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Affective Polarizations Role in Retaining a Misinformed Public

Jacob Johnston

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JACOB T. JOHNSTON

Abstract

Affective polarization and the retention of mistaken beliefs share a common mediator. The media. Both are extremely similar in terms of confidence in their beliefs and the tipping point associated when trying to break away from these mistaken or affectively polarized beliefs. By proving the relationship between both implies a bigger actor in utilizing both as a means of building media strength and solidifying its audience. That affective polarizations effect on causing a retention of mistaken beliefs is a devastating strategy utilized by media sources. This relationship is already seen with misinformation, as people largely go back to believing their mistaken beliefs, regardless if they have been proven otherwise previously with correct information. Alongside Mason, Lilliana's definition of Partisan-Ideological Sorting, this hints that affectively polarized beliefs should act similarly to mistaken beliefs over time, even if correct information was already heeded to previously.

Keywords: affective polarization, partisan-ideological sorting, misinformed beliefs, tipping point, media

Introduction

The effect of misinformation upon the public and its solidifying affect alongside prior beliefs or preferences is a problem. When a person confidently holds onto mistaken beliefs, they are a victim of misinformation. Therefore, the harder it will be for them to accept correct information from any source. However, each person does have a tipping point in which they realize they were misinformed. This is of course great news in combating misinformation. Although, it has been shown that those who reached this tipping point, eventually go back to

accepting misinformation again. Prior beliefs and preferences do play a role in this, but the prevalence of this retention would not be complete without another causal factor. The media. As the media is a mediator in both spreading misinformation and affective polarization then surely there must be some overlap. The overlap appears in the retention of misinformation due to the strength of prior beliefs or preferences and media sources promoting affectively polarized beliefs. This then leads into the primary question of how does affective polarization relate to the retention of mistaken beliefs among individuals that previously recognized they have been misinformed?

Currently the only causes of the retention of mistaken beliefs among individuals that had prior knowledge of having been misinformed are the strengths of prior beliefs and preferences. There seems to be a missing link though in this correlation. The public usually does not consider politics to be of the upmost importance. Therefore, the likelihood that these individuals were only influenced by their own prior beliefs or preferences is rather low. Not to say that prior beliefs or preferences do not influence this retention, but something else needs to have pushed these individuals back. The most logical choice considering the topic area must be the media, as it is a massive influencer on political opinion and behavior. This correlation also implies another finding between media and misinformation. That it is possible that media sources are utilizing affective polarization in such a way to keep its viewers coming back, which properly aligns with the phenomenon of this retention of mistaken beliefs and affectively polarized individuals. This is because these individuals are no longer concerned with their own core beliefs, but those of the opposing party. Hence, solidifying their confidence within their party and increasing the likelihood of their retention, even if they can break away from these beliefs.

Literature Review

Affective polarization, misinformation, and media influence seem to all tie in together. What is known about these topics certainly implies this. Affective polarization, otherwise known as negative emotions deriving from combining social identity with political ideology is becoming an increasing problem in today's political behavior. Another term that conceptualizes this is partisan-ideological sorting, which essentially states that as a person begins to associate social identity more so with political ideology, then the more likely they are to associate anger along with their partisanship. Otherwise known as negative partisanship, this is further illustrated as, "Partisan-Ideological sorting is capable of encouraging an increasingly angry and enthusiastic electorate" (Mason, 2018, p.93). This is due to its ability to make people under the influence of affective polarization less concerned with their own core beliefs and more so concerned with their oppositions beliefs. This is also shown when, "a growing proportion of Americans dislike the opposing party more than they like their own party" (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, p.21).

More specifically in making sure that the other partisanship loses no matter what, rather than supporting their own. This is certainly problematic as political behavior in this sense is no longer political. Rather it is the bickering of both sides about how the other is wrong because they are not the same. There is no healthy argument or discussion about political issues or events when this is involved, but rather just the creation of a lot of noise through anger towards the opposition. A helpful illustration of this can be relating this to a Super Bowl game. However, instead of supporting one team and occasionally insulting the other team. It is comprised of mostly insulting the other team and either showing happiness if the other team loses or anger if not. This is also seen when the people affectively polarized, "react to threat, anger, and the strength of a whole cohort of identities that are increasingly harmonized. When individuals

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participate in politics driven by team spirit or anger, the responsiveness to the electorate is impaired" (Mason, 2000, p.126).

