Interest, and Voting," *New Media & Society,* 21, no.6 (2019): 1253-1271.

limitations of these efforts). I will then introduce a recent study conducted by myself regarding how social media communication may relate to political polarization in contentious times to illustrate a couple of points about the role of communication in social conflict resolution. I will end the paper with some overall reflections.

Challenge of Social Media I: The Echo Chamber Thesis

The echo chamber thesis as a concern was identified almost two decades ago by media researchers when they started theorizing about the possible consequences of a "high-choice media environment"[2]. The latter notion refers to the proliferation of media outlets and channels over the years in modern societies, and the trend began even before the advance of the internet and social media. The conventional mass media system in many societies is typically marked by the presence of a relatively limited number of broadcasters and newspapers—the former being limited by regulations and airwaves allocation, whereas the latter being limited by the huge costs involved in setting up and running a print newspaper. The growth of cable television in the 1980s has already started to alter the situation. Into the 1990s, with the popularization of the internet, the number of "outlets" or "channels" of information and materials exploded.

When number of outlets explodes, operators of outlets need to shift their strategies from appealing to the mass to appealing to well-defined niches. That is, when one competes with only a few other channels and outlets, it would make sense for one to go after a large audience by offering a more comprehensive package of materials. But when one has to compete with a virtually infinite number of competitors, it would make sense for one to target a very specific niche through the offering of highly specialized contents and/or contents with a clear standpoint. In other words, the internet facilitated the proliferation of niche media.

This leads to heightened levels of selective exposure. It is a very basic idea in communication studies that people tend to pay attention to some media materials rather than the others. People generally prefer what they are interested in and what they agree with. [3] But in the conventional mass media environment, selective exposure is constrained by the number of choices available. The proliferation of niche media means

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2   W. L. Bennett & S. Iyengar, "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication," *Journal of Communication,* 58 (2008): 707-731; and M. Prior, *Post-broadcast Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3   N. Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

an explosion of choices that can be clearly differentiated from each other in terms of what they offer, making selective exposure an even more prominent phenomenon in contemporary media communication. It also means that people are no longer exposed to more or less the same set of contents and materials.

Against this background, the rise of social media in the second half of the 2000s aggravated the challenge in two important ways. First, social media allows people to build and maintain connections with others. Hence most social media sites are manifestations of what sociologists Lee Rainie and Berry Wellman have called networked individualism.[4] When a person logs into Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the person will find himself/herself being located at the center of the network s/he created via the site. What one would see in the account is dependent on what other people in one's network share and produce. Meanwhile, just as people are likely to prefer seeing agreeable materials, people are likely to be connected primarily with like-minded others.[5] Hence social media further enhances the possibility of people seeing primarily like-minded materials.

Second, social media platforms are commercial operations aiming at generating profits instead of promoting meaningful public communication. To derive profits, they need to maximize people's social media usage and generate accurate profiling of the users in order to maximize the effectiveness of targeted and personalized advertising. This in turn is closely related to the design and operation of social media platform algorithm. People are typically fed with materials that they have liked, commented on or paid close attention to via the site. That is, people tend to be provided with more of the same types of materials via social media sites.

According to some authors, the overall result of the above factors and dynamics is the formation of a fragmented cyberspace full of echo chambers or filter bubbles. Legal scholar Cass Sunstein described the phenomenon as cyberbalkanization. [6] One problematic consequence of cyberbalkanization is that it has become more difficult to get members of the public to focus on the same set of important issues facing the society.

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[4]   Lee Rainie & Berry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

[5]   R. Huckfeldt, P. Johnson, & J. Sprague, *Political Disagreement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[6]   Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

While conventional mass media are powerful in telling people what to think about, social media tend to tell different people to think about different things.

Another possible consequence of cyberbalkanization that has received even more research attention is social and political polarization. Polarization can refer to a few related yet distinctive phenomena.[7] It can refer to people on two sides of a social or political divide holding more and more extreme opinions, thus becoming more and more distant from each other in terms of their views. It can refer to people on two sides of a social or political divide holding a more and more rigid and coherent set of opinions. The result is that it becomes less likely for people on the two sides to share similar views on specific issues. It can also refer to people on the two sides, regardless of exactly how far their views are from each other, increasingly seeing the other side with disdain instead of respect. These three phenomena can be labelled opinion polarization, ideological polarization, and affective polarization respectively. Theoretically, echo chamber formation can lead to all three forms of polarization: when people keep consuming viewpoints and information favoring one side and lack understanding of the other side, their opinions tend to become reinforced and thus become more extreme. When people become more distant from each other, it also becomes easier for them to develop negative views toward the other side.

