Toda Peace Institute

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Polarisation and Peacebuilding Strategy on Digital Media Platforms:

The Current Research

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Abstract

This is the first of two policy briefs on the topic of polarisation. This first brief is a research overview about polarisation and policy issues related to digital media. There are plenty of unreliable research and dueling studies in this area, so each study was independently examined and methodologically verified by independent researchers Shauna Gordon-McKeon or Rachel Lazerus Although no human can lay claim to absolute knowledge, we are confident these studies are relatively sound. After summarising the studies, the policy brief closes with a series of questions highlighting where further information and research is most needed.

The second brief, "Polarisation and Peacebuilding Strategy on Digital Media Platforms: Current Strategies and Their Discontents," can be found on the website for the Toda Peace Institute.

Author Note: Any opinions, biases, and/or mistakes in this policy brief are my own. However, I would like to give enormous thanks to Rachel Lazerus and Shauna Gordon-McKeon for their work in methodologically evaluating the studies I cited. I would also like to credit some of the people I spoke to, in alphabetical order: Zahed Amanullah of the Institute on Strategic Dialogue; Alisha Bhagat of Forum for the Future; Kelly Born of the Hewlett Foundation; George Davis; Renee DiResta; Helena Puig Larrauri of Build Up; An Xiao Mina; Jonathan Stray of Columbia University; Aviv Ovadya; and others who asked not to be named.

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[1] Research support from Rachel Lazerus and Shauna Gordon-McKeon

Introduction

In a world that is becoming more and more polarised, there are both problems and opportunities for peacebuilding and governance on digital media. Lately, the problems are at centre stage. This is great, because many digital media issues (such as the unprecedented capacity to cheaply spread viral political propaganda at a global scale) have been ignored for too long.

Yet some reactions and claims about digital media issues are overblown, and the overcorrections will create new problems. For instance, broad societal polarisation often gets laid at the internet's door, but that is a dicey claim. It is true that polarisation is increasing in major democracies, but it is not clear that digital media is driving the increase; polarisation began its upward trend decades before the invention of the Internet. And overcorrecting to "fix" polarisation in the media, without addressing its root causes, could mean that major social issues get ignored or unfairly quelled.

Still, even if polarisation is not driven by digital media, severe conflicts are playing out on the digital stage. For example, political lies that are weaponised to go viral within minutes are still a gigantic, urgent problem, even if those lies do not increase polarisation.

It is also plausible that some forms of digital media drive polarisation and others do not. Different social platforms probably have different societal impacts — for instance, Facebook probably has different impacts from Twitter, which are different from Reddit, which are different from Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Livejournal, WeChat, Weibo, Line, Tiktok, Yelp, Ello, Mastodon, Gab, etc. — and it is hard to analogise any social media impacts to those of less social platforms, like Google or Amazon. (Fun fact: the vast majority of digital media studies are done with Twitter data, because Twitter has the most publicly-accessible data compared to other major platforms.) Plus, digital media impacts probably vary by culture, and there is not yet much research on any of this.

We need a finer-grained sense of how society is affected by digital media because that is the only way to start resolving the conflicts we face. And it is not just polarisation that has been exaggerated. One 2018 Buzzfeed News article about the "Yellow Jackets" riots in France ran with the headline, "The 'Yellow Vest' Riots In France Are What Happens When Facebook Gets Involved With Local News" — i.e., blaming Facebook for a massive social movement. This is sloppy from a data-crunching perspective; it also could be dangerous. The "Yellow Vests" have generated a million-signature petition, and they participated in riots in which people died. That is a significant movement, and global society should seek a *precise and accurate* understanding of the forces driving the Yellow Vests, because there is probably more than just Facebook.

Most importantly, in terms of documenting productive approaches: No matter "who is to blame," new opportunities to build peace are blossoming on digital media. Many people are working hard to build peace using the Internet, and we can learn a lot from their approaches, even if they do not work at a big internet company.