This anger originates from the definition of affective polarization seen above. Normally differences in political ideologies or partisanships do not create such negative emotions that are seen today towards the opposition. It is the overlap of social identity that introduces the notion of emotion and anger. When a person talks politically against a certain issue or candidate without overlapping with social identity, it can be a healthy discussion or argument. Thus, healthy politics in its most simple form. However, when social identity is included, any slight made against that person's political ideology or partisanship is automatically an attack against them as a person. Therefore, introducing the negative emotions that can come from that. This is also seen as, "the robust presence of an ingrained prejudice that grows out of the increasing alignment between partisan, ideological, racial, and religious social identities" (Mason, 2000, p.77).

As for the noise that this can create, it appears to be a relation of both misinformation and media. The noise is the ranting among those under the influence of affective polarization and those attempting to spread it further through media or social media. Misinformation can be described as simply not the full story or not all the information on a certain topic. More than likely it is just enough information to spin a story in favor of the media showing it. However, that will be discussed later as to why or how media sources do this. The primary factor of misinformation that more than likely relates to affective polarization is its ability to create extreme confidence within the belief of misinformation. As seen above affective polarization introduces extreme negative emotions towards different partisanships. Hence, these people are likely to accept misinformation that aligns with their affective polarized beliefs more so than the average affectively unpolarized individual.

The primary reason for this confidence is shown to be the strength of prior beliefs and preferences, which can also easily align with affective polarized beliefs or preferences. Nonetheless, the longer an individual believes in misinformation the more confident that person is in that information. Also, depending on that person's knowledge level on that certain topic, influences if they are successfully misinformed or not, this can be described as a sort of, "distillation of a person's lifetime experiences" (Zaller, 1992, p.23). Therefore, the less politically informed or sophisticated an individual is, the more likely they are to be confident in the misinformation provided to them. There is another association with belief however and it comes from if they are naturally untrusting of media sources, which is becoming a new phenomenon because of disinformation or fake news. This is seen in Tuckner, et al., as they, "identified 400,000 bots responsible for posting about 3.8 million tweets during the last month of 2016 U.S. presidential elections, … Reports from, among others, NBC News, WIRED, Wall Street Journal, and CNN, give ample qualitative evidence of bot and troll activity, including setting up Facebook groups; attempting to organize offline events; and spreading highly explosive and divisive messages on racial relations, gun and abortion rights, etc" (Tuckner et al., 2018, p.31). Not only does this make people wary of where their information is coming from, but also has the capability to increase confidence in the media that they regularly utilize. Thus, further solidifying confidence in misinformation from their prior or preferential media sources, while creating paranoia towards different and even informative sources. In conjunction with political unsophistication and if the misinformation provided aligns with past beliefs or preferences. This adds onto the already difficult task of informing the citizenry, as fake news can increase confidence in familiar media sources, which may or may not be reliable, and increase confidence in the misinformation provided, especially if they are politically uninformed.

It has been discussed as to why certain people accept misinformation more than others, but it is also important to note that those of less political sophistication are also more susceptible to be more confident in their misinformation than those with more political knowledge. The difference in levels of confidence matters primarily because it increases the difficulty for an individual to accept correct information. In other words, it raises their tipping point of realizing that they were misinformed and were wrong in their confidence of that certain information. Everyone has a different tipping point relating to political misinformation due to the factors discussed earlier. This has been illustrated through misinformation's alignment with either prior beliefs or preferences and the political knowledge that a person holds, which can make it easier to question information received more so than others. This also relates to how easily or difficult it is for an individual to be affectively polarized.

