

PARTISAN MEDIA IN THE U.S.

DANGER OR OPPORTUNITY FOR THE POLITICAL CULTURE?

Stefan Burgdörfer

In the United States, the political debate is starkly divided into two opposing camps. This applies not only to party politics, where last summer the ideological differences between Republicans and Democrats brought the country to the brink of insolvency, but also to the media, which is becoming increasingly partisan. This political bias has become particularly noticeable on television. For years, TV stations provided the American people with “a homogenous and generic point-counterpoint perspective on the news, thus ensuring that exposure to the news was a common experience”.¹ But this situation has changed, with cable broadcaster *Fox News* addressing itself exclusively to its Republican clientele, while *MSNBC* caters to its more liberal audience. In the middle there is *CNN*, a broadcaster that has always prided itself on providing balanced reporting, and which has seen its ratings plummet as a direct result.² The obvious partisanship of the media seems to appeal to viewers.³ They are highly selective in their choice of media to suit their political views and are keen that the news



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- 1 | Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use”, *Journal of Communication*, 59, 2009, 19-39, here 20.
- 2 | It is only recently that the ratings have stabilised and began to increase slightly. Cf. Jesse Holcomb, Amy Mitchell and Tom Rosenstiel, “Cable: *CNN* Ends Its Ratings Slide, *Fox* Falls Again”, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (ed.), *The State of the News Media 2012*, 19 Mar 2012, <http://stateofthemedias.org/2012/cable-CNN-ends-its-ratings-slide-fox-falls-again/?src=prc-section> (accessed 6 Apr 2012).
- 3 | “Most Americans (58%) do not care if the news reflects their own viewpoint on politics and issues. But the minority of Americans that like the news to reflect their own views (36%) are highly selective in their choices of news outlets.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Online news audience larger, more diverse: News audience increasingly polarized*, Washington D.C., 2004, <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/215.pdf> (accessed 25 Mar 2012), 35.

channels should reflect their own opinions. On television, this trend first became noticeable in the mid-1990s, and it has now spread to the internet. Young people in particular tend to consciously turn to media sources that reflect their viewpoint or follow like-minded bloggers and journalists on Twitter and social networks such as Facebook and Google Plus. Then they share this news, which is in fact opinion and commentary, with their online community.

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As a result, there are now effectively two separate political debates being conducted. In the U.S., the media, the social networks and politicians are all increasingly talking *about* each other, but not *to* each other. This has led to the growth of a culture in which it is more and more difficult to conduct rational political debate. There is a declining amount of information that people on all sides accept as fact. Last year, when U.S. President Barack Obama was forced to hold up his birth certificate to the cameras – even if he accompanied this gesture with ironic comments – it became clear how a significant proportion of the American people had been swayed by biased reporting and the vehement rumours spread by Republican blogs and talk radio into believing – or believing it was at least a possibility – that Obama was not in fact an American citizen.⁴ Christoph von Marschall, Washington correspondent of the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*, concluded from this that the country was in a “combustible” situation because of this cultural divide: “Nowadays, people only communicate with their own political groups and there is hardly any exchange of ideas.”⁵

Many others in the USA are coming to the same conclusion and predicting an even more extreme degree of polarisation. But there are also observers who see a positive side to this development, pointing out that voter turnout has once again been on the rise, young people are increasingly taking a more active interest in politics and noting that the

4 | “A Certificate of Embarrassment”, *The New York Times*, 27 Apr 2011, <http://nytimes.com/2011/04/28/opinion/28thu1.html> (accessed 24 Mar 2012).

5 | Speech by Christoph von Marschall at the 11th International Conference for Political Communication (IKPK11) organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Berlin, 11 Oct 2011.

steady ratings of satirical TV shows such as those hosted by Jon Stewart and David Letterman are mainly made up of young viewers. They accuse journalists who are unwilling to commit to a particular political viewpoint of indifference and of not contributing to the democratic process.⁶ So is the increasing polarisation of the U.S. media and society a threat to democracy – or an opportunity?

Journalists who are unwilling to commit to a particular political viewpoint are accused of being indifferent. So is the increasing polarisation of the U.S. media and society a threat to democracy – or an opportunity?

