Analyzing Media Trust Dynamics to Evaluate Depolarisation Strategies in The United States

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by deepening ideological divides, political polarisation emerges as a dangerous threat to the unity and political cohesion of the United States. Political polarisation has reached alarming levels in the past few decades, where partisan divides tear apart the very fabric of society and inhibit governmental cooperation. Depolarisation strategies, which aim to reduce the extent of political polarisation, serve as a crucial step to ensuring the political integrity of the United States and fostering mutual understanding. However, implementing depolarisation strategies presents unique challenges, due to their nuanced approach to freedom of speech and of the press, that differs significantly from other Western approaches. This article explores how analysing media trust dynamics can inform actionable solutions to mitigate political polarisation in the United States. I first analyse survey results detailing media trust and consumption across a range of news sources, correlating these findings with respondents' political affiliations to uncover patterns. Using multinomial logistic regression, I further quantify relationships and explore the nuanced interplay between media trust, media consumption and political lean. Within the context of my survey analysis, I then evaluate mitigation strategies for political polarisation, arguing that reducing political polarisation in the United States requires focusing on media trust divides that persist across partisan groups, rather than strategies targeting individuals.

Introduction

While technology has certainly revolutionised the way we communicate, the wide variety of media outlets now accessible has created an unprecedented set of challenges regarding political polarisation. While increased connectivity offers significant benefits, it also holds destructive potential, especially in the United States, renowned for its divisive political landscape. Individuals now have access to a vast array of media outlets, ranging from traditional news sources like newspapers and TV broadcasts, to online news sites and social media. Contemporary media outlets typically vary widely in terms of bias and factual quality and exist at both extremes of the political spectrum and everything in between. The wide selection of media outlets available allows individuals to selectively engage with news sources that reinforce pre-existing beliefs, fostering dangerous constructs such as echo chambers and filter bubbles that tend to push individuals closer to political extremes.

Political polarisation is a broad term used to describe "the growing ideological distance and division between political parties and their supporters" (Fiveable, n.d.). There are two main types of political polarisation: ideological polarisation, which are divisions created by fundamentally different political ideologies, and affective polarisation, which are divisions created by emotional attitudes and distrust (Arguedas et al., 2022). In recent decades, political polarisation has been amplified by online interaction, where constructs such as echo chambers and filter bubbles drive citizens further apart towards ideological extremes (Syed, 2019). Both types of polarisation, especially affective polarisation, have increased and decreased depending on the country. The United States is a notable example of increasing polarisation among western democracies. (McCoy et al., 2022).

Polarisation is particularly prevalent in the United States, often referred to as one of the most divided societies in the world (McCoy, 2018). The US is renowned for its two-party political system, consisting of 'Democrats' and

'Republicans'. Common ground between the parties is rapidly diminishing, with both taking very opposing issues on many economic and social issues (such as healthcare, immigration and abortion). The climax of this political polarisation in the United States is likely the January 6th riots, where supporters gathered at a Trump rally went on to storm the US Capitol building following his defeat in the 2020 US Presidential Elections (Duignan, 2024) (Wong & Kapur, 2022). Careful exposure to biased media narratives over an extended period led them to believe that "the election had been rigged and stolen" (Wong & Kapur, 2022).

The Need for A Solution

Political polarisation in the United States is already a serious issue that fragments US society along political lines and inhibits bipartisan cooperation. Left uncontrolled, the underlying issues it creates could scale indefinitely (McCoy et al., 2022). Currently, there lacks a robust framework to tackle political polarisation from its roots, and efforts to minimise polarisation are often scattered. Initiatives such as promoting media literacy or establishing heterogenous relationships, as discussed later, frequently place too much responsibility in the hands of individuals (who may not be willing to change) (Livingstone, 2018), and lack the widespread implementation necessary to reduce the problem (Bulger & Davison, 2018) (Livingstone, 2018).

There is an interesting research imbalance regarding political polarisation: while there has been extensive research and documentation into highlighting the trend of political polarisation and how it divides countries such as the United States apart, significantly less studies evaluate methods of mitigating the problem (Overgaard et al., 2021) - a gap that this paper aims to help address. Admittedly, dealing with a problem like political polarisation requires bold solutions and significant bipartisan cooperation, and so the feasibility of solutions discussed hinges on how much the US government prioritises political polarisation.

