

Cass Sunstein on Group Polarization and Cyber-Cascades

An excerpt from “The Daily We”, which appeared in the *Boston Review*, Summer 2001

Specialization and Fragmentation

In a system with public forums and general interest intermediaries, people will frequently come across materials that they would not have chosen in advance—and in a diverse society, this provides something like a common framework for social experience. A fragmented communications market will change things significantly.

Consider some simple facts. If you take the ten most highly rated television programs for whites, and then take the ten most highly rated programs for African Americans, you will find little overlap between them. Indeed, more than half of the ten most highly rated programs for African Americans rank among the ten least popular programs for whites. With respect to race, similar divisions can be found on the Internet. Not surprisingly, many people tend to choose like-minded sites and like-minded discussion groups. Many of those with committed views on a topic—gun control, abortion, affirmative action—speak mostly with each other. It is exceedingly rare for a site with an identifiable point of view to provide links to sites with opposing views; but it is very common for such a site to provide links to like-minded sites.

With a dramatic increase in options, and a greater power to customize, comes an increase in the range of actual choices. Those choices are likely, in many cases, to mean that people will try to find material that makes them feel comfortable, or that is created by and for people like themselves. This is what the Daily Me is all about. Of course, many people seek out new topics and ideas. And to the extent that people do, the increase in options is hardly bad on balance; it will, among other things, increase variety, the aggregate amount of information, and the entertainment value of actual choices. But there are serious risks as well. If diverse groups are seeing and hearing different points of view, or focusing on different topics, mutual understanding might be difficult, and it might be hard for people to solve problems that society faces together. If millions of people are mostly listening to Rush Limbaugh and others are listening to Fox News, problems will arise if millions of other people are mostly or only listening to people and stations with an altogether different point of view.

We can sharpen our understanding of this problem if we attend to the phenomenon of group polarization. The idea is that after deliberating with one another, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which they were previously inclined, as indicated by the median of their predeliberation judgments. With respect to the Internet, the implication is that groups of people, especially if they are like-minded, will end up thinking the same thing that they thought before—but in more extreme form.

Consider some examples of this basic phenomenon, which has been found in over a dozen nations. (a) After discussion, citizens of France become more critical of the United States and its intentions with respect to economic aid. (b) After discussion, whites predisposed to show

racial prejudice offer more negative responses to questions about whether white racism is responsible for conditions faced by African Americans in American cities. (c) After discussion, whites predisposed not to show racial prejudice offer more positive responses to the same question. (d) A group of moderately profeminist women will become more strongly profeminist after discussion. It follows that, for example, after discussion with one another, those inclined to think that President Clinton was a crook will be quite convinced of this point; that those inclined to favor more aggressive affirmative action programs will become more extreme on the issue if they talk among one another; that those who believe that tax rates are too high will, after talking together, come to think that large, immediate tax reductions are an extremely good idea.

The phenomenon of group polarization has conspicuous importance to the current communications market, where groups with distinctive identities increasingly engage in within-group discussion. If the public is balkanized, and if different groups design their own preferred communications packages, the consequence will be further balkanization, as group members move one another toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, different deliberating groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart, simply because most of their discussions are with one another.

Why does group polarization occur? There have been two main explanations, both of which have been extensively investigated and are strongly supported by the data.

The first explanation emphasizes the role of persuasive arguments, and of what is and is not heard within a group of like-minded people. It is based on a common sense intuition: any individual's position on any issue is (fortunately!) a function, at least in part, of which arguments seem convincing. If your position is going to move as a result of group discussion, it is likely to move in the direction of the most persuasive position defended within the group, taken as a collectivity. Of course—and this is the key point—a group whose members are already inclined in a certain direction will offer a disproportionately large number of arguments supporting that same direction, and a disproportionately small number of arguments going the other way. The result of discussion will therefore be to move the group, taken as a collectivity, further in the direction of their initial inclinations. To be sure, individuals with the most extreme views will sometimes move toward a more moderate position. But the group as a whole moves, as a statistical regularity, to a more extreme position consistent with its predeliberation leanings.