POLITICS ON TV: AGITATION NOT INFORMATION

In February this year, after ten years as a political commentator on *MSNBC*, Pat Buchanan had his contract terminated by the leftist/liberal TV station. In his latest book, “Suicide of a Superpower”, Buchanan, a former advisor to U.S. presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan, evokes the dangers that are looming if the USA loses its white majority as a result of flawed immigration policies. It seems that the broadcaster deems him no longer acceptable to its exclusively liberal audience. News channels in the USA traditionally report live on daily political events by using “talking heads” to explain what is happening. With the departure of Buchanan, the *New York Times* expressed its fear that controversial debates on *MSNBC* would be less frequent: “A corporate allergy to controversy sometimes exists, even though controversy is what sometimes motivates channels to hire commentators and compels people to watch.”⁷ So the channel no longer wants to air views akin to those of Buchanan that run so contrary to the opinions of its viewers.

On the internet, the cable channel’s website and on social networks, many *MSNBC* viewers accused Buchanan of being an extremist and urged that the broadcaster not give him a forum for his views. *MSNBC*’s right-wing opposite numbers at *Fox News* reacted with glee to this news. Bill O’Reilly, whose show *The O’Reilly Factor* is the most viewed

6 | For an example of this argument, see: Michael Luciano, “The Problem With Bipartisanship”, *policymic*, <http://policymic.com/articles/5015/the-problem-with-bipartisanship> (accessed 16 Apr 2012). In addition a reader’s comment: “I think that people who are intensely partisan are usually just more honest.”

7 | Brian Stelter, “With Book, Buchanan Set His Fate”, *The New York Times*, 26 Feb 2012, <http://nytimes.com/2012/02/27/business/media/with-book-buchanan-set-his-fate.html> (accessed 23 Mar 2012).

political talk show on American television,⁸ commented that if extremists had to be fired, *MSNBC* would have nobody left to go on air. In the same broadcast, O'Reilly and his colleague, who was clearly on the same wavelength, even went so far as to say that firing Buchanan violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that protects freedom of speech. But then again, would *Fox News* ever entertain the idea of having a left-wing commentator on one of their shows?

Such a distinct bias has clearly been beneficial for the cable channel, which is part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. Since it started broadcasting in 1996, its ratings have climbed steadily and while they have fallen slightly since 2009, they are still much higher than those of *CNN* or *MSNBC*.⁹ *MSNBC*'s own figures have also risen since the channel was launched in 1996 as a joint venture between *NBC* und Microsoft, even though they are significantly lower than those of *Fox News*. The success brought about by having a

According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, people avoid taking in information that does not coincide with their preconceived ideas and beliefs.

particular political orientation, as at *MSNBC* and *Fox News*, as well as the growth in the number of clearly partisan internet sites can be explained by a theory first put forward in the 1950s by social psychologist Leon Festinger: the theory of cognitive dissonance. According to this theory, people avoid taking in information that does not coincide with their preconceived ideas and beliefs. In terms of media use, this type of behaviour has three potential effects: people selectively choose the media they want to use; they selectively take in information whilst using this media, which is to say that they choose not to read or not to listen to information that is not in line with their own views; and they even tend to selectively remember information, i.e. on a disproportionately high number of occasions they remember the information that they did not feel to be dissonant.¹⁰

8 | "Pat Buchanan kicked off *MSNBC*", YouTube, 27 Jan 2012, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=BUQOriImqf0> (accessed 27 Mar 2012).

9 | Ratings figures provided by Nielsen Media Research, quoted from Holcomb, Mitchell and Rosenstiel, n. 2.

10 | For more on the theory of Selective Exposure cf. Michael Schenk, *Medienwirkungsforschung*, Tübingen, 2002, 153-166.

These well-known and extensively researched effects can become an important economic consideration at a time when media outlets are becoming ever more differentiated. If a broadcaster adopts a clear position, it can become more attractive to those viewers with fixed political preferences who wish to avoid cognitive dissonance. "The new, more diversified information environment makes it not only more possible for consumers to seek out news they might find agreeable but also provides a strong economic incentive for news organizations to cater to their viewers' political preferences."¹¹

CNN, the broadcaster that officially claims to have the highest degree of journalistic objectivity, was only seen as having a high degree of credibility by 32 per cent of Americans questioned in a survey conducted in 2004.¹²