The primary research hypothesis is: how can analysing media trust dynamics inform actionable solutions to mitigate political polarisation in the United States? To study this, I first conduct a survey to analyse the correlation between media trust, media consumption and political ideology, using multinomial logistic regression to demonstrate correlations in data. I then use the results to evaluate methods for media depolarisation, suggesting nuanced strategies of media regulation and public broadcasting in the unique context of the United States. I aim to discuss the benefits, drawbacks, opportunities and challenges behind implementing such plans, when considering the context of my survey results. It should be stressed that these results are purely exploratory within the context of my survey trends.

A Literature Review

Echo Chambers & Filter Bubbles

An echo chamber is defined as "a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal" (Arguedas et al., 2022). With a lack of exposure to contradictory information, a positive feedback loop can form, where participants reaffirm and strengthen common ideologies indefinitely. (Damerau, 2020) (Mattos et al., 2022). When opposing partisan groups eventually interact, their self-reinforced, opposing ideologies can inhibit mutual understanding, eroding political cohesion and deepening societal distrust.

A filter bubble is defined as "an environment in which people are exposed only to opinions and information that conform to their existing beliefs". It slightly differs from echo chambers in the sense that filter bubbles are often passive environments where individuals consume a limited selection of news, while echo chambers are often active environments involving direct social interaction between like-minded individuals (Arguedas et al., 2022). The selective exposure to information created by filter bubbles inhibits engagement with alternative viewpoints or approaches, reinforcing existing biases and furthering polarisation.

Algorithmic & Cognitive Biases

The technological age significantly complicates the issue of echo chambers and filter bubbles, by allowing algorithmic biases to significantly influence individual opinion. Historically, individuals generally had to engage with a wide range of perspectives which they encountered in their daily lives. While echo chambers could certainly still exist, for example, within families, social media now allows individuals to connect with like-minded individuals more easily than ever. Since social media platforms heavily rely on user engagement to show advertisements that generate profit, they are incentivised to optimise user retention on their platforms. This leads to algorithmic biases, where personalisation algorithms analyse user beliefs based on media they engage with, then push content that aligns with beliefs it identifies (Garimella et al., 2018).

Cognitive biases – irrational judgements or perceptions that affect an individuals' behaviour - also play a central role in fostering echo chambers and filter bubbles. Cognitive biases are fuelled by a fear of cognitive dissonance – a psychological discomfort caused when presented with contradictory information (Bright et al., 2020). One such cognitive bias is confirmation bias, also known as selective exposure theory (Hart et al., 2009), where individuals favour information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (and ignore information that contradicts these views) (French et al., 2023) (Garimella et al., 2018). Biased assimilation is a similar concept, where individuals receive information from all sides of an argument but interpret information so that it supports their ideologies (Garimella et al., 2018).

Current Depolarisation Methods

Political polarisation is deeply rooted in the group dynamics of modern society, making it very challenging to perceive and tackle, but there have been several methods of reducing political polarisation that have been proposed. "Depolarisation" is often used to describe efforts to reverse political polarisation, which typically aim to encourage diverse media consumption and awareness, maximising exposure to differing viewpoints (McCoy et al., 2022). This diminishes the effects of online constructs such as echo chambers and filter bubbles, therefore reducing political polarisation. Unfortunately, while current depolarisation strategies certainly hold merit, many struggle with widespread implementation, and lack the influence necessary to change the media environment enough to prevent polarisation at its core (Edwards et al., 2023) (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

One social method of reducing polarisation is raising public awareness through media literacy campaigns. These methods involve informing people of the threat of political polarisation and encouraging them to question bias within news sources they consume and communities that they interact with (Gaultney et al., 2022). While these initiatives are largely beneficial to those that are involved, they often have a few limitations. Firstly, media literacy campaigns require a certain amount of individual effort to enact, where individuals are responsible for adjusting biases within their own media consumption (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Since media literacy campaigns are decentralised and typically run by smaller organisations, they frequently struggle with scalability and cohesion (Bulger & Davison, 2018) (Edwards et al., 2023). Additionally, the high amount of funding and effort required per individual involved for targeted media literacy campaigns can be problematic, especially for smaller organisations, thus reducing the effectiveness of these campaigns (Bulger & Davison, 2018) (Edwards et al., 2023).

As well as educational depolarisation methods, there are also algorithmic methods that can be implemented on social media networks, where echo chambers and filter bubbles typically thrive. Personalisation algorithms could be adapted to promote a diverse range of content across multiple viewpoints. For example, heterogeneous relationships could be established, where individuals with opposing viewpoints can interact to better understand each other's views (Bogado et al., 2024). Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, the entire business model of social media networks relies on maximising user engagement, meaning that establishing heterogenous relationships is actively against the primary interest of these technology companies (Garimella et al., 2018) (Seneca, 2020).