The State of the Research

According to Merriam-Webster, societal "polarisation" is "concentration about opposing extremes of groups or interests formerly ranged on a continuum" (definition retrieved 2/28/2019). Conflict theorists pay attention to polarisation because increased polarisation is a warning sign for armed conflict, as documented in texts like *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall; 4th edition 2016). Even when it does not lead to war, polarisation can drastically decrease the effectiveness of governments and other institutions.

The question of whether polarisation is good or bad is outside the scope of this brief, but it is worth noting that it can be understood as positive. For instance, one way of thinking about polarisation is as an indicator that narrative and power are being negotiated. (How much of the idea of "polarisation" is broader society reacting to marginalised groups asserting themselves?) From this perspective, conflict can also be understood as positive; the threat of conflict or revolution can be a deciding factor reining in sadistic dictators.

In writing this brief, my intent is not to dismiss oppressed groups' concerns. In some parts of the world, we are already starting to see the blatant combination of authoritarian sensibilities plus finely-tuned behavioral modification through constant surveillance. Digital media could become a straightforward tool for the privileged to quell their subjects. Imagine a dictator who can press a "depolarise" button, from an isolated tower, insulated from consequences after their subjects protest abuse.

Yet although these are important concerns, peacebuilding is important, and empathy, and nonviolent conflict resolution — and depolarisation can be a way of talking about those things.

1. Research Methodology, Focus, and Limitations

This review focuses narrowly on research related to polarisation and peacebuilding-related political questions, such as how digital media can change voting patterns; digital propaganda; how viral content works; and so on. As per the author note, this review excludes *many* studies with slightly suspect findings and those that are out of scope (for example, studies about how digital media affects well-being).

Researching this subject is complicated by the fact that there is no common methodology or set of definitions. Some people have created, or are working on, meta-analyses of disinformation specifically — for instance, Jonathan Stray at Columbia University and Jennifer Kavanagh at RAND Corporation — but there are no common methodologies for broader political and societal impacts of digital media.

The Social Science Research Council is working on this problem, and Samuel Spies at SSRC sent the following statement: "SSRC is in the process of creating a web portal and content aggregation service, with a target launch date in the fall of 2019. The Council hopes this new project will consolidate an expanding scholarly literature that originates in multiple, partially overlapping fields. As part of this initiative, it will summarize research findings,

identify gaps in scholarship, help inform policy decisions, and translate academic knowledge for a broad audience of scholars, journalists, and interested citizens."

This research is further complicated by data availability. Again, this is why most studies use Twitter data — it is easy to get — but Twitter cannot necessarily stand in for other social platforms, and certainly not for non-social platforms.

Plus, research fashions play a role. There is far less research (or concern) about the impact of Reddit or Amazon than Facebook, Google, or Twitter, even though more people currently visit Amazon or Reddit than Twitter (note that Amazon started demonstrating the ability to remotely delete books from users' Kindles over ten years ago, and journalists at Vice have documented how Amazon actively experiments with which books they allow users to see).

Finally, as we look at digital propaganda, false news, voter influence, and other methods of persuading people that use digital media, it is worth noting that there is a field of perspective change in social psychology, and one of its findings is that *people's perspectives change differently on different topics.* Many factors affect decision-making, such as cognition effects (like whether someone is paying attention or not) and partisan effects (like whether a person is highly aligned with one side of the debate or not when they are exposed to new information). There can be strong differences between groups (for example, partisan attitudes may become more entrenched when exposed to different perspectives, while moderate partisan attitudes may not). As with all fields of human endeavour, these data may appear different and lead to different decisions when viewed at different scales.

Altogether, these are significant limitations! Still, researchers have managed to learn some things about polarisation and other societal impacts of digital media.

