

and the simplest way to do that, particularly in politics, was to focus on enemies. But the winners emerged quickly, often using techniques whose mechanisms they didn't fully understand—witness the reckoning Facebook has had to undergo facing up to the behavior their core product rewarded—and triggering an explosion of digital identities.

When I entered journalism, the term of art for pieces infused with perspective was “opinion journalism.” The point of the work was to convey an opinion. Nowadays, I think a lot of it is closer to “identity journalism”—the effect of the work, given the social channels through which it's consumed, is to reinforce an identity. But an identity, once adopted, is harder to change than an opinion. An identity that binds you into a community you care about is costly and painful to abandon, and the mind will go to great lengths to avoid abandoning it. So the more media people see that encourages them to think of themselves as part of a group, and the more they publicly proclaim—through sharing and liking and following and subscribing—that they are part of a group, the deeper that identity roots and the more resistant the underlying views become to change.

### Reading the other side doesn't change our minds, it deepens our certainty

When I interviewed Obama, he put particular focus on the role of the media in polarization. “I'm not the first to observe this, but you've got the Fox News/Rush Limbaugh folks and then you've got the MSNBC folks and the—I don't know where Vox falls into that, but you guys are, I guess, for the brainiac-nerd types. But

the point is that technology which brings the world to us also allows us to narrow our point of view.”<sup>9</sup> You can call this the echo chamber theory of polarization: we've cocooned ourselves into hearing information that only tells us how right we are, and that's making us more extreme.

There is an optimistic theory embedded in this story: people are open to counterevidence, but they're just not getting much of it. We watch MSNBC if we're liberal, Fox News if we're conservative, and CNN if we just want to see people fight; Facebook and Twitter serve us up the news they've learned we like, which means the angriest voices we already agree with; we don't see or hear from the other side, so of course we're becoming more polarized. This story suggests a straightforward solution: if only we crossed the informational aisle, if only the liberals would watch a bit of Fox and the conservatives would spend some time with Maddow, we would realize the other side is more like us than we thought, that it makes some good points, too, and our enmity and polarization would ebb.

Beginning in October 2017, a group of political scientists and sociologists decided to test this theory. In the largest study of its kind ever conducted, they paid 1,220 regular Twitter users who identified as either Democrats or Republicans to follow a bot retweeting elected officials, media figures, and opinion leaders from the other side. The participants took regular surveys asking about their views on ten issues ranging from immigration to government waste to corporate profits to LGBT acceptance. The researchers were testing the collision between two pop-

\* Obama is onto something with that description of Vox. “Brainiac-nerd type” is a kind of identity people hold, and it's one we try to activate both in our brand and our coverage. We do that in part because we think it's a healthy identity that aligns well with producing rigorous journalism. That we can choose to activate more productive identities is a theme I will return to later.

ular models. In one, “a vast literature indicates contact between opposing groups can challenge stereotypes that develop in the absence of positive interactions between them.”<sup>10</sup> In the other, exposure to those with opposing political views can “exacerbate political polarization,” as being told you’re wrong by someone you already don’t like triggers annoyance, not reflection.

In this case, the pessimists won the day. The result of the monthlong exposure to popular, authoritative voices from the other side of the aisle was an increase in issue-based polarization. “We find that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative posttreatment,” write the authors. “Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot, although these effects are not statistically significant.”

The difference between the Democratic and Republican responses is interesting and merits more study. But the key finding is that neither group responded to exposure to the other side by moderating its own views. In both cases, hearing contrary opinions drove partisans not just to a deeper certainty in the rightness of their cause, but more polarized policy positions—that is to say, Republicans became more conservative rather than more liberal, and Democrats, if anything happened at all, became more liberal rather than more conservative.

I spoke to Christopher Bail, one of the study’s authors and the head of Duke University’s Polarization Lab. “For a long time, people have been assuming that exposing people to opposing views creates the opportunity for moderation,” he told me. “If I could humbly claim to figure out one thing, it’s that that’s not a simple process. If Twitter tweaks its algorithms to put one Republican for every nine Democrats in your Twitter feed, that won’t increase moderation.”<sup>11</sup>

Imagine you’re a liberal browsing Twitter and you’re suddenly

confronted with a Trump tweet slamming “Sleepy Joe Biden” for destroying America. Your response isn’t to think, “Hmmm, that Trump makes some good points.” It’s to instantly come up with an argument for why he’s wrong or to dismiss him as a bully. If you’re a conservative who comes across Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez railing against the GOP’s corrupt, racist agenda, you’re likely to be offended, not convinced. In both cases, exposure to the other side’s attacks is likely to trigger rebuttal, not reflection—identity-protective cognition, remember?

