

Charting a Course for Research of Social Media Polarization | Items

By Jaime Settle

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Jaime Settle discusses her new book, *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarize America* in the [Democracy Papers](#) on [Items](#). She briefly lays out her theory of polarization and social media, emphasizing the importance of seemingly unpolitical posts and of exposure to the political opinions of people with whom we share only weak social ties.

Americans have good reason to be alarmed at the extent to which social media sites have been harnessed for pernicious purposes. Media coverage has focused largely on the ways foreign countries, bots, and candidates have deployed social media to their advantage, fanning the flames of partisan polarization for their own benefit. Conversely, much of the recent scholarship on homophily, fake news, and social media has found that individuals frequently spread mis- and disinformation independent of foreign actors, that social media actually increases exposure to outside viewpoints, and that the majority of people report not participating in political social media exchanges. However, both of these views have provided insufficient attention to the intersection between social media and human psychology, particularly to the nonpolitical ways individuals signal their partisan affiliation, the complicated consequences of online exposure to alternative viewpoints, and the increasingly negative and personal associations social media users pin to those with opposing viewpoints.

In this regard, a shift in our conceptual framework—starting with the way people actually use social media instead of imposing our offline theories onto novel, online behavior—is important no matter what facet of social media political behavior we seek to explain.

In my book, [Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America](#), I show that in the context of increasing partisan polarization among American political elites, the radical change brought by social media to the way people express their political identities, access information, and communicate with each other about politics has

fostered people's increasingly negative feelings toward those who identify with the opposing party.

[...]

There are a multitude of ways in which social media facilitates adverse consequences for the American political system, and many of these threats must be addressed by technology companies or government action. But Americans should not abdicate their responsibility as citizens, as we all play a role in shaping the public sphere. The choices we make on social media—what to post, what to click, and what to infer—should be made deliberately and in a manner informed by what social scientists have learned about the consequences of our actions.

Source: [Charting a Course for Research of Social Media Polarization | Items](#)