From a normative perspective, differences in opinion are a fact of life in a pluralistic society, and it may not necessarily be a problem for people to hold strong and very different views on important matters. Affective polarization, however, is the main concern because it is in one sense just another name for mutual disrespect or even hatred.

The above has recounted the major arguments leading to the "echo chamber hypothesis." However, empirical research has complicated the picture and provided a more nuanced view of the matter. Specifically, some researchers have found that the problem of echo chamber has been exaggerated.[8] That is, the online networks or content diets of many social media users are not as homogeneous as the echo chamber thesis would predict.

There are numerous reasons behind this. First, people are "naturally" connected with people holding different views and values in their social life. People do not choose

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[7]   P. DiMaggio, J. Evans & B. Bryson, "Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology,* 102, no. 3 (1996): 690-755.

[8]   E. Dubois & G. Blank, "The Echo Chamber is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media," *Information, Communication & Society,* 21, no.5 (2018): 729-745.

their parents, children, and relatives, and when people decide where to live, which job to take, and whom to befriend, social and political matters may not be important criteria. Network heterogeneity is a fact of social life.[9] Second, social media typically allow people to get connected with not only close friends but also distant acquaintances or even indirect social connections. It is common for people to be connected with hundreds or even a few thousand "friends" via a social media account, and it can be quite common for people to be connected with "friends" that they do not really personally know. Social media networks are typically constituted by many weak ties, and weak ties are often the sources of novel and alternative information and viewpoints.

Third, the idea that people would prefer materials that they find agreeable is based on the psychological motivation of ego defence. Although the tendency does exist, it does not mean that people are only interested in confirming their existing views all the time. There are also occasions when people are interested in getting their views right instead of getting their views confirmed. Factors such as perceived quality of information and credibility of sources could be powerful factors shaping people's choice of information.[10] While social media algorithm tends to give people what they react to, conscious social media users can make use of this feature of social media strategically to ensure exposure to a diverse range of materials, such as by "liking" pages that provide alternative viewpoints and information, responding to discordant views, and so on.

The last consideration also points to the important role of agency in shaping the impact of social media. While the design and materialistic features of social media carry certain tendencies, it is after all up to the users to decide how to use the platforms, and the effects of social media use would depend on such actual use.

In addition, some researchers have emphasized the importance of conditions and contexts for understanding the impact of social media. Take Hong Kong as an example, has social media played a role in the city's political polarization in the 2010s? In an article written in the middle of the last decade, I emphasized the argument that social media by itself does not lead to polarization.[11] Social media could polarize the public mainly when the social context itself is already polarizing. When the social atmosphere

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[9] R. Huckfeldt, P. Johnson, & J. Sprague, *Political Disagreement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[10] S. Messing & S.J. Westwood, "Selective Exposure in the Age of Social Media: Endorsements Trump Partisan Source Affiliation When Selecting News Online," *Communication Research,* 41, no.8 (2014): 1042-1063.

[11] F. L. F. Lee, "Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization in Varying Times," *Communication & the Public,* 1, no.1 (2016): 56-71.

is calm and there is a general absence of political animosity, there is little reason to expect people to frequently get into heated discussions on social media, and people may feel much more comfortable talking to others holding different views. But when the social atmosphere becomes very heated and animosity is already on the rise, people's social media usage could also change. People become more likely to "unfriend" others due to differences in opinions; they become more likely to engage in heated debates with others, often involving the use of uncivil language; they become more motivated to defend their existing political views at a time when political views become more central to their self-identity.

Empirically, that article draws upon two population surveys conducted in late 2013 and late 2014 respectively. The latter was conducted during the Umbrella Movement, whereas the former was conducted one year before the Umbrella Movement. The analysis shows that social media use was positively related to attitudinal extremity only in the 2014 survey but not in the 2013 survey. At the same time, in the 2014 survey, in addition to social media use, interpersonal political discussion itself also became positively related to attitudinal extremity. In a context of heated political controversy, many types of communication, and not only communication via social media, can result in political polarization. We will return to this point below in relation to a study about communication and polarization during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019 and 2020.