Not only are levels of political sophistication indicators of if a person has a lower likelihood or not to accept misinformation, but also that a less informed individual has a higher likelihood to fall into the trap of affective polarization. Primarily due to the notion that it is easier to hate the other sides beliefs, rather than supporting and understanding their own partisanships beliefs. This negative emotion can even over power a person's ability to recognize change in their own partisan's core beliefs. Thus, setting an unfortunate course for American politics because if this gains more strength then it may even shape how politics are conducted in a way to accommodate for this affect. Hence, how is this avoided or fixed?

Unfortunately, if misinformation is correlated with affective polarization then fixing this issue might not be enough. It has been shown that if or when an individual reaches their tipping point and accepts that they were wrong in their confidence of a misinformed belief. This is largely shown to be temporary (Sturgis et al., 2005). Primarily due to people eventually falling

back into the habit of picking up their prior beliefs and preferences. That, "unless they are "hit in between the eyes" with the right facts, they continue to judge policy on the basis of their mistaken beliefs" (Kuklinski, 2000, p.810). Regardless, this is most of the time not enough to prevent a person from falling back into believing mistaken beliefs once again due to the strength of their prior beliefs and preferences. Hence, "the polarization that our politics must confront is thus not just over issues and public policy, but over reality itself" (Flynn, et al., 2017, p.144).

However, this by itself does not make the best argument as something seems to be missing from this puzzle of why. The public are usually not that interested in politics in general. People usually do not sit in their home and brood over politics in such a way that would make them go back to believing misinformation. Hence, there should be another factor here that is not mentioned or measured. From the previous arguments over the importance of affective polarization and misinformation it can be inferred that this mediator is in fact the media.

It is no secret that media sources can feed misinformation to its viewers to uphold a certain viewpoint within their programming. The best examples of this can be seen with Fox news or MSNBC. One is the extreme right and the other the extreme left. Their methods either are agenda setting, priming, or framing. Agenda setting is essentially, media controlling what the public sees as the most important news at the time and altering it accordingly as the media source sees fit. Thus, setting the publics priorities depending on the agenda that the media source is attempting to adhere to. This is also defined as, "television news shapes the American public's political priorities. These effects appear to be neither momentary, as our experimental results indicate, nor permanent, as our time-series results reveal. All told our evidence implies an American public with a limited memory for last month's news and a recurrent vulnerability to

today's. When television news focuses on a problem, the public's priorities are altered, and altered again as television news moves on to something new" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p.33).

Then there is priming, which for example is when a media source makes the people watching dictate if something that a president is doing is either good or bad. Thus, assigning the publics evaluation of a president by his actions as dictated by the media source. This can otherwise be described as, "the influence of television news coverage on Americans' assessments of presidential performance depends partly on how the news portrays his responsibilities. As shown here, stories implying that the president is responsible for a national problem are more powerful in two respects: they lead viewers to greater certainty about his performance on that problem, and they induce viewer to attach greater importance to that performance in evaluating the president overall" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p.88).

Lastly, there is framing. Framing utilizes the method of dumbing down a very complex issue in a way to influence the watchers. Instead of stressing a certain side of a story as priming does, framing just focuses on one or two aspects of the story to influence its viewers. This is also described as, "frames shape individual understanding and opinion concerning an issue by stressing specific elements or features of the broader controversy, reducing a usually complex issue down to one or two central aspects" (Nelson et al., 1997, p.568).

As for why media sources do this, the reasons are numerous. The two most obvious in the media industry are money and power. However, more specifically it could be elites influencing mass political behavior for their favor and utilizing the methods above to do so or even going so far as to create or support conspiracy theories to implicate their rivals. Though this might be a stretch in relating affective polarization, misinformation, and media influence together, but it does surprisingly fit in nicely. This is due to how conspiracy theories are viewed by the public

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and how they play a role in the bigger picture of implicating rivals. Conspiracy theories are generally considered extremely paranoid or crazy by most. However, when these conspiracy theories make the news, it is a different story. If these conspiracy theories have a partisanship attached to them and are supported by the opposing side. Then they start to gather attention and even in some cases believability. This can relate to media and misinformation depending on how media sources display the conspiracy theory to its viewers. This is also seen as, "Republican elites may be more likely than their Democratic counterparts to float CTs that implicate their political nemeses. It could be the case that high-knowledge conservatives are picking up on these CTs that are being reported in the media, and endorse them as a result" (Miller et al., 2016, p.838). It also relates to affective polarization because it can cause negative emotions, depending on which side the conspiracy theory attempts to implicate and depends on how media sources cover it. Thus, spreading affective polarization through the two variables of misinformation and media.