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While 45 per cent of pro-Democrat respondents claimed that they believed everything, or at least of most of what they saw on *CNN*, only 26 per cent of Republican supporters gave this answer. According to Bill O'Reilly at *Fox News*, this loss of credibility and subsequent loss of viewers is down to the logic of a changed media environment that *CNN* has not yet adjusted to. He believes that it is precisely this decision not to adopt a particular political stance at a time when there is increased political polarisation and a growing number of news channels that has brought about this loss of credibility: "We live in a very intense country, a very difficult time. *CNN* does not reflect that urgency. They basically report the news. And they do a good job. But people in the United States now, they know the news already, because they have the Internet, they have talk radio, a lot of vehicles, so they want analysis and perspective from a cable network, particularly in prime time. They don't want to hear [the news] again."¹³

CNN, for its part, does not want to give up the brand's core values and believe it is about more than just ratings. Richard Griffiths, *CNN*'s Senior Editorial Director, says it is

11 | Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 21.

12 | Cf. Pew Research Center, n. 3, 2.

13 | Jim Meyers, "O'Reilly: Obama Turning U.S. Into 'Nanny State'", *Newsmax.com*, 28 Mar 2010, <http://newsmax.com/Headline/oreilly-fox-obama-ailes/2010/03/28/id/354047> (accessed 6 Apr 2012).

still a matter of providing information that all viewers, irrespective of their political views, can believe in: "We're not going to throw that away simply for higher ratings or more viewers on the Web."¹⁴ Having said that, in recent years *CNN* has also offered more opinion and controversy in its programmes, in as much as it has started to employ journalists with more concrete political views and has increased the number of discussion programmes it broadcasts.¹⁵ Recently it has employed Ari Fleischer, former White House Press Secretary under George W. Bush, as an election commentator.

Most of the pro-Republican TV viewers like to suggest that, in general, the media in the USA have a left-wing bias. This viewpoint is what initially made the success of Fox News possible.

While *CNN's* viewer numbers have dropped significantly since the channel was launched and have largely stagnated in recent years, albeit with a slightly positive trend, *Fox News* has continued to attract substantial numbers of new viewers since its launch in 1996.¹⁶ "Fair and balanced news" was the *Fox News* slogan when it first appeared on American TV screens and it was not long before liberal viewers began pouring scorn on the channel. Meanwhile, the majority of pro-Republican TV viewers are quite happy with the political bias of their favourite broadcaster. They like to suggest that, in general, the media in the USA have a left-wing bias. This viewpoint and the dissatisfaction with this situation is what initially made the success of *Fox News* possible, not so much as a provocation to other news channels that were attempting to be objective, but as a corrective measure in the face of what was seen as a leftist-liberal mainstream within the media.¹⁷

14 | David Folkenflik, "Bias Or Balance? Media Wrestle With Faltering Trust", *NPR.org*, 23 Apr 2010, <http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126203294> (accessed 6 Apr 2012).

15 | There has also been some evidence of diversification at *Fox News*, which has recently poached journalists from *NPR* and *CNN*.

16 | Pew Research Center, n. 3, 5.

17 | There has been a similar discussion in Germany for decades now. Based on the perception that the media is generally biased towards the left of the democratic political spectrum, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann developed a spiral of silence theory back in the 1970s, which gained international recognition and is still the basis of much research today. According to the theory, the majority of society may not openly express their views on a political issue in public because the weight of media opinion reflects something different. The majority therefore sees itself as being in the minority and remains silent so as not to become socially isolated.

There is a widely-held perception that most media outlets largely represent left-wing views and fail to give sufficient airtime to opinions that are right of centre. Twice as many Republicans as Democrats consider the news channels of the three big networks *ABC*, *NBC* and *CBS*, the political weeklies and non-commercial radio stations, including the TV broadcaster *PBS* and the radio broadcaster *NPR*, to be politically biased.¹⁸ This scepticism runs so deep that it is sometimes actually to the benefit of Republican politicians to be severely criticised by the “mainstream media” in the USA. In 2008, the *New York Times* ran a story about a possible improper relationship between then Republican presidential candidate John McCain and a female lobbyist. The newspaper was criticised by all sides, not just the political right, because of its use of anonymous sources,¹⁹ and many Americans spontaneously came out in support of McCain. In the 24 hours following the publication of the story more contributions were made to McCain’s election campaign than on any day up to that point.²⁰

Buchanan, the Republican author fired by *MSNBC*, is himself critical of the growing polarisation within the political debate. He believes there is a “profound political and ideological divide that is getting almost impossible to close in this country”.²¹ In an interview on *Fox News* immediately after his split with *MSNBC*, he warned that “ideologically and politically we are at each other’s throats”. In Buchanan’s view, it is not those who use the media or the media companies themselves who are to blame for this polarisation, but the politicians, especially the Democrats. Underlying this view is an accusation regularly trotted out by the political right that U.S. President Obama in particular has less interest in

The Republican author Buchanan warned that “ideologically and politically we are at each other’s throats”. It is not those who use the media who are to blame for this polarisation, but the politicians.

