Chapter 58
The Impact of Similarity and Self-Esteem on Facebook Behaviors, Perceptions, and Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

From their inception, electronic social networks (ESNs) have held the potential to either (1) expose individuals to a greater diversity of beliefs and interests by removing geographical barriers to communication; or (2) act as "feedback loops" by facilitating relationships and communication among like-minded individuals. In this survey study, the author will examine changes in communication behaviors and perceptions on Facebook from 2013 to 2017. The findings conclude that individuals with lower self-esteem have become less willing to share their views on Facebook, perceive a higher number of negative experiences, and spend less time communicating and more time passively consuming content. The same behavioral changes are found when individuals believe that fewer of their online "friends" have similar beliefs, and when individuals are more prone to "unfriending" others. General comfort in sharing views online is associated with a higher willingness to share views and communicate on Facebook, but also more negative experiences.

INTRODUCTION

In the 2016 U.S. presidential election Donald Trump narrowly lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton, who captured about 51.1% of individual votes. However, Trump won the Electoral College by a wide margin, in part because both Republican and Democratic votes tend to be concentrated in specific geographic areas. Trump won approximately 2,600 counties to Clinton's 500, and about 2,200 of those were "landslide counties" in which Trump won by a margin of 20% or greater (Unruh, 2016). In 2016, 60% of Republican voters lived in landslide counties; by contrast, in 2008 this percentage was 48%, and

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in 1992 it was 38% (Aisch et al., 2016). One conclusion that has been drawn from such statistics is that people tend to live near others who are similar to themselves. Within an economic range, people are likely to choose neighborhoods that provide easier access to their preferred activities, religious institutions, and schools. Stated more broadly, people tend to choose neighborhoods in which the inhabitants are culturally similar, and this phenomenon is often correlated with political and religious affiliation. Over time, a "feedback loop" results as individuals are continually exposed to the same political and religious viewpoints (Bishop, 2008).

Many of the geographic factors that limit exposure to a diversity of viewpoints are less relevant in an online setting. Electronic social networks (ESN's) such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn have made it easier to stay connected with many others (Claybaugh & Haried, 2014). People are connected in ESN's to many of the same people to whom they are connected in the physical world, but they are also likely to be connected to others who they seldom, if ever, encounter in real life. For example, on Facebook people may be "friends" with high school classmates whom they have not seen or spoken to verbally in decades, or with distant family friends and relatives who are typically seen every few years at events such as weddings and family reunions. To the extent that these distant connections live in different geographies, they are more likely to exhibit different economic and cultural characteristics. By interacting with distant connections through ESN's, people are more likely to be exposed to these different characteristics (Balint & Gustafson, 2015). However, ESN's can also facilitate the opposite effect in the form of online communities of interest. The same technology that enables people to connect with others in geographically dispersed locations can also be used to find like-minded individuals online. Thus, although ESN's such as Facebook have existed in consumers' lives since the early 2000's, evidence about ESN's ability to effectively create and spread new political, religious, or social ideas across groups is mixed (Furner, 2013). Some experts believe that ESN's are more successful than traditional, offline forms of communication in spreading new viewpoints, but others feel that ESN's are useless, or even detrimental, in the dissemination of diverse beliefs. For example, ESN's have been blamed for causing more apathy towards political and social causes by allowing people to simply broadcast their opinions without encouraging them to consider others' beliefs as well (Gladwell, 2010; Neil, 2013). Particularly in the U.S. religion is highly correlated with political affiliation, and online discourse of political, religious and social issues has become more divisive since the 2012 presidential election. In addition to current events, individuals may also turn to social media to learn new information about long-standing religious or political doctrine (Almobarraz, 2016). An increasing percentage of content that is posted and discussed online is from sources that are perceived as partial to one end of the political spectrum or the other, discouraging the presentation of diverse viewpoints (McHugh, 2016). Even more insidiously, there is evidence that terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and other radical activist groups use ESN's to recruit members and organize activities (Knibbs, 2017).

Adding to this tension is the fact that ESN's change over time. Like most technology companies, ESN providers periodically make changes to the user interface, security settings, or back-end algorithms that affect what content users see (Balint & Rau-Foster, 2014). Most ESN's use collaborative filtering and user feedback to determine the types of content users are most likely to click through. For example, if a Facebook user consistently clicks on articles from conservative sources and spends time reading them, Facebook is more likely to display conservative articles in the future. This gives users what they like, and also generates more revenue for Facebook (McHugh, 2016). However, it also means that the user is less likely to see articles presenting contradictory viewpoints. Individuals have become more likely to "second-screen" social media on mobile devices or tablets, making political messages more salient