2. Basic Research on Polarisation Suggests that Digital Media is not Driving Polarisation (But Polarisation Is Really High, and Getting Higher)

The claim that polarisation is rising is uncontroversial; in fact, polarisation has been increasing for decades. With regards to polarization as a broad trend, the 2018 study "How Polarized are Citizens? Measuring Ideology from the Ground-Up" by Draca and Schwarz is a good place to start. The study documents polarisation in 17 countries across the European Union and North America. It notes that polarisation has increased more in the US — and is currently at a higher level in the US — than in any other countries studied. However, the fact that polarisation is rising does not necessarily mean that digital media is driving it.

In research that takes a more granular look at the phenomenon, there is a range of approaches for measuring polarisation. In a 2017 study titled "Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarisation among US demographic groups," Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro looked at eight proposed measures and gave references to previous discussions of the "appropriate definition of polarization and the extent of its increase." Their study results are summarised by the title — i.e., they did not find any indication that polarisation correlates with internet use.

Those authors also found that "demographic groups *least likely to obtain information online*

or from social media are the groups seeing the *largest increase in polarization* in the U.S." (emphasis added) — i.e., polarisation seems to be happening *faster* in groups that use digital media *less.* This is strong evidence that digital media platforms are not a driver for polarisation.

3. Caveats Specific to the Polarisation Research

Some digital platforms may have different impacts on polarisation than others, and those different impacts could get lost in broad studies like the one above. For example, it is possible that Facebook increases polarisation among the groups that use it, while Twitter decreases polarisation. Or it is possible that Twitter increases polarisation and Facebook decreases it... and so on.

Additionally, the effects could be changing over time, especially given how fast and how significantly digital platforms can change. For instance, even if we assume that digital media was not a causal factor in polarisation in 2015, it could be more of a factor today.

To drill down on this question, it may help to test specific *affordances* rather than *platforms.* Some research (detailed later in this brief) has tried, but more is needed. (An "affordance" is an interactive aspect of design. For example, the "retweet" button is an affordance on Twitter, the "Like" button is an affordance on Facebook, and the handle on a tea mug is an affordance on the tea mug.)

Most importantly:
• Even if polarisation is not caused or driven by digital media, its effects can be seen on digital media
• And there may be digital media interventions that can depolarise offline society, even if digital media is not causing polarisation.

We will return to these two ideas frequently over the course of these briefs.

4. Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles are Largely Debunked

A relevant, albeit less broad and more debunked, concept is "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles," which gained currency among media theorists over the last decade. Indeed, though the phrase "filter bubble" was first used in 2010, it is already in Merriam-Webster, which defines it as "an environment and especially an online environment in which people are exposed only to opinions and information that conform to their existing beliefs" (definition retrieved 3/6/2019).

The idea is so prevalent that in 2018, the Knight Foundation published a white paper by Guess, Nyhan, Lyons and Reifler (scholars affiliated with Princeton, Dartmouth, and Exeter) titled "Avoiding The Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers: Why selective exposure to like-minded political news is less prevalent than you think." In that paper, the researchers state that "the data frequently contradict or at least complicate the 'echo chambers' narrative."

And relevant to the aforementioned 2017 polarisation study — which found that polarisation seems to be happening *faster* in groups with *less* social media exposure — the authors of the "Echo Chamber" paper further say that, "the context in which we encounter information matters. Endorsements from friends on social media and algorithmic rankings can influence the information people consume, but these effects are more modest and contingent than many assume. Strikingly, our vulnerability to echo chambers may instead be greatest in offline social networks, where exposure to diverse views is often more rare."

This is not to say that we are not seeing homophily, or "birds of a feather flocking together," on social media platforms. We are! Both this 2011 study by Conover et al., and this one from 2016 by Gregory and Du, give further details of how homophily operates on Twitter. Yet although these studies use words like "polarization" and "echo chambers" in their write-ups, their *results* show homophily — they do not necessarily show a link to offline polarisation.

5. Asymmetric Polarisation: When Polarisation Works Differently Across Political Lines

The phrase "asymmetric polarisation" refers to the broad phenomenon of political sides getting polarised differently. This is particularly relevant to citizens of today's politically polarised US. The 2018 book *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* by Harvard scholars Benkler, Faris, and Roberts contains a detailed discussion of how polarisation is advancing faster on the right than on the left. One does not need to agree with the historical or political explanations suggested by the book to take in its documentation of asymmetric polarisation.