18 | Pew Research Center, n. 3.

19 | Gabriel Sherman, “The Long Run-Up. Behind the Bombshell in ‘The New York Times’”, *The New Republic*, 21 Feb 2008, <http://tnr.com/article/politics/the-long-run?id=8b7675e4-36de-43f5-afdd-2a2cd2b96a24> (accessed 25 Mar 2012).

20 | Elisabeth Bumiller, “In Aftermath of Article, McCain Gathers Donations”, *The New York Times*, 23 Feb 2008, <http://nytimes.com/2008/02/23/us/politics/23mccain.html> (accessed 25 Mar 2012).

21 | “Pat Buchanan on why *MSNBC* fired him – Part 2 of 2”, YouTube, 19 Feb 2012, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=M8ksrG08VUg> (accessed 6 Apr 2012).

addressing key tasks and working on urgent issues than in using the media to conduct politically-motivated debates. They tend to view healthcare reforms or changes to the policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” regarding homosexuals serving in the military as being totally unnecessary and as jeopardising American values. While Europeans tend to see Obama as a president who does too little and who has either not implemented his intended reforms or has not implemented them thoroughly enough, the impression in America, especially amongst conservatives, is the exact opposite. According to them, he is doing too much, and they accuse him of being motivated purely by ideology.²² At a time when the Republican Mitt Romney was campaigning to beat his rivals in the race for his party’s presidential nomination – a race in which every candidate is trying to prove he is more conservative than the other – Buchanan was still of the opinion that it is not the Republicans who are to blame for the current political polarisation. Buchanan believes that if Obama were to win another term in office things would actually get worse: “I think if the President of the United States is re-elected we will have a deadlock, a gridlock for the next four years that we had in 2011 and we will have in 2012 because he is out campaigning all that time.”²³

NEWSPAPERS ARE LOSING CREDIBILITY AND CIRCULATION

A loss of trust in traditional media, especially newspapers, has contributed significantly to the growth in partisan news channels and blogs and deepened the financial crisis in the American newspaper market. For years now, newspapers have been suffering from declining circulation and falling revenues. Between 2006 and 2009 alone, revenues fell by 23 per cent.²⁴ Public belief in the accuracy of reported facts in American newspapers has also declined dramatically. In 1985, 55 per cent of those questioned by the Pew Research Center agreed with the statement “Newspapers get the

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22 | Marschall, n. 5.

23 | YouTube, n. 21.

24 | Markus Horeld, “US-Zeitungen: Bedrohlich nah am freien Fall”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 Mar 2009, <http://tagesspiegel.de/medien/medienkrise-us-zeitungen-bedrohlich-nah-am-freien-fall/1477126.html> (accessed 10 Apr 2012).

news straight”, while in 2009 this number had fallen to only 29 per cent.²⁵

It may be fair to assume that their own desire to remain objective is what has actually harmed newspapers. The fact that many papers are regional is one reason they cannot afford to address solely one specific political group amongst their readers. The USA is almost entirely made up of areas with just one regional newspaper, so it would be highly unusual for there to be two rival regional papers that could adopt different political stances. The end result is that papers tend to report on all political issues in an independent and critical manner and don't actively support one political viewpoint over another, something which can lead to them becoming more and more unpopular amongst an increasingly politically polarised readership.

Newspapers that report on all political issues in an independent and critical manner are becoming more and more unpopular amongst an increasingly politically polarised readership.

Particularly amongst Republican-minded readers, U.S. press approval ratings – which the Pew Research Center has been tracking since 1985 – have been steadily declining. The main complaint is that newspapers report too negatively on the United States. In 1985, 34 per cent of Republicans believed this to be the case, which was not so different to the Democratic figure of 25 per cent, but since then the gap has widened. In 2009, 60 per cent of Republicans polled believed that American newspapers were too negative about their country, while only 33 per cent of Democrats believed this to be the case. This would explain the high approval ratings for the news channels on cable television, *Fox News*, *MSNBC* and *CNN*, which are strictly divided according to the political orientation of the respondents. The 72 per cent approval rating enjoyed by *Fox News*²⁶ is clear evidence that partisanship is valued by media consumers. This provides broadcasters with a sound viewer base, so they can happily do without the approval of people on the other side of the political divide.

