

# Chapter 22

## Digitalization and Political Extremism

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### ABSTRACT

*Information and communication technologies shape, direct, and deter political behaviour and institutions as the increase in internet usage regulate our daily lives. The advance of internet and digital media also shape political involvement, partisanship, and ideology. Internet, as the new media, is an important information source that shapes political behaviour along with other effects on societal layers. The new technologies provide a platform for the voices of minorities and disadvantaged communities, therefore urging a pluralist agenda. They are also blamed for the recent rise of populism and polarisation by creating echo-chambers, filter-bubbles, and the “fake news.” In this study, the authors analyse the possible effects of internet usage on political polarisation and ideological extremism by utilising World Values Survey Wave 7 Data for 40 countries. The findings show that internet usage and education level decrease extremism, while safety, work anxiety, and religiosity drive people to the extreme.*

### INTRODUCTION

The influence of traditional media such as print and TV, has long been a discussion topic as shaping mass opinions and perceptions. Since Gutenberg, the print has created many platforms that shape and influence religions, political behaviour, electoral choice and governance in general. The new digital media and increasing usage of digital social networks put the discussion a step further as these new

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media channels are user-driven and open source. These technologies have abolished the limits of time and space in communication by facilitating information sharing and networking that leads to enormous changes from economic to political spheres (Kamp, 2016). Every individual has the opportunity to instantly share their ideas with millions of people with the disappearance of these limits. Naturally, the scope and definition of the media and the ways of it influences socio-economic facts have also changed. In last decade, the effects of social media have seen in many socio-economic facts. The role of social media during the Arab Spring has been appraised as the new technologies are useful to motivate the public against the autocrats. Internet and digital social networks have mostly been regarded as increasing democratic values by allowing and improving communication channels between citizens and governments to increase civic participation, and to provide a public sphere for discussion of pertinent issues to have more inclusive processes of decision making (Kamp, 2016). However, the euphoria about the democratic benefits of social media did not last long and now there is a widespread concern that social media may undermine democracy and cause polarisation (Tucker et al., 2017).

There is a widespread concern that social media causes polarization in societies. It is necessary to understand the concept of new media and how social media works to relate this concern to internet. The main cause of polarisation is assumed to be the self-enforcing argumentation, as the internet can make it easy for people to move towards a more extreme position by facilitating the encounters to the arguments that support their views and can exclude any material that argues against their own views. Communication tools widely used on the internet suggest new ideas, new users and new websites to people through the algorithms they use. These recommendations are directly related to the ideas that the person likes or supports during the time spent on the internet. Sunstein (2017) describes that, people may end up in enclaves of like-minded people as in an “echo-chamber” on Internet. Sunstein (1999) prescribes this phenomenon to group polarisation, which takes hold when like-minded people talk to one another and end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk. Group members may impose pressures on one another, leading to a consensus on falsehood rather than truth. Sunstein and Hastie (2008) argue that a group of like-minded people, with similar predilections are particularly vulnerable to this problem. Group polarisation arises when members of a deliberating group move towards a more extreme point in whatever direction is indicated by the members’ pre-deliberation tendency. People in the group may attach importance to the supportive sentences of group members instead of questioning their thoughts. This may cause the misconception that more repeated thoughts are true rather than truth. The main reasons for moving the group members to the extremist opinions are that: the group deliberation amplifies rather than corrects individual errors, people follow the statements and actions of their predecessors, and they emphasize shared information at the expense of unshared information (Sunstein and Hastie, 2008, p.2).

Another problem related to the new social media is that its instant network structure allows rapidly spreading misinformation and disinformation widely referred to as “fake news”. Although the use of false information through media channels goes back to centuries ago, the new technologies instantly create and spread fabricated or distorted news to wider audiences at massive scales. Because the news shared by the individuals who open an account in the new social media do not controlled through a certain regulation stage as in the classical media. Because the news shared by the individuals who open an account in the new media do not go through a certain regulation stage as in the classical media. The stories or news these people share can be read by many individuals if they are interesting enough, even if they are fake. As a result, these types of false information exacerbate the polarisation and corrode public dialogue, and further push the people into extremist opinions. Furthermore, the business models of

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