On the whole, while there are various reasons why social media may facilitate the formation of echo chambers, fragment the public, and contribute to opinion polarization, there are also many reasons and actual empirical findings suggesting that social media are not the primary moving force. Problems such as polarization usually have deeper social and political roots. Social media can aggravate the problem when the problem arises, but it should not be regarded as having led to the emergence of the problem in the first place.

Challenge of Social Media II: The Fake News Problem

The term fake news became a buzzword in public discussions around the world since the 2016 US Presidential Elections. But the challenge the internet and social media bring to the problem of truthfulness of information has a much longer history. Scholars have long been aware of how the internet might become a hotbed for rumors.[12] As social

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[12]   Cass Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can*

psychologists have pointed out for many decades, rumors tend to proliferate when a high level of uncertainty combines with a high level of anxiety,[13] and the internet may provide the channels for the quick and widespread diffusion of rumors. What optimists hailed as the information superhighway in the 1990s could also be a rumor superhighway.

Nevertheless, the problem of rumor-mongering on the internet has not caught as much attention, and there are numerous reasons why so-called fake news has become such a huge concern. First, it is not necessarily difficult to dispel rumors if people maintain high levels of trust in the established institutions and the mainstream professional media. When a rumor arises, people may seek clarification from various sources. In this scenario, if the affected institutions (e.g., a commercial corporation or a government agency) can act quickly to provide clarification and accurate information, and the mainstream media help communicate the correction, rumors can be relatively easily dispelled. Therefore, a fundamental problem behind the fake news problem in more recent years is people's declining trust in established institutions and professional media.[14] This could in turn be tied to the emergence of other social and political phenomena in different countries, such as the rise of right-wing populist politics in the US and some European states, or the growth of political discontents in Hong Kong. But in any case, a lack of trust in established institutions makes clarification of misinformation or rumor very difficult.

Second, the rise of social media, as noted in the previous section, aggravated the development toward a high-choice environment where outlets continue to proliferate and competition for audience attention becomes increasingly fierce. Against this background, many societies saw the rise of content farms and individualized online Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). These entities shared the same goal and need of attracting huge amount of page views and audience reactions in order to generate advertising revenues. Rapid and undifferentiating transmission of sensational claims, juicy rumors, or even outright fake news has become a rather common tactic for these entities to achieve their goal. That is, fake news proliferated because willing transmitters of such materials proliferated.

Third and in addition to the commercially driven entities mentioned in the previous paragraph, there was also the rise of entities that intentionally spread untruthful information and claims for political reasons. Conceptually, we have been seeing a rise of

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Be Done. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

[13] T. Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor,* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956).

[14] S. Waisbord, "Truth is What Happens to News: On Journalism, Fake News, and Post-truth," *Journalism Studies,* 19, no.13 (2018): 1866-1878.

not so much misinformation than disinformation—the former refers to inaccurate information that is produced and transmitted as a result of honest mistakes, whereas the latter refers to inaccurate information intentionally fabricated and transmitted for the purpose of deceiving others.[15] The production and distribution of disinformation is a particularly prominent and problematic phenomenon during major political events, such as elections and large-scale protest campaigns.

Fourth, in relation to the point about lack of trust among the general public, it is also possible that members of the public have become less likely to agree upon facts due to their polarized views on social matters and on people on the other side. The theory of motivated reasoning holds that people may process information with either a directional goal or an accuracy goal. When a directional goal prevails, people aim at arriving at their favored conclusion. When an accuracy goal prevails, people aim at arriving at the right answer.[16] But the degree to which the directional or accuracy goal prevails could vary across contexts. In a highly polarized environment, the need for people to defend their existing views becomes stronger. Hence the directional goal can become dominant in information processing. Whether a piece of information constitutes fake news or not becomes a judgment heavily influenced by people's political stance.[17] It enhances the likelihood for people to accept attitudinally consonant misinformation as true.

Finally, it should also be noted that "fake news" is a label promulgated by various political actors to serve a range of purposes. In the US during the Trump administration, while professional journalists and critiques of the administration might see Trump as a main source of inaccurate claims and information, Trump himself often appropriated the notion of fake news to criticize media organizations. Some critiques argue that authoritarian countries often have an interest in establishing fake news legislation as a means to curtail the freedom of information and expression.[18] In other words, while there is no denial that a significant amount of misinformation and disinformation can be present in the online arena, the precise extent of the problem is contestable, yet various

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[15] E.C. Tandoc, Z. W. Lim & R. Ling, "Defining 'Fake News:' A Typology of Scholarly Definitions," *Digital Journalism,* 6, no.2 (2018): 137-153.