Surveying Media Trust

Evaluating solutions to political polarisation requires a concrete understanding of how media trust varies by political ideology. To analyse relationships between partisan group affiliation and media trust, I conducted a paid online survey using "SurveyMonkey" (SurveyMonkey, n.d.), to assess broad public trust in media outlets based on their political affiliation. The survey included 122 US citizens (48 males and 74 females), including 45 Democrats, 35 Republicans and 42 individuals with no political affiliation. Respondents were within the 18-99 age bracket, across a spread of income ranges ($0-$200,000+). The survey was conducted early in February 2024, around 9 months before the US Presidential Election in 2024.

Methodology

There were three survey questions, as follows:
1. Select any news sources which you use regularly (tick all that apply).
2. Select how trustworthy you find the following news sources.
3. Where do you consider yourself to be on the political spectrum?

The questions were intended to have simple, instructional wording so they could be easily interpreted by a wide audience. Question 1 was structured as a check-box, and aimed to assess the distribution of sources that respondents tend to consume. Question 2 was structured as a matrix, where individuals could rate how trustworthy they deemed media outlets from across the political spectrum, from "very trustworthy" to "very untrustworthy". Question 3 aimed to identify the political lean of the respondent, assessing their affiliation to the Democratic or Republican party on a point scale from 1 to 5. For the purposes of this entire analysis, I will define this as the Respondent Political Lean. This question allowed me to correlate Questions 1 and 2 with the political viewpoint of the respondent, providing the basis from which deeper trend analysis could be performed.

Initially, I took several precautions to clean the data and eliminate any rushed, low-quality responses. I compared the start and end time for each respondent to find the time taken to complete the survey. I established 40 seconds as an estimated minimum amount of time required to thoughtfully respond to the survey, and so eliminated responses completed quicker than this. To further enhance credibility, I manually reviewed the data to remove any clear anomalies, such as where questions were left largely incomplete. Cleaning the data eliminated 18 respondents, leaving me with a sample size of 122.

Both Questions 1 and 2 incorporated the same eight news sources, which were carefully selected to ensure a diversity in media biases, adequately representing the general media scene in the United States. Specifically, sources were: Breitbart News; CNBC; CNN; Fox News; HuffPost; New York Post; New York Times; Reuters. I took quantitative bias ratings from AllSides and AdFontes Media (as shown in the table below), then combined the scales to produce an overall bias score, for each media outlet, as a real number in the range -100% to 100%. I acknowledged the inconsistency in rating scales between the two sources by using the mean and standard deviation to standardise, then adjust the scales before further processing. Two bias rating systems (AllSides/AdFontes) were used to enhance the credibility of the overall bias score (as shown in Table 1), leveraging the strengths of both AllSides' and AdFontes Media's ratings. I will refer to these scores as Media Bias Scores.

Table 1. The raw bias ratings were standardised using the mean (0.28 for AllSides; 0.77 for AdFontes) and standard deviation (3.27 for AllSides; 9.33 for AdFontes).

Type		Breitbart	CNBC	CNN	Fox News	HuffPost	NYP	NYT	Reuters
AllSides	Raw	5.00	-0.90	-1.30	3.88	-4.30	2.93	-2.20	-0.89
	Standardised	1.446	-0.361	-0.483	1.103	-1.402	0.812	-0.759	-0.358

AdFontes	*Adjusted*	*96.41%*	*-24.04%*	*-32.21%*	*73.55%*	*-93.45%*	*54.15%*	*-50.58%*	*-23.83%*
	Raw	13.66	-1.77	-6.28	11.03	-10.67	9.29	-7.88	-1.22
	Standardised	1.381	-0.272	-0.755	1.099	-1.226	0.913	-0.927	-0.213
	Adjusted	*92.07%*	*-18.14%*	*-50.36%*	*73.28%*	*-81.71%*	*60.86%*	*-61.78%*	*-14.21%*
Combined		**94.24%**	**-21.09%**	**-41.28%**	**73.41%**	**-87.58%**	**57.50%**	**-56.18%**	**-19.02%**

Before further processing, I then transformed the responses for Questions 2 and 3 onto a numerical point scale. For each media outlet in Question 2, I assigned a "tick" the number 1 and no tick the number 0. For Question 3, I subtracted two from each rating to ensure ratings were on a scale from -2 to 2, meaning: a rating of -2 represented "very untrustworthy"; a rating of -1 represented "untrustworthy"; a rating of 0 represented "neutral"; a rating of 1 represented "trustworthy"; a rating of 2 represented "very trustworthy".