The second mechanism, which involves social comparison, begins with the claim that people want to be perceived favorably by other group members (and to perceive themselves favorably). Once they hear what others believe, they adjust their positions in the direction of the dominant position. People may wish, for example, not to seem too enthusiastic, or too restrained, in their enthusiasm for affirmative action, feminism, or an increase in national defense. Hence their views may shift when they see what other people and in particular what other group members think.

Group polarization is a human regularity, but social context can decrease, increase, or even eliminate it. For present purposes, the most important point is that group polarization will significantly increase if people think of themselves, antecedently or otherwise, as part of a group having a shared identity and a degree of solidarity. If, for example, a group of people in an Internet discussion group think of themselves as opponents of high taxes, or advocates of animal rights, their discussions are likely to move toward extreme positions. As this happens to many different groups, polarization is both more likely and more extreme. Hence significant movements should be expected for those who listen to a radio show known to be conservative, or a television program dedicated to traditional religious values or to exposing white racism.

This should not be surprising. If ordinary findings of group polarization are a product of limited argument pools and social influences, it stands to reason that when group members think of one another as similar along a salient dimension, or if some external factor (politics, geography, race, sex) unites them, group polarization will be heightened.

Group polarization is occurring every day on the Internet. Indeed, it is clear that the Internet is serving, for many, as a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are deliberating with one another, without hearing contrary views. Hate groups are the most obvious example. Consider one extremist group, the so-called Unorganized Militia, the armed wing of the Patriot movement, "which believes that the federal government is becoming increasingly dictatorial with its regulatory power over taxes, guns and land use." A crucial factor behind the growth of the Unorganized Militia "has been the use of computer networks," allowing members "to make contact quickly and easily with like-minded individuals to trade information, discuss current conspiracy theories, and organize events."⁴ The Unorganized Militia has a large number of websites, and those sites frequently offer links to related sites. It is clear that websites are being used to recruit new members and to allow like-minded people to speak with one another and to reinforce or strengthen existing convictions. It is also clear that the Internet is playing a crucial role in permitting people who would otherwise feel isolated and move on to something else to band together and spread rumors, many of them paranoid and hateful.

There are numerous other examples along similar lines. A group calling itself the "White Racial Loyalists" calls on all "White Racial Loyalists to go to chat rooms and debate and recruit with NEW people, post our URL everywhere, as soon as possible." Another site announces that "Our multi-ethnic United States is run by Jews, a 2% minority, who were run out of every country in Europe.... Jews control the U.S. media, they hold top positions in the Clinton administration ... and now these Jews are in control—they used lies spread by the media they run and committed genocide in our name." To the extent that people are drawn together because they think of each other as like-minded, and as having a shared identity, group polarization is all the more likely.

Of course we cannot say, from the mere fact of polarization, that there has been a movement in the wrong direction. Perhaps the more extreme tendency is better; indeed, group

polarization is likely to have fueled many movements of great value, including the movement for civil rights, the antislavery movement, the movement for sex equality. All of these movements were extreme in their time, and within-group discussion bred greater extremism; but extremism need not be a word of opprobrium. If greater communications choices produce greater extremism, society may, in many cases, be better off as a result.

But when group discussion tends to lead people to more strongly held versions of the same view with which they began, and if social influences and limited argument pools are responsible, there is legitimate reason for concern. Consider discussions among hate groups on the Internet and elsewhere. If the underlying views are unreasonable, it makes sense to fear that these discussions may fuel increasing hatred and a socially corrosive form of extremism. This does not mean that the discussions can or should be regulated. But it does raise questions about the idea that "more speech" is necessarily an adequate remedy—especially if people are increasingly able to wall themselves off from competing views.