[16] Z. Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, no.3 (1990): 480–498.

[17] S. J. Tsang, "Motivated Fake News Perception: The Impact of News Sources and Policy Support on Audiences' Assessment of News Fakeness," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly,* 98, no.4 (2021): 1059-1077.

[18] R. Neo, "A Cudgel of Repression: Analyzing State Instrumentalisation of the 'Fake News' Label in Southeast Asia," *Journalism.* 23, no.9 (2022): 1919-1938. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920984060.

political actors might have the incentive to create and maintain the impression of an intractable problem.

Notably, the various reasons discussed above do not include the development of social media per se as a factor. This is consistent with the previous section's discussion of the challenge of echo chamber formation: to the extent that the problem exists, the roots of the problem probably reside in some broader social and political developments rather than merely the emergence of social media. Certainly, given the other causes of the phenomenon, social media can become a further contributing factor to the problem of the circulation of fake news. Social media provide the habitat for the growth of content farms and other promulgators of misinformation in the online arena; they facilitate a flow of information that bypasses the professional media's gatekeeping; and in times of political contention, they facilitate the formation of echo chambers within which attitudinally consonant misinformation can be shared without being appropriately evaluated and challenged.

Empirically, a study conducted during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement has demonstrated the relationship between media use and belief in misinformation. During the movement, much misinformation and rumor—some disfavoring the government and some disfavoring the protest movement—was circulating in the online arena. Analyzing a survey conducted in September and October of 2019, Lee showed that political stance heavily influenced the degree to which Hong Kong citizens would take a piece of information as true or not.[19] More importantly, further analysis shows that, when demographics, basic political attitudes, and movement participation were statistically controlled, consumption of conventional news media did not relate to the accuracy of one's factual beliefs. Consumption of pro-movement media related positively to the accuracy of pro-movement beliefs, but negatively to the accuracy of pro-government beliefs. The use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp, an important form of social media, related negatively to both the accuracy of pro-movement beliefs and the accuracy of pro-government beliefs. In other words, messaging apps had the unique impact of undermining the accuracy of people's factual beliefs no matter whether the factual beliefs favor the government or the protest movement.

I contend that this finding emerges due to the fact that messaging apps facilitated the formation of small groups for communication among close friends. In times of

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[19]   F. L. F. Lee, "Social Movements, Media, and Politics of Information in the Post-truth Era: The Experience of Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *Chinese Journal of Communication Research,* 37 (2020): 3-41. [in Chinese]

heightened political contention, these "groups" formed via messaging apps are particularly likely to be the echo chambers that facilitated the spread of misinformation.

Nonetheless, the relationship between social media and the spread of fake news should not be treated as totally unavoidable. Over the past few years, people have become more aware of the problem of fake news and the need for "fact-checking" when seeing questionable information online. There have been calls and actual efforts on enhancing people's digital media literacy. At the individual level, the threat of fake news can certainly be reduced if people acquire a better understanding of the operation of digital media platforms, including their algorithmic code, and act in ways to minimize the flow of misinformation.

Institutionally, the rise of fact-checking agencies around the world has been an important trend that counters the spread of fake news. Professional fact-checkers have also connected with each other through The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The IFCN developed a code of principles including a commitment to non-partisanship and fairness, a commitment to standards and transparency of sources, a commitment to transparency of funding and organization, a commitment to standards of transparency and methodology, and a commitment to an open and honest corrections policy. In Hong Kong, several fact-checking units have been developed in the past few years, including the Annie Lab at the University of Hong Kong, the Factcheck Lab organized by a group of journalists and civil society actors, the HKBU Factcheck at the Department of Journalism of Hong Kong Baptist University, the Facebook page Kauyim Media, and so on. Their work has contributed to the maintenance of the quality of information circulating in the public arena.

Admittedly, fact-checkers are not the panacea to the challenge of fake news. The fact-checking movement has its own limitations. First, fact-checking agencies may not always have the resources needed to combat all misinformation out there. Second, many questionable claims and materials circulating in the public arena may not be "checkable" facts. A lot of rumors, for instance, carry highly speculative and ungrounded claims that are nonetheless difficult to prove either right or wrong. Third, as a couple of recent studies about the performance of fact-checkers in Hong Kong illustrated, partisan actors can participate in fact-checking, and part of their performances can be rather questionable. [20] This might hurt the reputation and credibility of the fact-checking

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[20] M. Z. Feng, N. Tsang & F. L. F. Lee, "Fact-checking as Mobilization and Counter-mobilization: The Case of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong," *Journalism Studies,* 22, no.10 (2021): 1358-1375.

enterprise in the long run. Fourth, the results of fact-checking may not reach as many people as the original questionable materials do. After all, a main reason for the quick and wide diffusion of fake news is their timely and sensational character, which is something that fact-checking reports typically lack.