A great example of how conspiracy theories can relate to affective polarization can be seen with climate change. This once bipartisan issue of environmental protection has become exceedingly polarized due to extreme partisanships and affectively polarized beliefs. The conspiracy theory is that global warming or climate change is a hoax, which is supported by the extreme right. Whereas, the left seeks to prevent future damage on the earth by the effects of climate change. The debunking on climate change is starting to diminish, however it is still obvious that it is far from becoming a bipartisan issue once again. This is seen as, "many studies find that political ideology (typically measured with a single item) is a strong predictor of climate change views of the American public, rivaling party identification. In both cases, the shared commitment to an anti-regulatory view of government, or what has been called "market

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fundamentalism," is assumed to be the crucial motivator of opposition to recognizing the significance of human-caused climate change and thus the necessity of developing policies to lower greenhouse gas emissions" (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2015, p.12). The reason for this comes from several possible factors. Elite influence as described earlier or the medias ability to prime, frame, and set the agenda of its viewers. This has been a recurring problem and is a prime example of how affect polarization can affect not only political behavior but can also implicate policy.

This is what is known about this topic area, however there are a few unknowns in this area of research. Such as, if media sources are utilizing affective polarization in such a way to solidify their audience or increase retention of mistaken beliefs among those that realized they were misinformed? Or is this just a positive phenomenon for the media, which is not acted upon, but rather just a natural occurrence? This leads to the research question of how does affective polarization relate to the retention of mistaken beliefs among individuals that previously recognized they have been misinformed? If there is proven to be a causal connection between these two variables of retention of mistaken beliefs and levels of affective polarized beliefs then the questions above can certainly be inferred and thus, built upon.

Theory

Due to what is known and not known per the literature review it is rather understandable as to how this question came into fruition and why it is important. The question is how does affective polarization relate to the retention of mistaken beliefs among individuals that previously recognized they have been misinformed? Media is a primary mediator for both, thus there is a high probability that there is a correlation between the two. The retention of mistaken beliefs among individuals that previously realized they have been misinformed properly falls into

same effects of affective polarization. That people who are affectively polarized become less concerned with their own core beliefs or preferences and more so concerned with the oppositions. Hence, making it easier for a person that realized they were mistaken to be tricked into believing it again as they are no longer concerned with the mistaken belief at hand, but rather that of the opposition.

Another important factor that correlates the two is medias role in both. Media sources benefit from spreading affective polarization because anger sells and especially when it comes to politics. As for retentions of mistaken beliefs, media gains the benefit of solidifying its audience through misinformation. Thus, increasing their viewer numbers while keeping them from transitioning to their opposing media source. Such as, Fox or MSNBC. Therefore, properly displaying as to why this correlation makes sense and the possible benefits for research that this could present if proved correct.

Research Design

The purpose of this research is to provide insight to if and how affectively polarized beliefs relate to the retentions of mistaken beliefs. This then would infer medias involvement in this relationship, thus giving way to possible future research. By utilizing strategies discussed earlier, media sources have the potential to solidify their audience and even keep individuals coming back after they realized they had been misinformed. To further illustrate this connection, a case study of the book, *Uncivil Agreement* (2018) by Mason is conducted, alongside relative works depicted in the literature review.