The basic issue here is whether something like a "public sphere," with a wide range of voices, might not have significant advantages over a system in which isolated consumer choices produce a highly fragmented speech market. The most reasonable conclusion is that it is extremely important to ensure that people are exposed to views other than those with which they currently agree, that doing so protects against the harmful effects of group polarization on individual thinking and on social cohesion. This does not mean that the government should jail or fine people who refuse to listen to others. Nor is what I have said inconsistent with approval of deliberating "enclaves," on the Internet or elsewhere, designed to ensure that positions that would otherwise be silenced or squelched have a chance to develop. Readers will be able to think of their own preferred illustrations. Consider, perhaps, the views of people with disabilities. The great benefit of such enclaves is that positions may emerge that otherwise would not and that deserve to play a large role in the heterogeneous public. Properly understood, the case of "enclaves," or more simply discussion groups of like-minded people, is that they will improve social deliberation, democratic and otherwise. For these improvements to occur, members must not insulate themselves from competing positions, or at least any such attempts at insulation must not be a prolonged affair.

Consider in this light the ideal of "consumer sovereignty," which underlies much of contemporary enthusiasm for the Internet. Consumer sovereignty means that people can choose to purchase, or to obtain, whatever they want. For many purposes this is a worthy ideal. But the adverse effects of group polarization show that, with respect to communications, consumer sovereignty is likely to produce serious problems for individuals and society at large—and these problems will occur by a kind of iron logic of social interactions.

The phenomenon of group polarization is closely related to the widespread phenomenon of "social cascades." Cascade effects are common on the Internet, and we cannot understand the relationship between democracy and the Internet without having a sense of how cascades work.

It is obvious that many social groups, both large and small, seem to move both rapidly and dramatically in the direction of one or another set of beliefs or actions.⁵ These sorts of "cascades" often involve the spread of information; in fact they are driven by information. If you lack a great deal of private information, you may well rely on information provided by the statements or actions of others. A stylized example: If Joan is unaware whether abandoned toxic waste dumps are in fact hazardous, she may be moved in the direction of fear if Mary seems to think that fear is justified. If Joan and Mary both believe that fear is justified, Carl may end up thinking so too, at least if he lacks reliable independent information to the contrary. If Joan, Mary, and Carl believe that abandoned toxic waste dumps are hazardous, Don will have to have a good deal of confidence to reject their shared conclusion.

The example shows how information travels, and often becomes quite entrenched, even if it is entirely wrong. The view, widespread in some African-American communities, that white doctors are responsible for the spread of AIDS among African Americans is a recent illustration. Often cascades of this kind are local, and take different form in different communities. Hence one group may end up believing something and another group the exact opposite, and the reason is the rapid transmission of one piece of information within one group and a different piece of information in the other. In a balkanized speech market, this danger takes a particular form: different groups may be lead to quite different perspectives, as local cascades lead people in dramatically different directions. The Internet dramatically increases the likelihood of rapid cascades, based on false information. Of course, low-cost Internet communication also makes it possible for truth, and corrections, to spread quickly as well. But sometimes this happens much too late. In that event, balkanization is extremely likely. As a result of the Internet, cascade effects are more common than they have ever been before.

As an especially troublesome example, consider widespread doubts in South Africa, where about 20 percent of the adult population is infected by the AIDS virus, about the connection between HIV and AIDS. South African President Thabo Mbeki is a well-known Internet surfer, and he learned the views of the "denialists" after stumbling across one of their websites. The views of the "denialists" are not scientifically respectable—but to a nonspecialist, many of the claims on their (many) sites seem quite plausible. At least for a period, Mbeki both fell victim to a cybercascade and through his public statements, helped to accelerate one, to the point where many South Africans at serious risk are not convinced by an association between HIV and AIDS. It seems clear that this cascade effect has turned out to be deadly.

I hope that I have shown enough to demonstrate that for citizens of a heterogeneous democracy, a fragmented communications market creates considerable dangers. There are dangers for each of us as individuals; constant exposure to one set of views is likely to lead to errors and confusions, or to unthinking conformity (emphasized by John Stuart Mill). And to the extent that the process makes people less able to work cooperatively on shared problems, by turning collections of people into non-communicating confessional groups, there are dangers for society as a whole.