This is not to dismiss the value of fact-checking and other institutional efforts to enhance people's media literacy in the combat against fake news. Noting the limitations of such efforts leads us back to the point that the challenge of misinformation has its roots in deeper social and political conditions. While fake news can exacerbate distrust and polarization, it is the presence of distrust and polarization that contribute to the proliferation of fake news in the first place. The challenge for fake news requires more a fundamental solution in addition to promoting more healthy use of social media.

The Social Fabric Matters: A Recent Study

To further our understanding of what needs to be done in order to address the challenges discussed in the two previous sections, I would like to introduce a recent study that examines the impact of ego-network difference on political polarization.[21] Although it is only a single study addressing a specific set of hypotheses, and the study does not even focus squarely on social media per se, the findings are pertinent to the discussion here.

Specifically, the study is concerned with whether ego-network difference, defined as the degree to which an individual finds his or her political views differing from those held by people in his or her own social networks, would shape the influence of social media use and interpersonal political discussions on affective polarization within the context of heightened political contention. The concern is grounded in a long line of research about the possible consequence of social network heterogeneity in political communication. As noted earlier, a degree of social network heterogeneity is a fact of life.[22] People are likely to be aware of the differences that exist in their networks. Even without engaging in political talks frequently, people are likely to become aware of the views of their friends and acquaintances through observations, impersonal communications, or the casual remarks made by others during otherwise merely sociable

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[21] F. L. F. Lee, "Ego-network Difference, Political Communication, and Affective Polarization during Political Contention," *International Journal of Communication,* 16 (2022): 4934-4957.
[22] R. Huckfeldt, P. Johnson, & J. Sprague, *Political Disagreement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

conversations. When people are located within more heterogeneous networks, they may not engage in political discussions as frequently because of the wish to avoid conflicts, yet they are more likely to encounter views and information that disfavor their own views.

More importantly, the study contends that ego-network difference could alleviate the problem of affective polarization. This is grounded in existing research findings regarding how dehumanization—the refusal to recognize the outgroup as members of humanity—is a cause of hatred and polarization.[23] In addition, conflicts can arise if people perceive others as seeing themselves as less than human. Therefore, what can prevent people from dehumanizing the outgroup and/or misperceiving the outgroup's views toward themselves should help prevent or alleviate the problem of polarization. Meanwhile, the tradition of contact theory in social research sees interactions between members of different groups as capable of helping people realize their common humanity, reduce misunderstanding, and generate and sustain trust. [24] Combining these considerations, one could argue that a high degree of ego-network difference implies constant interactions with members of the political outgroup. The understanding and trust developed through ordinary social interactions should prevent people from developing an extreme view of the outgroup when political conflicts arise.

Moreover, the study explores if ego-network difference could moderate the relationship between political communication and affective polarization. The aforementioned study conducted during the Umbrella Movement found that both social media use and interpersonal discussion related positively to attitude extremity during the height of the occupation campaign.[25] It is because political communication during times of heated controversies tends to be conflict-ridden. The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement study thus posited that social media use and interpersonal political talk could relate positively to affective polarization. Nonetheless, we are not sure if communication within a homogeneous group or communication involving disagreeing others could be more polarizing. On the one hand, communication among like-minded people tends to reinforce existing views and thus possibly existing prejudices, and this might lead to higher levels of polarization. But on the other

23   J. L. Martherus et al., "Party animals? Extreme partisan polarization and dehumanization." *Political Behavior,* 43, no.2 (2021): 517-540.
24   G. W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Boston: Beacon, 1954); and M. E. Wojcieszak & B. R. Warner, "Can Interparty Contact Reduce Affective Polarization? A Systematic Test of Different Forms of Intergroup Contact," *Political Communication,* 37, no.6 (2020): 789-811.
25   F. L. F. Lee, "Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization in Varying Times," 56-71.

hand, actually arguing with disagreeing others during contentious times might be even more polarizing because of the conflict-ridden character of such communication.