When we say that polarisation is visible on digital media even if digital media is not necessarily driving it, asymmetric polarisation makes a good case study. In a 2018 Twitter-specific study by Bail et al. titled "Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization," the researchers found that experimentally exposing people to the other side's views on Twitter seems to reinforce pre-existing views rather than changing them — and the effect was stronger in right-wing subjects than in left-wing. Specifically, Republicans became more polarised when exposed to opposing views on Twitter than Democrats. (Differences between political audiences have also been reported by field workers experimenting with depolarisation interventions using social media platforms. There are examples in the "Interventions by Independent Organisations" section of my second brief, "Polarisation and Peacebuilding Strategy on Digital Media Platforms: Current Strategies and Their Discontents.")

6. Viral Tactics and the Global Underground Disinformation Trade

Regardless of how we came to this pass, lots of people are taking advantage of our polarised environment. Propaganda, false news, and coordinated harassment campaigns are just a few strategies that thrive in a polarised environment — often by exploiting audiences' emotional responses in specific, calculated ways.

One 2017 study by Brady et al., "Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks," found that "the presence of moral-emotional language in political messages [on

Twitter] substantially increases their diffusion within (and less so between) ideological group boundaries." A 2012 study by Berger and Milkman reviewed three months' worth of New York Times articles and concluded that articles provoking "high-arousal" emotions — emotions that trigger a strong physiological response, such as anger and awe — are more likely to go viral. (These findings align with what many media creators have learned through experience; whether they are journalists, fashion influencers, food bloggers, or governmental propagandists, creators do not need academic research access to discover what serves their goals.)

Many researchers believe there is an emerging "global underground disinformation and propaganda trade," which includes government and terrorist agents as well as individuals and corporate vendors (such as the much-discussed Cambridge Analytica). Viral content tactics are just one more weapon in this underground community, and experts in those tactics are mercenaries.

This space has not been publicly mapped or studied, although specific propaganda tactics have been. For example, a 2018 study by Starbird et al. describes how propagandists exploit another human tendency — that people are more likely to believe a piece of news they see or hear often — by creating false news accounts that seed the same narrative in multiple spaces, so it looks like the same "facts" are being reported by multiple different "people."

Some propagandists are now adept at identifying existing cultural fault lines within fast-moving, highly polarised discourse. More 2018 work from Starbird et al. shows how hashtags are sites of "framing contests" between interest groups: "Framing contests occur when two (or more) groups attempt to promote different frames — for example, in relation to a specific historical event or emerging social problem."

An event in the context of an emerging social problem (like, for example, a policeman shooting a Black teenager at the height of #BlackLivesMatter) might be an opportunity in the eyes of a propagandist, as different political frames jostle for control (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter). Propagandists often find hashtags related to a contentious issue and then do things like (a) promote the narrative that supports their agenda, or (b) fan the flames of the conflict by supporting both sides in an inflammatory way.

7. What We Actually Know About Causation on Digital Media, Versus Correlation

Another 2013 paper, "Secular vs. Islamist polarization in Egypt on Twitter" by Weber et al., found that increased hashtag polarity is an indicator of violent periods in the real world. This finding is obviously correlational (and correlation is not causation!), but it is part of a growing body of research that links online phenomena to offline phenomena.

Proving causality (rather than mere correlation) is difficult when trying to understand the impact of digital platforms. In 2018, Müller and Schwartz took a stab at this with a paper titled "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime." They looked at anti-refugee violence in Germany, and their findings suggest that, in places where hate speech is already spreading, Facebook enables violent mobs to mobilise more quickly than would

otherwise be possible.