For the scores for Question 2, I then wrote a program, using Python, to multiply the response for a given outlet (either 0 or 1) by the Media Bias Score (as a raw number between -100 to 100). For each respondent, I then summed responses for all media outlets, giving me an overall score detailing bias in the sources that each respondent uses frequently, which I will define for the rest of this analysis as the Respondent Bias Score. I then reused this program for Question 3, multiplying the trust rating for a given outlet (in the range -2 to 2), by the Media Bias Score, giving me an overall trust score, which I will define as the Respondent Trust Score. This meant that a negative Respondent Bias/Trust Score represented a Democrat lean, while a positive Respondent Bias/Trust represented a Republican lean. It is important to note that the choice of negative/positive values is not intended to suggest any qualities about each party. Using the mean and standard deviation for the Respondent Bias Score and Respondent Trust Score, I then standardised both scales so values appeared in the range -100 to 1000, ensuring to adjust the position of the distribution of both slightly so that a score of neutral on every answer yielded 0.

As well as directly comparing each scale graphically, I was also able to use multinomial logistic regression techniques to further analyse the data and explore overarching trends. Linear regression is a statistical technique that is commonly used to quantify and investigate relationships between data, in particular, continuous variables (e.g. my Respondent Bias/Trust Scores) and a discrete variable (e.g. Respondent Political Lean). Using the scikit-learn library in Python, I first split the data into a training set (consisting of 80% of the data) and a test set (consisting of 20% of the data). I then ran the "LogisticRegression" model to train the Respondent Bias/Trust Scores, and visualised the success rate of this as a confusion matrix using the matplotlib library.
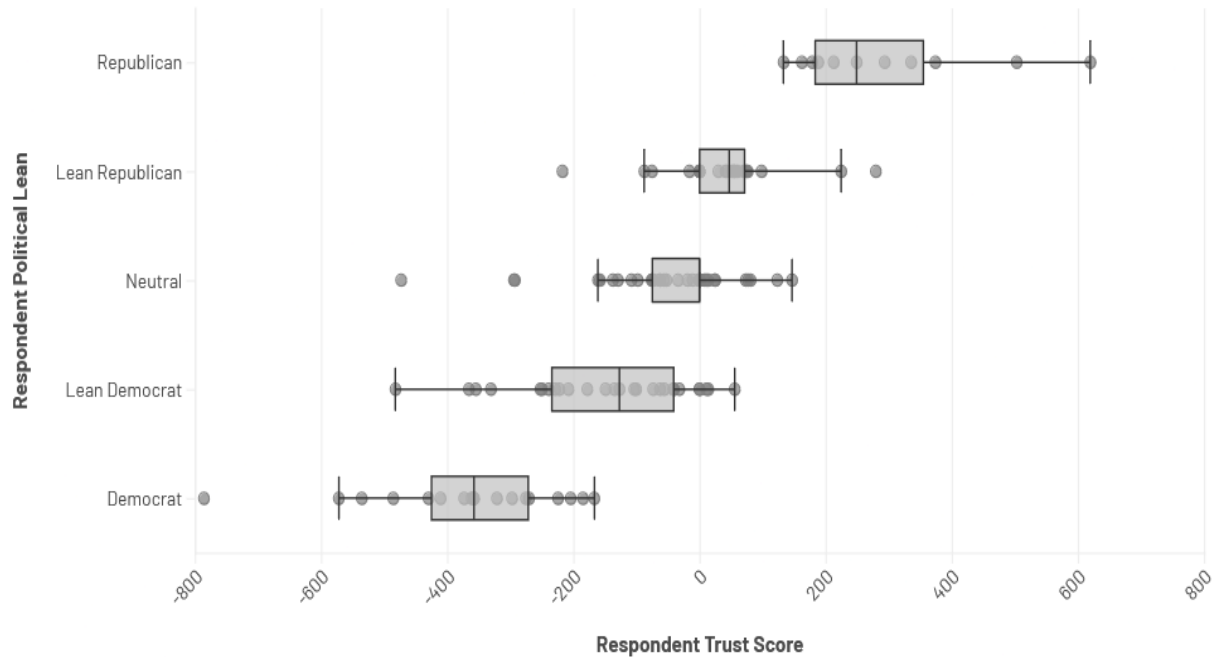
Analysis

Figure 1. There is evidently a strong correlation between Respondent Political Lean and Respondent Trust Score, proving that trust in media is a strong identifier of political affiliation.

