

The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configurational Narrative

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies hold immense potential to enhance our lives and societal well-being. However, digital spaces have also emerged as a fertile ground for fake news campaigns and hate speech, aggravating polarization and posing a threat to societal harmony. Despite the fact that this dark side is acknowledged in the literature, the complexity of polarization as a phenomenon coupled with the socio-technical nature of fake news necessitates a novel approach to unravel its intricacies. In light of this sophistication, the current study employs complexity theory and a configurational approach to investigate the impact of diverse disinformation campaigns and hate speech in polarizing societies across 177 countries through a cross-country investigation. The results demonstrate the definitive role of disinformation and hate speech in polarizing societies. The findings also offer a balanced perspective on internet censorship and social media monitoring as necessary evils to combat the disinformation menace and control polarization, but suggest that such efforts may lend support to a milieu of hate speech that fuels polarization. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Key words: Polarization, Disinformation, Fake news, Hate speech, Internet censorship and Social media monitoring

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