25 | Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (ed.), “Press Accuracy Rating Hits Decade Low. Public Evaluation of the News Media: 1985-2009”, 13 Sep 2009, <http://people-press.org/2009/09/13/press-accuracy-rating-hits-two-decade-low> (accessed 10 Apr 2012).

26 | Ibid.

POLARISATION IN THE MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Even before newspaper approval ratings began their rapid decline, communication researchers in the USA were publishing data indicating that political polarisation was growing. When asked about their political orientation, an ever larger number of people placed themselves firmly at one end or the other of the political spectrum, from right-wing Republicans to left-wing Democrats.²⁷ At the same time, there was an increase in the number of respondents of the opposite political persuasion who viewed the incumbent U.S. president negatively: "In fact, polarized assessments of presidential performance are higher today than at any other time in recent history, including the months preceding the resignation of President Nixon."²⁸ The reasons for this clearly lie in the interaction between a partisan media and a polarised public, according to Paul Starr, writing in the liberal magazine *Atlantic*: "On both ends of the political spectrum, people interested in politics increasingly view national leadership through the prism of the partisan media that dominate cable news, talk radio, and the blogosphere."²⁹

The study of Iyengar and Hahn published in 2009 showed that conservatives and Republicans preferred to read reports that were ascribed to *Fox News* and tended to ignore news from *CNN* and *NPR*, while Democrats and liberals behaved in exactly the opposite manner. Researchers concluded "that the further proliferation of new media and enhanced media choices may contribute to the further polarization of the news audience".³⁰ They referred to an earlier study from 2002, which concluded that "the impression of mass polarization may reflect the nomination of extreme rather than centrist candidates, and an electorate that votes along party lines".³¹ But the opposite could also be true. Are parties who put forward extreme candidates (Tea Party) simply following the perceived radicalisation of the media? Have the media simply picked up on the polarisation of the public in order to improve their ratings and

27 | Cf. Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 20.

28 | Ibid.

29 | Paul Starr, "Governing in the Age of Fox News", *The Atlantic*, Jan 2010, <http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/01/governing-in-the-age-of-fox-news/7845> (accessed 6 Apr 2012).

30 | Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 19.

31 | Layman und Carsey quoted by Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 19.

page impressions,³² or has the power of the media resulted in Americans actually adopting the intransigent attitudes of their preferred broadcasters?

Even though the data on growing partisanship is somewhat older than that on public dissatisfaction with media reporting, it is difficult to say where the polarisation originated – in the media or in society as a whole.

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But what we can say is that the interaction between the two spheres, broadcasters and viewers, has resulted in this trend taking on a life of its own: “When the audience is polarized, ‘news with an edge’ makes for market success.”³³

The phenomenon of U.S. citizens choosing specific media along partisan lines, with most arguing that this is the only place to find objective reporting, has been researched in more detail recently. One of the main causes could be what is known as Hostile Media Perception (HMP): “HMP posits that as individuals increase in levels of partisanship, they also increase in the perception that the media is hostile towards their group or position.”³⁴ Matthew Baum and Phil Gussin conducted research into this effect, in which they showed participants a specially-produced TV program about the 2004 U.S. presidential elections. They then claimed that the program had been made either by *CNN* or by *Fox News*. The result was that participants who preferred *Fox News* from an ideological standpoint considered the report to be objective and accurate when they were told it had indeed been made by *Fox News*. However, participants from this group rejected the same report when they thought it had been made by *CNN*. The authors concluded “that viewers

32 | A page impression (PI) is the unit of measurement for the success of an internet site. It measures how many pages of an internet site an individual user has looked at. Also important is the number of unique visitors, which shows how many visitors a site has overall (excluding those visitors who revisit a site after a certain period). The cost of internet advertising however has been linked increasingly to the PI in recent years, which helps to explain the growing number of picture galleries or articles spread over several pages, as each click increases the number of PIs.

33 | Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 34.

