# Homophily and Online Politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Homophily is "the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook 2001, 416). Studies of homophily have a long and distinguished tradition in anthropology, sociology, political science and mass communications. While numerous studies on social networks were published in the 1920s, 1930's and 1940's (e.g., Almack 1922, Richardson 1940, Bott 1929, Loomis 1946), the classic citation in the homophily literature is Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1954) analysis of friendship patterns in two small New Jersey towns. In this study, Lazarsfeld and Merton distinguish between status homophily, in which "similarity is based on informal, formal, or ascribed status," and value homophily, which is based on "values, attitudes, ands beliefs." Subsequent empirical research into homophilous sorting – the propensity of individuals who are similar on some meaningful dimension to form clusters with each other – has employed this basic distinction as a guide.

Research over the last fifty years has shown that both status and value homophily are driven by many factors. One particularly important factor in the early literature on homophily was geography and physical proximity. As McPherson et al. (2001) write, "it takes more energy to connect to those far away than those who are readily available" (429). Based on this line of work, one might expect that technological innovations that "loosen the bounds of geography by lowering the effort involved in contact" (Kauffer & Carley, 1993) will dramatically minimize both status and value homophily. In particular, the Internet, with its ability to allow asynchronous and spatially unconstrained communication between previously isolated individuals, should diversify the composition of social networks and encourage cross-ideological political discussions.

It is easy to imagine, however, that the Internet will exert a much different kind of impact on homophily. Specifically, in the political realm, the Internet may promote high levels of homophilous sorting along ideological lines. As Farrell (2012) points out, there are a variety of ways in which the Internet makes it more likely that individuals with shared political views will cluster together. According to Farrell, the Internet encourages homophily by making it exceedingly easy for individuals to express their opinions and begin directly interacting with others who share those views. But, as Farrell points out, homophily may also occur more indirectly. Individuals may, for example, spontaneously converge around a common source of online political information that is attractive given their shared interests and cluster together only as a secondary consequence of this shared interest. Thus, while technological change is often perceived as facilitating diverse political interactions, "new technologies may have [just] allowed people greater latitude to create ties that are homophilous" (Hampton & Wellman, 2000).

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## CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN HOMOPHILY

The pioneering research about homophily in online politics was conducted by Cass Sunstein (2001) at Harvard University. Since the release of Sunstein's book, homophily has attracted a great deal of attention from political scientists, such as Henry Farrell (2012) at George Washington University, Jason Gainous at the University of Louisville and Kevin Wagner (2011, 2013) at Florida Atlantic University, mass communication specialists, such as Eszter Hargittai (2007) at Northwestern University, and researchers interested in information technology, such as Lada Adamic (2005) at the University of Michigan and Eli Pariser (2011) of the technology firm Upworthy. Five central questions have occupied the attention of these scholars. First, what are the consequences of value homophily for democratic deliberation? Second, has the Internet led news consumers to self-segregate ideologically and limit their exposure exclusively to sources that confirm their prior beliefs? Third, are political discussions taking place in the blogosphere polarized and fragmented along ideological lines? Fourth, are political discussions taking place in the Twitterverse polarized and fragmented along ideological lines? Finally, does exposure to information in Facebook's news feed limit self-selection and increase exposure to diverse political viewpoints? The following sections will summarize the current research on each of these five questions in turn.

## THEORIZING ABOUT THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF HOMOPHILY

The most well-known argument about the Interent's impact on value homophily can be found in Cass Sunstein's 2001 book *Republic.com*. Drawing on Negroponte's (1995) notion of the customized "Daily Me" afforded by new technologies, Sunstein argued that "the most striking power provided by emerging technologies [is] the growing power of consumers to filter what they see" (8). According to Sunstein, the power to filter what they see will inevitably "encourage people to narrow their horizons, or to cater to their existing tastes rather than to form new ones." (26). And while Sunstein admits that filtering is hardly a new phenomenon – people have used filtering techniques in their everyday lives for quite some time – he links Internet filtering to group polarization – "the tendency of like-minded people to push one another towards extremes" (209). In other words, the Internet leads people to "listen to louder echoes of their own voices" and, as a result, political discourse will become more fragmented along ideological lines (Sunstein 2008, 247).

For Sunstein, a polarized and fragmented political discourse poses a serious threat to the system of deliberative representative democracy embedded in the American political system. On the one hand, the Founding Fathers created a system of republican self-government, where institutions act as a filter and a buffer between the people and the government. On the other hand, however, representative democracy presupposes a considerable amount of deliberation between citizens. Indeed, studies in political science have shown that deliberation – defined as conversations that "air disagreements" and "bring into play a wide range of alternative perspectives and viewpoints" – is a necessary prerequisite for effective democracy because it produces, among other things, more informed opinions about political matters (Berelson 1950; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). If people are increasingly relying on the Internet to learn about politics and they are using filtering techniques to wrap themselves in impenetrable "ideological cocoons," cyberspace is undermining the deliberative foundation that American representative democracy is built upon. Put differently, the Internet "is bad for democracy because it is reducing common experiences and