Ironically, Müller and Schwartz's paper debuted during a cultural moment when media coverage of Facebook was very heated. As a result, the paper was massively overhyped (especially considering that itis not peer-reviewed). Well-intentioned media outlets promoted wild claims, which eventually caused many readers to dismiss the paper's findings.

Still, notwithstanding the hype and attendant backlash, the methodology from Müller and Schwartz's paper has potential, especially given that showing causation in this field is so hard. In fact, the main problem with the paper was that the researchers were forced to work with limited data, because Facebook was choosing not to share internal data with academics at the time. Many criticisms of the study focused on its data analysis, including some of Facebook's criticisms.

Yet as tech blogger Ben Thompson pointed out at the time (in a paywalled article on his website Stratechery), "Facebook itself can overcome some of the biggest deficiencies in this article: the company actually knows exactly how much people use Facebook on an individual level, they have location data for the vast majority of people, and these researchers have helpfully compiled all of the data of violence against refugees that Facebook would need to replicate this study."

Some experiments that are conducted off Facebook could potentially apply to Facebook. For example, in 2013, Stroud et al. published a study looking at affordances: They learned that a "Respect" button "yielded less polarized comment section behavior" when compared to the more common "Like" button. However, Stroud's study was conducted using comment sections for news site articles rather than Facebook comments.

Facebook — like other tech companies — routinely experiments with its buttons and other affordances. (Google infamously tested 41 shades of blue for its links, as blogged in 2009 by Douglas Bowman, a designer who worked on the test and then quit.) But the vast majority of those experiments are not public. In 2016, Facebook officially switched from the "Like" button to six different "emoji reactions" (though there is not a reaction that seems to denote "respect"). However, the data that led to this affordance change has never been released, and neither has the data they gained from changing it, so we do not know if this change was influenced by Stroud's study, and we also do not know if Facebook's results are similar to Stroud's.

8. How Digital Platforms Can Change Voting Behaviour

Some of Facebook's fear of sharing data is related to its ongoing public relations crisis. Facebook was more willing to share data with researchers and publicise its internal experiments several years ago. Back then, some interesting research got published that shows causal mechanisms. One 2013 study by Bond et al., conducted in partnership with Facebook, found that Facebook has the ability to directly affect the voting behavior of millions of people. In other words, a small change in Facebook's interface can cause many Facebook users to vote when they otherwise would not.

Influencing voters is, of course, not limited to Facebook. A 2015 study by Epstein and Robertson found that manipulating search engine results can change voting behavior, too. The researchers also point out that the manipulations "can be masked so that people show no awareness of the manipulation." (Epstein has been accused of having an axe to grind against Google, but his study passed our methodological review — and the results of his study are generally about search engines, not just Google.)

Older research focused on television, conducted by Gentzkow in 2006, showed that increased access to television has decreased voter turnout in the U.S., which the author attributed to consumer choice: "Faced with both a reduction in a price of information and a much larger drop in the price of entertainment, consumers responded by substituting away from the former and toward the latter."

In other words, Gentzkow's study suggests that when consumers have access to free high-quality entertainment, they vote less. As we consider this study from the vantage of 2019, we must keep in mind that Internet provides a far greater quantity of free, high-quality entertainment than TV.

9. A Non-Western View

Speaking of scale, the above studies largely centre on the West. If we take a global view, there is far less research about polarisation, government, and politics on social media — and there is an enormous need for it. In 2017, Foreign Policy ran an article by award-winning journalist Christina Larson that chronicled Facebook's political impact in countries like Myanmar and Cambodia. One of the most disturbing parts is a story of how Facebook chose to run an experiment on its newsfeed in Cambodia during a touchy political period, which changed the news seen by millions of people:

"Out of all the countries in the world, why Cambodia? This couldn't have come at a worse time," a Cambodian blogger told the BBC, explaining that the number of people who saw her public video had dropped by more than 80 percent. "Suddenly I realized, wow, they actually hold so much power.... [Facebook] can crush us just like that if they want to."