34 | R. Trevor Hall and James C. Phillips, “The Fairness Doctrine in Light of Hostile Media Perception”, *CommLaw Conspectus*, Vol. 19, 2011, 411.

utilized the cognitive shortcut of a media outlet's reputation to make judgments about media bias, which led to the perception of a bias where none existed".³⁵

SELF-REFERENTIAL SYSTEMS? EXCHANGING INFORMATION VIA SOCIAL NETWORKS

At the end of the 1990s, optimists were stressing that the internet would make it possible to be involved in debates that did not include a pre-determined hierarchy of participants, thereby allowing the best arguments to prevail.

From the very beginning, the internet aroused both hopes and fears when it came to its potential influence on political communication. At the end of the 1990s, optimists were stressing that the internet would expand the marketplace of ideas and make life easier for anyone who was looking for political information and was keen to exchange views with a large group of people, even when separated by great distances. It would also make it possible for people to be involved in debates that did not include a pre-determined hierarchy of participants, in this way allowing the best arguments to prevail. More pessimistic observers however pointed to the potentially negative consequences for democratic opinion-forming and political discourse, saying that the internet would make it much easier for people to avoid opinions and information that were not in line with their own beliefs and instead only have contact with those who espoused their beliefs.

Very few Americans exclusively use the internet to keep themselves informed (two per cent). But younger people use the web more than older people, retrieve information from a wider range of sources and frequently ignore the classic online media in favour of following individual journalists and bloggers on Facebook and Twitter.³⁶ This type of media use will continue to grow, and will have an impact on the quality of the political debate: "The importance of source cues³⁷ to news exposure and the resulting 'reinforcement of priors' effect will only grow as technology diffuses and consumers increasingly customize their online news menus. [...] Internet technology will, in practice,

35 | Ibid., 414.

36 | Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (ed.), "Understanding the participatory news consumer. News and the internet", 1 Mar 2010, http://journalism.org/analysis_report/news_and_internet (accessed 6 Apr 2012).

37 | What is meant here is the use of additional sources to evaluate the news.

narrow rather than widen users' political horizons. [...] The end result is likely to be a less informed and more polarized electorate."³⁸

However, the influence of the internet on this growing political polarisation should not be overrated. The majority of forums are not political, and social networks can just as easily bring people together as cause divisions. What is interesting is that, more often than one might expect, people who frequent chat rooms to discuss hobbies end up discussing political issues; thus people of different political persuasions end up talking to each other.³⁹ Social networks are also likely to have less of a polarising influence than is generally assumed, because those who register with Facebook and Google Plus are often of an age where their political opinions are not yet fully formed. These form a network from among their social sphere – school, sports club, family, etc. If people they know begin developing diverging political views and decide to express them, the Facebook user will receive these messages via newsfeed, whether they agree with them or not. The average Facebook user has 190 "friends",⁴⁰ and it is very unlikely that he or she will share the political views of all these people.

Social networks are also likely to have less of a polarising influence than is generally assumed. Those who join Facebook are often of an age where their political opinions are not yet fully formed.

BLOGS: AGITATION RATHER THAN TALKING SHOPS?

So although social networks may be used for the exchange of differing viewpoints, the majority of political blogs in the U.S. do not feel it is their task to facilitate the exchange of different opinions. Liberal and so-called progressive blogs, such as MoveOn.org and DailyKos.com, are just as unlikely to allow people with different ideas have their say as Republican-conservative blogs like FreeRepublic.com and InstaPundit.com. According to a survey by the George Washington University, 94 per cent of the readers of political

38 | Iyengar and Hahn, n. 1, 34.

39 | Magdalena E. Wojcieszak and Diana C. Mutz, "Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement?", *Journal of Communication*, 59, 2009, 50.

40 | Lars Backstrom, "Anatomy of Facebook", Facebook, 22 Nov 2011, <http://facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-team/anatomy-of-facebook/10150388519243859> (accessed 1 Apr 2012).

blogs read exclusively those blogs that reflect one side of the political spectrum.⁴¹ The authors concluded that: "Both sides of the ideological spectrum inhabit largely cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance, thereby creating little opportunity for a substantive exchange across partisan or ideological lines."⁴²

The polarisation of the DailyKos blog is vigorously defended in the dKosopedia, the political online encyclopaedia used by the blog's readers. Here the DailyKos blog is described by one reader as "primarily a Democratic site, with a heavy emphasis on progressive politics. It is not intended for Republicans, or conservatives. [...] This is not a site to debate conservative talking points. There are other sites for that. This is not a site for conservatives and progressives to meet and discuss their differences. There are other sites for that, too. [...] Conservative debaters are not welcome simply because the efforts here are to define and build a progressive infrastructure, and conservatives can't help with that. There is, yes, the danger of the echo chamber, but a bigger danger is becoming simply a corner bar where everything is debated, nothing is decided, and the argument is considered the goal."⁴³

Those who consume political content online generally still use established news sites rather than blogs. Usually they turn to the offshoots of their preferred print media.