Discussion

When considering both affectively polarized beliefs and misinformed beliefs, a similarity appears in their definitions that points towards a relationship. Affectively polarized beliefs, or more specifically partisan-ideological sorting, as defined by Mason, essentially states that as a person begins to associate social identity more so with political ideology, then the more likely they are to associate anger along with their partisanship. This anger in turn makes these individuals less receptive to any information relative to the opposing party. The notion of anger or emotion also coincides with confidence of one's beliefs, specifically in this case, the confidence of anger towards the opposition's beliefs, rather than the importance of confidence in their own parties' beliefs. In relation, a misinformed belief can be understood as either accepting a partial story, for its entirety, or misconstruing information due to a lack of knowledge in that area, or a combination of both. Prior beliefs and preferences influence how susceptible individuals are in accepting misinformation. More so, prior beliefs and preferences in relation to accepting misinformation, increases confidence levels in these individuals of their misinformed beliefs. In conjunction with emotion, their confidence or unwillingness to communicate with those identifying with the opposing party, increases further. This is further illustrated as, "highly sorted partisans will be biased against their outparty friends, neighbors, and romantic interests no matter what they think about political issues" (Mason, 2018, p.72). Based upon the relationship between believability of misinformation due to an inept understanding and the unwillingness for those affectively polarized to communicate with the opposing side due to an inept understanding of their own parties' beliefs, infers a correlation.

By identifying a correlation between both affectively polarized beliefs and misinformed beliefs, this starts to paint a bigger picture for those affected. As it was illustrated in the literature review, those that reach their tipping point in relation to misinformed beliefs, largely revert

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eventually. In conjunction with affectively polarized beliefs, the same could very well be observed. Considering the similar sources of affectively polarized beliefs, it is not unreasonable, if not more so, to associate the difficulty of not reverting after reaching that tipping point. Prior beliefs and preferences play a role in both confidence and level of emotion towards certain beliefs. Also, the consistent negative sources of information stay the same for both either through friends, family, and media. Thus, the two also share similar difficulties when considering the reversion towards either misinformed or affectively polarized beliefs.

As it was hinted towards in the literature review, one of the major influencers of political behavior, or more specifically, affectively polarized beliefs and misinformed beliefs is the media. The most obvious effect of sustaining a misinformed public or affectively polarized public is to solidify their audience and keep them from turning towards the opposing media source. Although the correlation between both media and misinformed/ affectively polarized beliefs is a rather sound strategy, it certainly does not imply causation. This is further illustrated with the correlations between similarities of affectively polarized beliefs with misinformed beliefs, and their similar difficulties in avoiding reversion. Rather, the purpose of making these connections is to further the understanding of how to potentially combat these phenomena by associating known solutions of both towards a joint effort.

Informing the citizenry has been a known strategy in reducing belief in misinformation, however, the primary difficulty of this approach lies within consistency. It has been shown that actively informing individuals increases their political sophistication, although over time these individuals eventually fall back into their prior beliefs or preferences due to several factors (Sturgis et al., 2005). Hence, simply informing the citizenry does not seem to be an ideal form of inducing informative decision making in the long term, at least as a singular strategy. Rather than

utilizing a bottom up approach to help alleviate this issue, a top down approach can also be utilized. This approach could be illustrated as working with media sources to portray cross-cutting ideologies or beliefs in a positive light. In other words, instead of portraying the opposite side in an affectively polarized way, which would be viewed upon as the opposition, rather portray them more so as an alternative viewpoint. This could very well reduce the aggression towards the opposing sides, if done correctly. Although, the one primary weakness of such an approach would be if media sources would be willing to do such a thing. If not, then this could very well be indicative of a correlation between media and its misinformed/ affectively polarized audience, which is considered above. Although both strategies represent seemingly longshot solutions, they do represent a possibility of reducing this negative political phenomenon. Considering that informing the citizenry using political experts and continuity works in the short term, there is hope in establishing more cross-cutting ideologies, separate from social identity in the long run. Thus, further study needs to be implemented to identify potential solutions or remedies to this negative phenomenon on the United States political landscape.

Conclusion

Media influence is a well-known actor in the realm of political behavior. It is a primary distributor of affective polarized beliefs and misinformation. As the retention of misinformed beliefs correlates with affective polarization, this gives deeper insight into the already growing negative effects that affective polarization can create. This also adds another layer onto the negative influence that media can have on political behavior and how manipulative it can be when utilizing mis or disinformation. More so, this infers affective polarization as a possible strategy for media sources to utilize in retaining its audience, which will prove to be detrimental

to future American political behavior as politics continue to deteriorate as a result of this

unreality that affective polarization creates.

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