Figure 1 highlights a strong correlation between Respondent Political Lean and Respondent Trust Score. At each political lean, partisan groups generally trusted outlets with biases aligning with their own political viewpoints, while distrusting media outlets that conflicted with these viewpoints. Many of those who reported themselves as Democrats tended to trust left-leaning media outlets (such as CNN and CNBC) and distrust right-leaning outlets (such as Fox News and Breitbart News). Similarly, those who reported themselves as Republicans tended to trust right-leaning outlets and distrust left-leaning outlets. Incorporating Question 2 into this, many of those that leaned Democrat or Republican also consumed media outlets leaning towards their respective political ideologies, although this trend was less pronounced, which could be promising for polarisation.
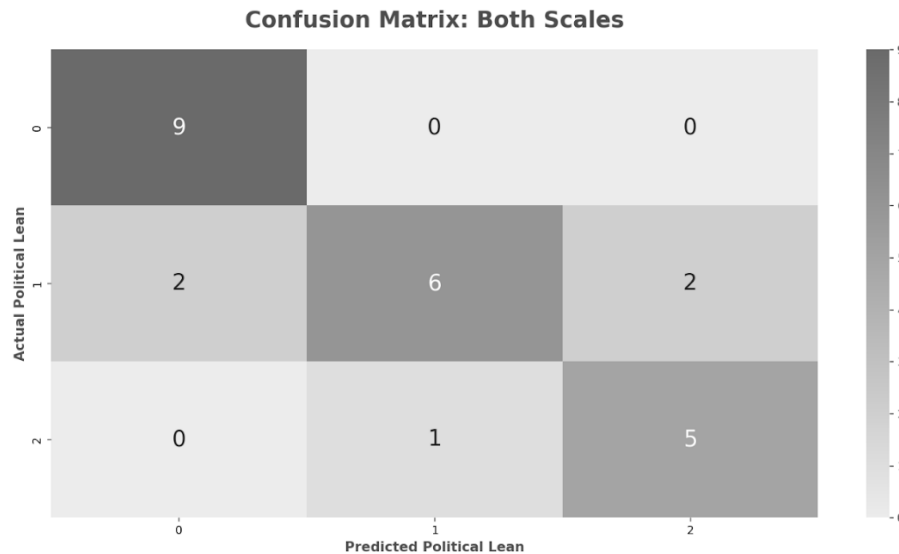
Confusion Matrix: Both Scales

Figure 2. A confusion matrix visualising how accurately the model predicted political lean. In this Figure, a political lean of 0 represents Democrat, a lean of 1 represents neutral and a lean of 2 represents Republican.

Performing multinomial logistic regression analysis on both scales further quantifies this relationship. When provided with both scales ("Respondent Bias Score" and "Respondent Trust Score"), my model was able to predict the correct Respondent Political Lean with 80% accuracy. This is shown in a confusion matrix in **Figure 2**, where the model made 5 incorrect judgements out of 25 attempts. Generally, the model was able to successfully predict Respondent Political Lean, based purely on Respondent Bias/Trust Scores, highlighting that media bias and trust can be a strong identifier for political lean.
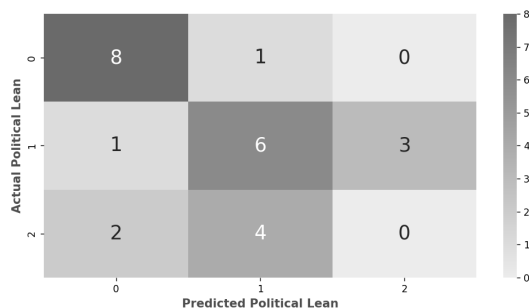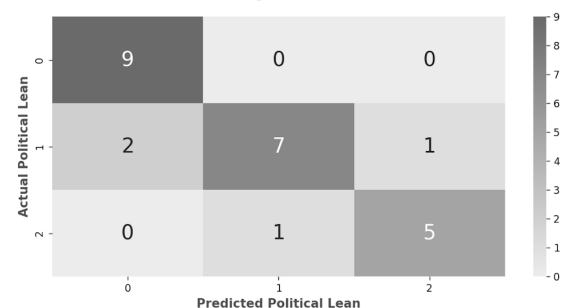

Figure 3. The confusion matrix on the left shows the accuracy with just the Respondent Bias Score, while the confusion matrix on the right shows the accuracy with just the Respondent Trust Score. In this Figure, a political lean of 0 represents Democrat, a lean of 1 represents neutral and a lean of 2 represents Republican.