The role of blogs in forming political opinion, however, is still somewhat limited, as those Americans who consume political content online generally still use established news sites rather than blogs, usually turning to the offshoots of their preferred news channels or print media. Studies have shown that the content of these pages does not differ significantly from the front pages of newspapers. The choice of topics is similar, and the amount of opinion or commentary on their home pages is similar to that on the front pages of the newspapers.⁴⁴ The main differences tend to be in the

41 | Eric Lawrence, John Sides and Nehry Farrell, *Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics*, 10 Mar 2009, Department of Political Science, George Washington University, Washington D.C.

42 | *Ibid.*, 16.

43 | "Troll rating", last amended by the user Thruthofangels on 24 Jul 2008, http://dkosopedia.com/wiki/Troll_rating (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

44 | Cf. Scott R. Maier, "Newspaper Offer More News Than Do Major Online Sites", *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter 2010.

length of the articles (newspaper articles are significantly longer) and the number of sources quoted (internet articles tend to reference more sources). Bloggers and commentators almost always refer to the original source, which in the majority of cases is the traditional media anyway.⁴⁵ The reader is therefore in a position to check the facts. The argument is that this frees the blogger from the journalistic burden of having to be as objective as possible: transparency is the “new objectivity”.⁴⁶

POLITICAL REACTION TO BIAS IN THE MEDIA

The media’s political polarisation has resulted in some politicians boycotting them. These politicians not only tend to favour those media outlets that share their political views, but they are also inclined to turn down interviews or live appearances on opposing channels, either on some pretext or other, or by offering openly confrontational reasons for their decision. Even the White House has evinced this behavior. In September 2009, President Obama visited five TV channels to promote his healthcare reforms, but the channel with the most viewers, *Fox News*, was not amongst them. The White House Communications Director at the time, Anita Dunn, was quite open about their reservations regarding the conservative broadcaster: “It’s opinion journalism masquerading as news. [...] They are boosting their audience. But that doesn’t mean we are going to sit back.”⁴⁷ A study carried out at the time indicated she was correct. The level of awareness of TV viewers who were asked about the President’s proposed healthcare policies served to illustrate the extent to which

In September 2009, President Obama visited five TV channels to promote his healthcare reforms, but the channel with the most viewers, Fox News, was not amongst them.

45 | Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (ed.), “New media, old media. How blogs and social media agendas relate and differ from the traditional press”, 23 May 2012, <http://journalism.org/node/20621> (accessed 16 Apr 2012).

46 | Cf. Mathew Ingram, “Is transparency the new objectivity? 2 visions of journos on social media”, Nieman Journalism Lab, 28 Sep 2009, <http://niemanlab.org/2009/09/is-transparency-the-new-objectivity-2-visions-of-journos-on-social-media> (accessed 24 Mar 2012).

47 | Michael Scherer, “Calling ‘Em Out: The White House Takes on the Press”, *Time Magazine*, 8 Oct 2009, <http://time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1929220,00.html> (accessed 22 Mar 2012).

the media fed citizens disinformation.⁴⁸ 52 per cent of those asked assumed that the planned healthcare reforms would mean that illegal immigrants would also be covered, and yet such far-reaching measures had never been proposed by the government. Depending on the particular TV channel, the level of disinformation was more clear cut: 72 per cent of *Fox News* viewers believed that illegal immigrants would be covered, while only 41 per cent of *MSNBC* and *CNN* viewers thought this was the case.⁴⁹ At the time, the White House was seeking to gain broad support for its reforms amongst politicians and the public as a whole, so it reacted angrily to the way *Fox News* reported the issue.