There is evidence that structuring positive, collaborative interactions can promote understanding. But very little in either political media or social media is designed for positive interactions with the other side. Most political media isn’t even designed for persuasion. Some is—Ross Douthat’s column at the *New York Times* is a conservative trying to persuade a liberal audience, for instance—but, for all the reasons we’ve discussed, the bulk of opinionated political media is written for the side that already agrees with the author, and most partisan elected officials are tweeting to their supporters, who follow them and fund-raise for them, rather than to their critics, who don’t.

Ironically, this same dynamic limits the polarizing effect of opinionated media, at least on its direct audience. After years in which people worried over the polarizing effects of cable news, Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson decided to test it in something closer to real-world conditions. In a series of experiments, they forced one group to watch either politically friendly or unfriendly cable news content, but let another choose between political news and entertainment channels.<sup>12</sup>

Sure enough, if you forced people to watch cable news that agreed with them, they became more polarized, and if you forced them to sit through cable news that disagreed with them, it either did nothing or backfired. But if you gave them the remote and

allowed them to change the channel, the effect dissipated entirely. It turned out the polarization was coming from forcing people who were persuadable to watch political news, which they didn't want to do. Once you gave them the choice to opt out, it was just preaching to the choir.

Tellingly, this was under conditions that were unusually favorable to cable news: political channels were a third to half of all available content in the experimental conditions, as opposed to a tiny fraction of all available content, as is true on our actual televisions. But even that bare level of choice permitted the persuadable to wander off—or, if you prefer, flee elsewhere. “Political news shows cannot directly affect those who refuse to watch them,” Arceneaux and Martin conclude.

I don't take this to prove cable news and other forms of politicized and social media aren't polarizing, even on those who don't watch or tweet. Many of us, myself included, have watched an older family member retire and swing sharply right as Fox News comes to fill their days. And a number of studies show that Fox News increased Republican vote share as it rolled out across the country, suggesting a genuine persuasive effect compared to the pre-Fox News equilibrium.<sup>13</sup> But the reality is these networks command modest audiences. The key to their influence is that they have the right audiences. A polarized media environment can polarize the country through its effect on political elites and party activists. Virtually every congressional office on the Hill has its televisions tuned to cable news. Politicians are increasingly addicted to Twitter, with the president being only the most prominent example.

To the extent that political elites have cocooned themselves into more polarized informational worlds—and they have—they behave in more polarized ways, which in turn polarizes the system. Fox News has whipped the Republican Party into a number of gov-

ernment shutdowns, and much of Trump's most offensive rhetoric comes on a direct conveyor from conservative media feeding him conspiracies that he transforms into presidential proclamations. Indeed, the impeachment effort House Democrats launched against Trump stems from Trump believing a set of anti-Biden conspiracies pushed by Breitbart editor-at-large Peter Schweizer and heavily promoted on Fox News.<sup>14</sup> Most Americans had never heard of Hunter Biden, much less followed vague insinuations about Ukrainian prosecutors. But the president was sufficiently persuaded that he threw the weight of his administration into an investigation, setting off a chain of events that changed American political history. You don't need a big audience when you have the right audience.

Politics is, first and foremost, driven by the people who pay the most attention and wield the most power—and those people opt in to extraordinarily politicized media. They then create the political system they perceive. The rest of the country then has to choose from more polarized options, and that in turn polarizes them—remember, the larger the difference between the parties, the more compelling it becomes for even the uninterested to choose a side.

Journalists are hardly immune to these forces. We become more polarized, and more polarizing, when we start spending our time in polarizing environments. I have seen it in myself, and I have watched it in others: when we're going for retweets, or when our main form of audience feedback is coming from partisan junkies on social media, it subtly but importantly warps our news judgment. It changes who we cover and what stories we chase. And when we cover politics in a more polarized way, anticipating or absorbing the tastes of a more polarized audience, we create a more polarized political reality.