An even more intriguing relationship arises when decomposing the scales and rerunning the regression analysis with each individual scale. When presented with only the Respondent Bias Score, the model was able to predict ideology with 56% accuracy (left of Figure 3), while when presented with only the Respondent Trust Score, the model was able to predict ideology with 84% accuracy (right of Figure 3). Out of my test data of 25, using only the Respondent Bias Score yielded 11 incorrect predictions, while using only the Respondent Trust Score produced just 4 incorrect

predictions. The addition of a second scale surprisingly decreased the performance of my overall model (in Figure 2). This could either be a consequence of the limited size of my dataset, or alternatively, could suggest that the news sources that individuals trust are more strongly correlated to political ideology than the news sources they consume.
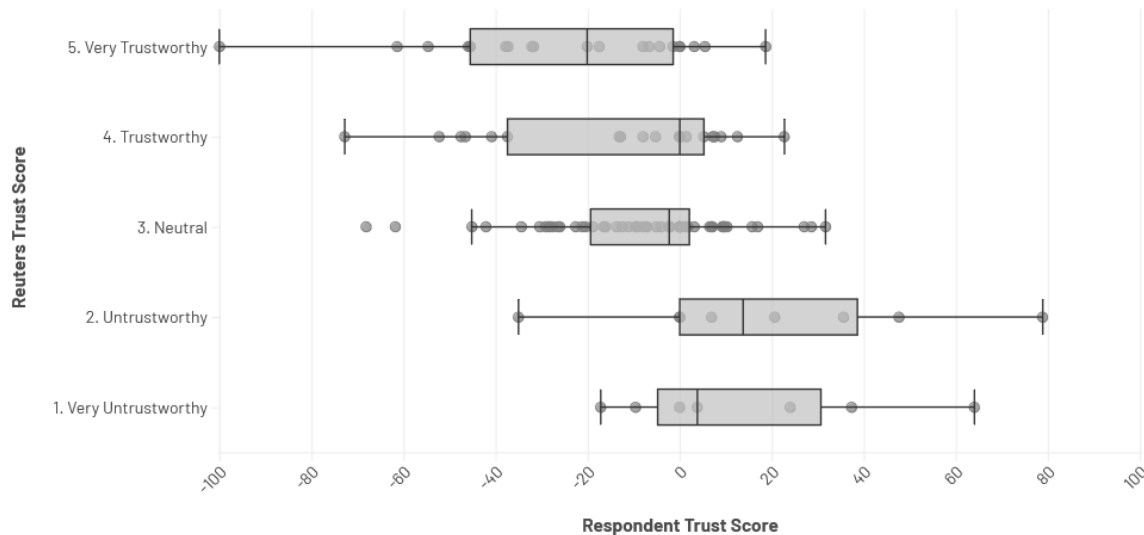

Figure 4. A greater trust in Reuters can be associated with a more left-leaning trust score, while a lower trust can be associated with a more right-leaning stance.

Another intriguing correlation lies in how the respondents viewed trust in Reuters, as shown in **Figure 4**. While Reuters is slightly left-leaning (as evident in my bias score), it is generally considered very reputable within the media industry, with a relatively centrist political stance and high factual accuracy. The majority of respondents rated Reuters as 3. Neutral, which could either indicate their indifference or show that they are not familiar with the outlet; however, the respondents who expressed an opinion shape a clear picture of polarising opinions across partisan groups. Respondents that rated Reuters as 5. Very Trustworthy or 4. Trustworthy tended to have a more left-leaning Respondent Bias Score, indicating they were more likely to be a Democrat. Similarly, respondents that rated Reuters as 1. Very Untrustworthy or 2. Untrustworthy tended to have a more right-leaning Respondent Bias Score, indicating they were more likely to be a Republican. This could be indicative of the general trend where Democrats typically trust a larger number of liberal/centrist news sources, while Republicans generally exhibiting greater distrust and skepticism of "mainstream media" (Pew Research Center, 2024), with their media trust primarily rooted in conservative media outlets such as Fox News (as can be seen in my results).

Using The Survey

Current efforts to tackle political polarisation typically work directly with individuals to produce results. Media literacy campaigns, which aim to empower people towards spotting biased media more effectively (Bulger & Davison, 2018), can certainly be effective, and have been frequently hailed as a "silver bullet solution" (Livingstone, 2018) for depolarisation efforts. Likewise, establishing heterogeneous relationships between individuals from "opposing" partisan groups aims to increase mutual understanding and de-escalate tensions between parties, a procedure that is beneficial for depolarisation efforts. However, efforts to reduce polarisation through changing individual media attitudes face significant challenges (Bulger & Davison, 2018), as mentioned earlier. While I strongly advocate for continued funding of such programs to better our society, I think it is crucial to address the potential flaws of current depolarisation methods, especially within the context of the survey.