Not unexpectedly, *Fox News* reacted with rancour to Anita Dunn's strategic positioning and open criticism. But it didn't end there: liberal commentators and those voices calling for more journalistic objectivity also criticised her actions, and they continue to criticise this ongoing trend to this day. The danger that such an attitude poses to the democratic exchange of ideas was accurately summed up by liberal blogger Jason Salzman

"With the major media in decline, and more small outlets lining up along ideological lines, many people are less likely to hear from elected officials they disagree with", the blogger Jason Salzman wrote.

of Colorado. When the Republican politician Scott Gessler declined to be interviewed either by him or other liberal media such as the *Colorado Independent*, he wrote: "With the major media in decline, and more small outlets lining up along ideological lines, many people are less likely to hear from elected officials they disagree with. Progressives, for example, who consume news from progressive news outlets, won't be hearing from Scott Gessler directly any time soon, it appears. That's not good, and you have to think it will get worse, because, politically, Gessler can write off the left [...]."⁵⁰ Polarisation, he wrote, can only get worse under these circumstances.

48 | Chuck Todd et al., "First thoughts: Obama's good, bad news", *First Read (NBC)*, 19 Aug 2009, http://firstread.MSNBC.msn.com/_news/2009/08/19/4431138-first-thoughts-obamas-good-bad-news (accessed 22 Mar 2012).

49 | Ibid.

50 | Jason Salzman, "Should Elected Leaders Talk to All Journalists, Even Rabid Ones?", *Huffington Post*, 21 Mar 2012, http://huffingtonpost.com/jason-salzman/elected-officials-media-interviews_b_1367182.html (accessed 22 Mar 2012).

CONCLUSION: DANGER OR OPPORTUNITY?

The growing media bias in the U.S. has made a significant contribution to the spread of a climate of political tension. However, by polarising society, it has also helped to mobilise voters. This has had a positive impact that should not be underestimated – more and more people in the U.S. are once again turning out to vote and are prepared to publicly, and sometimes passionately, defend their political views. “After a long decline, voter turnout in the 2004 and 2008 elections returned to levels America hadn’t seen in 40 years. [...] Democracy needs passion, and partisanship provides it”, wrote Paul Starr.⁵¹

Indifference towards politicians, parties and their goals has become less common. In this respect, the polarisation of Americans, which is closely linked to growing political bias in the media and to different, much more selective patterns of behaviour when it comes to media use, can be seen not only as a danger to democracy, but also as an opportunity. It is clear that a lively culture of debate on the internet and on TV can lead to significant polarisation, but also to a higher level of involvement – even if people are not actually talking to each other in the forums and programmes (which in theory would be even better in terms of the democratic process) but only about each other.

The polarisation of the U.S. people can be seen not only as a danger to democracy, but also as an opportunity. It is clear that a lively culture of debate on the internet can lead to a higher level of involvement.

As society becomes more polarised, there is a tendency for the media to report in great detail on those topics that are particularly controversial. This can be a positive for democracy, particularly if this kind of reporting results in people taking issues seriously and being prepared to discuss them. However, the most controversial topics are not necessarily the ones that are the most urgent, so the trend towards controversy can sometimes be at the expense of relevance. *Tagesspiegel* correspondent von Marschall comments: “The crime with the most victims in recent times, the massacre in Oakland, where both the perpetrator and the victims were Korean, was only a lead news item for 36 hours. In contrast, the debate over a possible racist motive in the killing of the 17-year old Trayvon Martin in Florida

51 | Starr, n. 29. The author continues: “Journalism needs passion, too, though the passion should be for the truth.”

has been making headlines in America for over three weeks now."⁵² As a result, the U.S. has been discussing latent and open racism within its borders for weeks now, and rightly so. But what is strange is the way this is being done. Early on, TV channels and newspapers came down on the side of either the perpetrator or the victim, and then failed to report any information that would be exonerating for the other camp. Right-wing, conservative media went as far as to suggest that the clothing the black young man was wearing was partly to blame: because he was wearing a hoodie, it wasn't easy to see his face and he was therefore obviously suspicious. The liberal media were happy to seize on this, showing photos of celebrity hoodie wearers including Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, teenage star Justin Bieber and Prince Harry, and asking whether their clothes also made them suspicious. When understood and practiced in this way, the polarisation of media and society certainly does nothing to further the cause of democracy in the U.S.

52 | Christoph von Marschall, "Amerikanische Farbenlehre. Nach den Morden an Schwarzen geht die Debatte um Rassismus weiter", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 11 Apr 2012, <http://tagesspiegel.de/weltspiegel/amerikanische-farbenlehre-nach-den-morden-an-schwarzen-geht-die-debatte-um-rassismus-weiter/6493380.html> (accessed 13 Apr 2012).