In early 2019, The Guardian published a piece by Julia Carrie Wong titled "'Overreacting to failure': Facebook's new Myanmar strategy baffles local activists." Wong describes how Facebook has chosen to "ban four ethnic armed Myanmar-based groups from its site" — all of which oppose the Myanmar government that's currently in place. Wong then notes, "These questions have resonance far beyond Myanmar. Had Facebook existed during the Rwandan genocide, one human rights observer asked, would it have allowed the government-backed Hutu genocidaires to use its platform while banning the rebel Tutsi forces that fought back?"

It is hard to say how these decisions get made within large companies like Facebook. For example, Wong reports that Facebook commissioned a human rights report but then ignored the report's findings in Myanmar — and without more visibility into Facebook's process, it is hard to say why this happened. (Facebook's PR department did not respond to

a request for comment. Indeed, the only major platform that seems to prioritise public transparency for its moderation process is Reddit, which, in 2018, gave New Yorker writer Andrew Marantz access to its internal moderation meetings.)

Still, many employees at large platforms really do want to do the right thing and are struggling to develop solid, research-backed strategies that will work at unprecedented scale. (Some platform employees contributed to this policy brief, but wish to remain anonymous.)

Meanwhile, in China, digital media platforms cooperate openly with the state. We know little about the philosophy informing government control of those platforms, but right now, it seems largely focused on preventing citizens from organising, and flooding the internet with positive posts.

A 2013 study by King, Pan, and Roberts found that on Chinese social media, "Contrary to previous understandings, posts with negative, even vitriolic, criticism of the [Chinese] state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored. Instead, we show that the censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilisation, regardless of content." A 2017 study by the same researchers found that many, perhaps most, of the propaganda posts on Chinese social media are simply "cheerleading" for China. Instead of outright censorship, this strategy focuses on soaking up citizens' attention with nice-feeling posts about the loveliness of China and how lucky and grateful Chinese citizens are.

This sort of activity does not just affect China's internal politics. For one thing, citizens of other countries can and do use Chinese digital platforms. Indeed, many Chinese digital platforms are now growing aggressively outside China. The data they have gathered, and the control taken by the Chinese government, may now apply to millions of other countries' citizens. And given that these platforms do not seem concerned about state censorship in China, there is no reason to think they will hesitate to cooperate with authoritarian governments anywhere else.

10. Positive Social Networks?: "Adaptive vs. Maladaptive," or "Connection-Promoting vs. Non-Connection-Promoting"

The recent years of fever-pitch moral panic brought ethics to the forefront of the global conversation about digital media. Unfortunately, moments of moral panic are not ideal for long-term thinking. But hopefully good things will emerge from the sustained public pressure on tech companies we are now seeing.

Most past research concentrated on showing that platform problems exist, because the problems were both frequently denied by tech companies and hard to understand, even for experts. Today, tech companies are trying different solutions (which I outline in my next brief, "Current Strategies and Their Discontents"). So is civil society, like NGOs whose operations take place on digital platforms. But when solutions are backed by research, the research largely is not transparent to the public.

So, what can research tell us about building a digital platform that does good things in the

world? Research about wellness is mostly out of scope for this brief, but one concept from that sphere could be useful here: "Maladaptive" vs. "adaptive" usage, or "non-connection-promoting" vs. "connection-promoting."

In a 2016 pilot study by Tran et al., researchers took a look at when and how social media improves people's mental state, and when it makes people feel worse. This was a preliminary study, so it is not conclusive, but its findings suggest eleven ways social media can be a positive coping mechanism, like when people use it to actively communicate with friends or change their perspective on negative experiences. On the other hand, it can make people feel worse, too, like when people use social media to facilitate obsessing over their problems. Positive usage is called "adaptive," and negative usage is "maladaptive." This research dovetails with a later study, published in 2018 by Clark, Algoe, and Green, which notes that a key distinction in social media use seems to be "connection-promoting" vs. "non-connection-promoting" use.