The study analyzed data derived from a telephone survey conducted by the Center of Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2020, immediately after the news about the upcoming National Security Law came out and when some small-scale protests associated with the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement were still going on. The analysis comes up with the following key findings:

1.   Interpersonal political discussion relates negatively to ego-network difference, confirming the idea that people tend to be conflict-avoidant, hence they engage in political talk less frequently with friends and relatives when their friends and relatives hold views different from theirs. Nonetheless, the ego-network difference does not relate significantly to public affairs social media use.

2.   Ego-network difference relates positively to cross-cutting exposure, that is, exposure to views opposite to one's own. At the same time, both public affairs social media use and interpersonal discussions relate positively to cross-cutting exposure, and ego-network difference strengthens the latter relationships. That is, political communication contributes to cross-cutting exposure to even larger extents when the social networks of people are heterogeneous.

3.   As expected, public affairs social media use and interpersonal political discussion were both positively related to affective polarization, measured by the difference between respondents' ratings of the supporters of the movement and opponents of the movement. At the same time, ego-network difference relates negatively to affective polarization, i.e., people with a more heterogeneous social network were less likely to develop polarizing views about people supporting and opposing the protest movement.

4.   Intriguingly, ego-network difference moderates the influence of social media use and political discussion on affective polarization differently. The relationship between public affairs social media use and affective polarization was stronger among people with a more heterogeneous social network, but the relationship between interpersonal political discussion and affective polarization was weaker among people with a more heterogeneous social network.

5.   Combining points 3 and 4, the results show that affective polarization was weakest among people who were tied to disagreeing others and did not engage in political communication during the protest movement.

This overall conclusion has two major implications on our understanding of the role and influence of communication. First, it reminds us that communication is not always the solution to problems. In one sense, this is an intuitive finding. In everyday life, when an argument becomes very heated and/or when emotions are riding high, it is often advisable to try to calm down and suspend the argument for a while. Communication researchers often try to examine how and what kinds of communication, such as deliberative discussions, may contribute to conflict resolution (e.g., Fishkin et al., 2021); the possibility that the suspension of communication at certain key moments may actually help is often ignored.

Second and more importantly, the findings suggest that the impact of political communication during times of heightened political contention could depend on what kinds of relationships were built and maintained during times of "normality." As mentioned earlier, in normal social life, political differences are unlikely to matter substantially in how people relate to others. If people interact with others of diverse backgrounds constantly, they can develop a better appreciation of social, cultural, and political differences. They could develop their ability to trust and/or tolerate others whose views and habits are different from theirs. When respect and trust are developed among individuals, these could become the basis to prevent communication from becoming highly toxic and polarizing even when the social and political atmosphere becomes heated. In other words, a strong social fabric in which group affiliations and identities crisscross each other could become a buffer against toxic polarization. This is why social scientists have recently turned their attention to the problem of social sorting[26] and the politicization of everyday life[27]. The convergence of lines of social, cultural, and political differences through social sorting and the increasing salience of political matters in everyday life could undermine the formation of a strong yet heterogenous social fabric, and it could make affective polarization a particularly intractable problem when social and political conflicts arise.

26   L. Mason, "A Cross-cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* 80, no.1 (2016): 351-377.
27   A. H. Y. Lee, "How the Politicization of Everyday Activities Affects the Public Sphere: The Effects of Partisan Stereotypes on Cross-cutting Interactions," *Political Communication,* 38, no.5 (2021): 499-518.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has reviewed two major challenges that are often associated with social media. It should be clear by this point that both challenges are seen as rooted in broader social and political conditions of contemporary societies. Social media can be understood as a contributing factor but not the root cause. Notably, this paper has focused on the two major challenges in public communication, but the general lesson of the need to ground the analysis of social media in broader socio-cultural or political perspectives should be valid if we are going to analyze how social media may relate to issues and challenges in the private arena.

Underlying this paper's discussion is the fundamental idea that social media have their affordances, but the affordances do not determine anything. Affordance is the concept used by researchers studying the relationship between technology and society to point to the role of materiality in shaping the impact of technologies. Early studies of technology and society often adopted an impact-imprint perspective.[28] They see specific technologies as having certain inherent characteristics because of their basic material and design features, and such inherent characteristics largely determine the way the technologies would affect society. Other researchers later realized that the relationship between technologies and society is by no means straightforward. They thus turn to the more nuanced concept of affordance.[29] A technology is seen to have certain characteristics so that specific types of actions are allowed or forbidden, or encouraged or discouraged.[30] But affordances by themselves do not determine usage. Whether the affordances are leveraged for specific purposes remains an open question. For instance, internet and social media technologies are particularly suitable for facilitating and sustaining decentralized action coordination, but it does not mean that they are always used for the purposes. It also does not mean that the internet and social media cannot be appropriated for strengthening centralized power (e.g., through facilitating surveillance).