The results of the survey indicate that general media consumption and trust is heavily skewed by political lean, and that this also further correlates with media trust. To exacerbate the issue, many of the largest media outlets in the United States, such as CNN and Fox News, display pronounced bias (as shown by my Media Bias Scores) that attracts distinct audiences based on political lean. However, the issue is this: any efforts that work directly with individuals, such as media literacy campaigns, can never tackle the issue of the media: the overarching cause of political polarisation (Bulger & Davison, 2018) (Livingstone, 2018). As highlighted by my survey results and analysis, it is the deep-rooted distrust of media networks that conflict with personal viewpoints that directly fuels affective polarisation. Individuals feel more comfort in engaging with and trusting sources that align with their own viewpoints, as it avoids the issue of cognitive dissonance (discussed above), a psychological phenomenon that education alone might struggle to change. While media literacy certainly equips individuals with the skills to identify bias in media, it does not prevent returning to the comfort of sensationalist media, which filters out opposing viewpoints. This can also lead to overconfidence, where individuals believe they are more proficient at identifying biased or misleading media than they are (Bulger & Davison, 2018), without realising that information they consider to be verifiable aligns closely with biased internal perceptions.

Ultimately, this means that a strong policy to reduce political polarisation in the United States should be directed more strongly towards the *media*, rather than towards *individuals*, and individual behaviour should change as a result of depolarising the media. Establishing bipartisan media sources that both parties can trust is an absolute priority. While a formidable challenge, considering the cultural landscape of the United States, as well as my survey's suggestion that even relatively neutral outlets face slight polarisation, it remains a necessary step to depolarise the media network of the United States. This could be done in various forms, such as imposing stricter regulation on existing private media outlets, or alternatively, investing much more heavily in public broadcasting services run by the government of the United States, with strict regulations on bias and factual accuracy. There are both extraordinary benefits and significant challenges that could arise by implementing such strategies.

Bipartisan Media

Imposing stricter regulation on existing networks could be a powerful tool for directly addressing the issue of media bias. Softening extreme narratives in highly polarised media has the subsequent effect of reducing the polarisation in individuals' own opinion and narratives, thus reducing polarisation and the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Arguedas et al., 2022). There are many notable examples of regulatory frameworks successfully being implemented in European countries, such as the BBC in the United Kingdom (Reuters Institute, 2024), as well as ARD and ZDF in Germany (Reuters Institute, 2024), where bipartisan media trust, regardless of political leaning, remains high.

Another key method that leverages the media to guide depolarisation efforts, in line with the conclusions of my survey mentioned earlier, is placing increased efforts on scaling public broadcasting services. The United States already has public broadcasting agencies, which are funded via government grants to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which distributes money to outlets (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, n.d.), notably, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). Public media outlets in the US are certainly a plausible solution to political polarisation, as they already provide an adaptable framework that can easily be scaled to meet a widespread audience. Public broadcasters have also been shown to be well-trusted across the US population (Pew Research Center, 2014), although they falter in raw viewer count when compared with other major broadcasters (Pew Research Center, 2014), meaning their reach can be limited. In the United States, public broadcasting is critically underfunded: around $3 per capita is typically allocated to public media, while in the UK, Germany and many other European countries, investment is typically at around $100+ per capita (CBC|Radio-Canada, 2013). Even moderate investments could provide significant benefits to the public media industry, accelerating depolarisation efforts by providing trusted news sources spanning partisan divides.

Implementation Challenges

One of the largest hurdles that would need to be overcome when implementing such systems in the United States is the cultural challenges associated with media regulation and expanding public media compared to many European countries. Unlike many European countries, American culture tends to strongly advocate for the deregulation and privatisation of many sectors (Heath, 2024) (Logani, 2019), including the media industry. However, in the context of political polarisation, it is precisely this deregulation and privatisation that is fragmenting US society along partisan lines (Heath, 2024). Therefore, any restrictions to the media may face significant backlash, and implementing media depolarisation efforts without significant political resistance is challenging.

To exacerbate the situation, media regulation and expanding public media is typically not viewed favourably by regulatory bodies either. A prime example of attitudinal shifts towards media deregulation is the abolishment of the Fairness Doctrine, which had previously required broadcasters to present unbiased views on sensitive issues (Logani, 2019). The decision effectively gave broadcasters free reign over the quality and bias in information they disseminate, marking a significant setback for depolarisation efforts in the United States. A key factor to note is that this decision was made unanimously by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who had regulated it, reflecting their emphasis on individualism and limited government intervention (Logani, 2019). Therefore, perhaps another point of concern is educating not only the general public, but also FCC commissioners about the threat of political polarisation to the integrity of the United States, and how softer media regulation strategies can still produce benefits without infringing on constitutional rights.