It is hard to find spatial community metaphors that work well for describing digital media — is Facebook a cocktail party? A public square? — but these findings could fit with experiences of social space. A person who is saddened by the death of a parent may be comforted if they go to a party and have close conversations with friends, but they may just feel more isolated if they go to the same party and do not talk to anyone. Researchers like Helena Puig Larrauri, who has been designing depolarisation interventions for Facebook and Twitter, note that these social platforms are not inherently "good containers" for dialogue, but human facilitators can get involved to depolarise a given conversation.

Human facilitators are likely irreplaceable, but it may be possible to design a better container. Perhaps, when designing humane technology, it would help to build digital platforms that actively *model* respectful conversation and healthy connection with their affordances — or whose container is labeled clearly to users in advance, in the same way that people know whether they are going to a dinner party or a public square. With luck (and accountability), such models could be informed by transparent research and built with transparent processes.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although research alone cannot solve digital media problems, there is still a lot we do not know about how platforms operate and how people are using them. The second brief on polarisation details different intervention strategies. Recommendations for further research include the following:

1. Research the different types and genres of social media (or just different platforms) to see if they have significantly different impacts on society, and/or require different interventions
2. Identify whether some impacts can be traced to affordances rather than platforms. (An "affordance" is an interactive aspect of design. For example, the "retweet" button is an affordance on Twitter, the "Like" button is an affordance on Facebook, and the handle on a tea mug is an affordance on the tea mug.)

3. Map the emerging "global underground disinformation and propaganda trade," similar to the global arms trade. In this world, there are vendors as well as individuals selling their services. There are also state actors making alliances and training each other. For instance, Russia's Internet Research Agency is rumoured to have trained President Duterte in the Philippines on propaganda tactics. Who are the major players in this world? In what skills are they training and what trends are they watching?
4. Research if and how culture affects the societal impact of US digital media platforms. For instance: If we discover that Facebook has a specific impact on polarisation in America, then can we be sure that will hold true in Russia, or Thailand, or in subcultures? (I have heard rumours that researchers find misinformation campaigns to be less effective in some countries, and more effective in others.) And how best can we understand different social media usage in different cultures, even when the platforms are the same (e.g., what's the best way to get a handle on how Instagram usage differs between the Middle East and the US)?
5. Explore digital platforms created in other countries. What methodologies and options do we have for understanding and interacting with Chinese platforms, for example?
6. Inquire about the impacts of homophily. Even if homophily does not seem to cause echo chambers, what can we learn about its other impacts? (Some examples of homophily seem benign, like the asexual community gaining the ability to find each other and form support groups. Other examples may be concerning in mental-health-related ways, such as pro-anorexia groups or pro-self-harm groups. Still other examples are worrying in political ways, such as the QAnon phenomenon, where conspiracy theorists have created a sub-community that supports itself via Patreon, and are cross-promoting across other conspiracy theories to create a larger movement; see this tweet from researcher Renee DiResta.)
7. Research a finer understanding of polarisation's negatives and positives. What do we know about how asymmetric polarisation works, its root causes, and how interventions might differ between asymmetrically polarised populations?
8. Understand the "ultra FOMO" (fear of missing out) phenomenon: One impact of large-scale digital media seems to be that peer pressure and self-comparison get scaled to an absurd degree. Most people using the Internet are exposed to images of the most beautiful possible people, porn that showcases niche and extreme acts, etc. This may lead to worse body image, lower satisfaction with intimate relationships, etc. For example, doctors have coined the phrase "Snapchat dysmorphia" to describe women getting plastic surgery so they match the modified images of themselves that they are posting on social media. (This may dovetail with homophily.) Effects on well-being are becoming better documented — and this probably also affects peacebuilding and government, given that people's personal feelings and connections on digital media are leverage points for propaganda.

For more about how these questions and phenomena are playing out in real time, check out the second brief in this series, "Polarization and Peacebuilding Strategy on Digital Media Platforms: Current Strategies and Their Discontents."

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