The implication is that we do need to better understand the affordances of digital and social media, and that would allow people to employ social media more skillfully and strategically to advance valued goals. The social media algorithm designed by commercial corporations may tend to encourage the formation of echo chambers, but it is the human user who provides the input—the sites they like, the materials they share or

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[28] C. S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[29] I. Hutchby, "Technologies, Texts and Affordances," *Sociology,* 35, no.2 (2001): 441-456.

[30] J. Davis & J. B. Chouinard, "Theorizing Affordances: From Request to Refuse," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society,* 36, Issue 4 (2017): 241-248.

hide, the people they follow or unfollow—that ultimately shapes the outcome of algorithm curation by platforms. Whether we locate ourselves in echo chambers and whether we surround ourselves with misinformation remains something we can try to control.

From a longer historical perspective, the implications of social media on society and human relationships could continue to evolve. Whenever a powerful new technology arose, people often responded with both utopian and dystopian visions.[31] On the dystopian side, television was once seen by some commentators as leading to a visual culture in which the younger generation would lose their ability to critical analysis and logical thinking. The internet was once regarded as displacing face-to-face interactions and aggravating the problem of social isolation. Rarely did such dystopian visions become reality. This is because some of the worries are often grounded in unrealistic assumptions, and some of the worries are grounded in ephemeral phenomena that emerge due to the novelty of media technology. The possibilities introduced by powerful new media technology can indeed disrupt social life in various ways and hence bring about various problems, but a well-functioning society should have the ability to adjust and address the problems. As the social shaping process continues, media technologies and society will co-evolve. From this perspective, social media as we understand them have existed only for less than two decades and are still evolving rapidly.

At the end of the paper, it should be appropriate to return to the point of how a strong social fabric could minimize the rise and impact of toxic communication—via social media or otherwise—in times of conflict, as well as the possible relationship between the issues discussed in this article and the situation facing the Catholic community. To reiterate, communication is not the panacea to social problems. Communication can bring about mutual understanding only when certain conditions are present—basic respect among the participants, relative equality, open-mindedness etc., but communication by itself does not create those conditions. Religious communities should have a role to play in helping weave together the social fabric. However, based on the author's own anecdotal observation, the Catholic community itself in Hong Kong might also have suffered from internal polarization in the past few years. The problem, to the extent that it exists, has its roots in the current social and political conditions in Hong Kong, and therefore cannot be easily resolved. The challenge is to find ways to

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[31]   D. Fisher & L. M. Wright, "On Utopias and Dystopias: Toward an Understanding of the Discourse Surrounding the Internet." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 6, no.2 (2001). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2001.tb00115.x

build and maintain mutual respect and trust so that meaningful communication across differences would remain possible.

【摘要】傳播學者花費了大量的研究精力來理解社交媒體在當代世界公共傳播和輿論形成中的各種問題現象中的作用，包括情感兩極化的趨勢和虛假信息的傳播。同時，媒體組織和民間團體也開展了各種努力，打擊有問題的網絡議題內容，促進網絡健康傳播。本文借鑒現有文獻和作者自己的作品，概述社交媒體對公共傳播可能產生的負面影響，以及應對措施的有效性。 一方面，數碼和社交媒體環境確實包含了促進各種問題現像出現的功能特性。這些功能特性包括數碼和社交媒體如何加速資訊流動、削弱可信任新聞媒體的把關作用、分散公共傳播過程、促進過濾泡沫的形成。數碼媒體公司營運背後的商業需求加劇了問題。 但另一方面，許多研究表明，並非所有社交媒體網站都會產生相同的後果，其影響力取決於內容。如果維持高水準的機構信任和強大的社會結構，則可以減輕社交媒體使用所帶來的問題的影響。然後，本文指出了當前事實查核和內容審核應用的實用性和局限性。總體而言，雖則不能低估數碼和社交媒體帶來的挑戰，但社交媒體的影響最終取決於用戶的應用。

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