Further Strategies

To avoid clashing with the First Amendment of the Constitution and concerns over governmental oversight (Logani, 2019), which might cause political resistance, it is key that such methods are incorporated gradually and transparently, clearly articulating to the public how the changes are beneficial and in their interest.

Implementing a media regulation framework as restrictive as in many European countries is likely impossible. However, a method which may face a significantly higher chance of avoiding constitutional resistance is encouraging the media to adopt voluntary ethical standards. To incentivise this change, fact-checking organisations could be leveraged to provide monetary incentives, such as tax breaks, to outlets that adhere to standards for factual accuracy and centrist outlooks. However, there is the issue of defining and quantifying "bias" within legal terms, since it is a subjective term that could vary based on perspective. This issue could perhaps be addressed by establishing a panel of experts to review media bias, based on factors such as frequency of "loaded words" (Media Bias/Fact Check, n.d.), and use their findings to reward outlets.

Alternatively, methods of incentivising voluntary frameworks could be shifted to instead punish outlets which do not adopt them. For example, legislation could allow media outlets to only call themselves 'news sources' should they follow a set of guidelines detailing bias and factual accuracy requirements. It could also be made a requirement for broadcasting licences that outlets provide a news channel, with certain regulations about its bias and factual quality, alongside any sensationalist or extremist media. While political resistance may still persist, this strategy may face success if combined with awareness campaigns, which could emphasise how limited regulation is in the public interest as opposed to political or financial interests.

Depolarisation efforts can also be influenced by legal cases, and several notable media organisations have faced the consequences of publishing extremist or factually incorrect media. For example, in 2021, Dominion Voting Systems filed a lawsuit against Fox News, who had claimed in broadcasts that their machines manipulated votes in favour of Joe Biden during the 2020 US Election (Martinez, 2023). While Fox News argued that their coverage was opinion, and therefore allowed under the US Constitution, it was discovered that executives continued to permit the reporting of false information for financial gain (Debusmann Jr, 2023). The case was eventually settled for $787.5 million (Debusmann Jr, 2023), preventing it from reaching a trial. A similar case to this occurred with InfoWars,

which was sued into bankruptcy after the Sandy Hook shooting, where the outlet spread conspiracy theories that the "shooting was staged to take away US gun rights" (Spring, 2022). These cases highlight that media outlets cannot blindly broadcast anything that can be proven false, and perhaps more accountability and regulation may help to depolarise media networks further.

Conclusion

This study delves into how information on consumption and trust can be utilised to evaluate potential solutions to depolarise political discourse in the United States. Evidently, political polarisation is a large issue, and this is testimony to the significant cultural difficulties associated with the United States. The conflict between free speech dynamics and political polarisation makes depolarisation efforts a challenge unique to the United States, but one that can definitely be reduced with radical depolarisation efforts directed towards the media.

However, I am optimistic that mitigating the harmful political and social effects of polarisation is feasible, provided that the Democrats and Republicans are able to put aside differences and collaborate to implement nationwide depolarisation strategies. Public media desperately needs more funding and promotion, and the media world desperately needs further regulation to ensure its quality. An effective overall depolarisation strategy should leverage the strengths of all kinds of strategies, and media literacy campaigns could also do with further implementation and funding. Ultimately, reducing political polarisation is a formidable task, but one that must be tackled to ensure the political integrity and healthy discourse in the United States.

Limitations

While my methodology has certainly highlighted the strong correlation between media trust and political affiliation, there are still several limitations in the methodology that I should address. Most of the limitations of the results link to the fact that an online survey of this kind relies on a self-selected sample rather than a truly random sample, meaning there is inherently bias in the individuals that are assessed. To complete an online survey like this, respondents have to find the survey platform and understand how it works, including understanding the monetary incentive behind completing these surveys. This factor may naturally attract individuals with above average technical literacy, who may be more proficient in observing and avoiding biased media. Additionally, the urban distribution of Democrats versus Republicans may have influenced why there are almost 30% more Democrat respondents than Republican respondents. Democrats are more likely to live in urban areas (with a higher chance of internet access so they can find the survey), while Republicans are more likely to live in rural areas (where they may be less likely to find the survey).

Unfortunately, as an independent researcher, the cost of conducting a paid online survey is fairly significant per capita, and due to financial constraints I was unable to survey more people, which has left me with a relatively small sample size of 122. While viewpoints were sourced from across the United States, the sample size is not quite large enough to reliably generalise findings across the entire United States. Therefore, it should be noted that this study is intended to be exploratory rather than a definitive conclusion on the nature of political polarisation.

Acknowledgments

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