

Do Participants in Online Political Conversations Adapt Their Posts to Their Audience's Political Views When Given the Chance?

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Research Proposal Drafted for DPSA, November 2023

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Abstract

Within political science, there is a large literature that seeks to address why interactions on social media tend to have a polarizing effect. Whereas the current literature would be inclined to answer that this is because participants are only *motivated* to share messages that are congruent with their political views, I suggest that it might (also) be a result of how the structure of the conversation impedes on participants' *ability* to engage in basic language-use mechanisms that allow them to take their audience's beliefs into consideration when they formulate their utterance. With this research proposal I aim to explore whether participants in online political conversations adapt their posts to their audience's political views, when given information about these. Using a survey-experiment, I propose to study how participation control - the degree to which a speaker can control or predict who their audience is - influences whether the speaker engages (or not) in *audience design* - the process by which a speaker adapts their utterance to their interlocutors' beliefs.

Research On Political Polarization and Social Media Exposure and Effects

Contemporary research on political polarization tends to agree that social media use, in a variety of contexts, predicts both ideological and affective polarization (Cho et al., 2018; Kubin & Sikorski, 2021) and that social media use is linked to participation in polarizing political protests (Chang & Park, 2020).

What is it, then, about *how* citizens use social media that tends to further polarization?

A range of studies show that it is selective exposure to pro-attitudinal information that increases both ideological (e.g. Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015) and affective (e.g. Kim, 2015) polarization. In other words, some research suggests that users tend to mostly interact with other likeminded users online, which further exacerbates polarization (e.g. Gimpel & Hui 2015).

An apparent antidote to this could then be that interacting with users who share counter-attitudinal information should help to decrease ideological and affective polarization, building on the insights of intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2013; Warner & Villamil, 2017) and on research showing that diverse social networks foster tolerance for opposing viewpoints, thereby ameliorating (affective) polarization (Mutz, 2002; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Diversity in discussion groups is thought to help people address their own reasoning biases and broaden their ability to look at issues from different angles (Mercier & Landmore, 2012; Morrell, 2010). Research also shows that when people with differing views engage in discussion, it boosts their political knowledge and their understanding of other viewpoints (e.g. Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Grönlund et al., 2017). Overall, there exists a persistent hope that social media could be a public sphere that engages citizens with differing political perspective in conversations, as this is seen as particularly valuable for democracy (Carpini et al., 2004).

But some studies on social media-use observe a backfire effect, where exposure to counter-attitudinal information actually seem to increase ideological polarization (Kim, 2019; Heiss et al., 2019), and under certain circumstances increase affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014). Some studies explored ideological differences, finding Republicans, but not Democrats, exposed to counter-attitudinal content became more ideologically polarized (Bail et al., 2018). So what is it that makes constructive online conversations between citizens with differing political perspectives so difficult?

Some studies show that participants in online conversations are primarily motivated to express views or share information that aligns with their own political views (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018), and that partisanship is a common predictor for why people share hostile political rumors (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Research also shows that people have group-identity-based motivations to share moral-emotional content congruent with their political identities (Brady et al., 2020) and that e.g. the sharing of emotional experiences can serve the purpose

of signaling important elements of one's social identity or social norms to one's social community (Jordan & Rand, 2020).

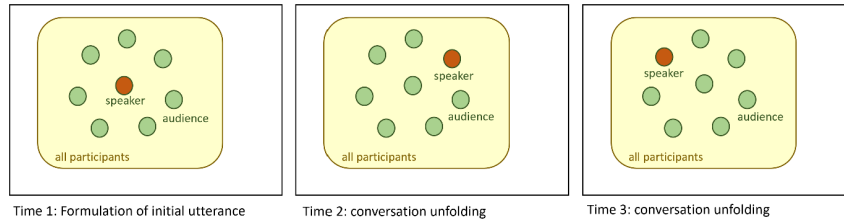
If the primary motivation to post on social media is to state one's own political views or to signal in-group allegiance, then "conversations" risk merely becoming a series of statements of opinion, completely disregarding what a conversation 'ought' to be, in a normative, deliberative sense where we would want conversations to yield positive and especially cooperative interparty contact (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). In fact, this might be a reasonable description of how many experience conversations on open social media. The question then becomes, what is the root cause for this phenomenon? Whereas the current literature would tend to answer that this is because participants are only *motivated* to share messages that are congruent with their political views, I suggest that it might (also) be a result of how the structure of the conversation impedes on participants' *ability* to take their audience's beliefs into consideration when they formulate their utterance.

Speakers Adapt Their Utterances to their Audience

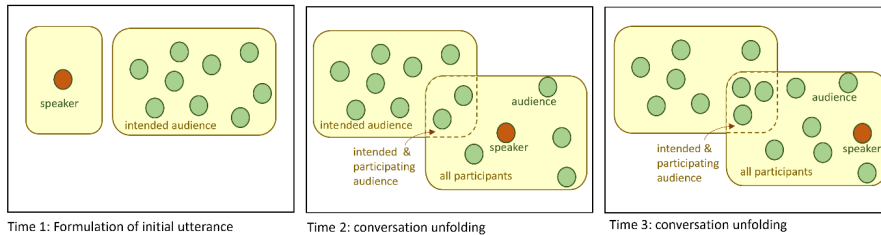
From the cognitive literature on language-use, we know that for a conversation to be successful, participants need to be able to adapt their utterances to the informational needs of their addressees (Clark & Carlson, 1982; Clark & Murphy, 1982; Bakhtin, 1986; Isaacs & Clark, 1987; Brennan et al., 2018). The concept that describes how speakers accommodate their addressee's level of knowledge in the way they design their utterances is referred to as *audience design* (Clark & Carlson, 1982). According to Clark and Schaefer (1987, p. 209), 'Speakers design what they say for the particular people they believe are or might be listening... They plan their utterances to be understood not by just anybody, but by the addressees and other participants in the conversation at the moment.'

Logically, for participants to engage in audience design, they need to know who will participate in the conversation, before they formulate their utterance. I refer to the degree to which a speaker has control over who participates in a conversation as degree of *participation control*.

In 'conventional' conversations, audience design is made possible through a high degree of participation control; the group of participants is already determined at the point at which any participant formulates an utterance. This is illustrated in Figure 2, below. At 'Time 1', the speaker formulates the initial utterance that starts the conversations. The audience is already present with the speaker. At 'Time 2' and 'Time 3' the conversation progresses, and other members of the audience take on the role of speaker. In this stereotypical case, there is a high degree of conversation control, because the speaker at any given moment in the conversation knows who will participate in the conversation at the moment they formulate their utterance.



In public online conversations, where any user can join (such as most conversations on X, in open Facebook groups or in comment section on news sites), participants are not able to take their addressee’s beliefs into consideration when formulating their utterances, because the participants in the conversation are not determined at the moment of formulation. This is illustrated in Figure 3 below. At ‘Time 1’ the speaker formulates their initial utterance without any participants present, but with an intended audience in mind. At ‘Time 2’, and ‘Time 3’ individuals have joined the conversation, thereby becoming participants in it. Only some of these are part of the initial speaker’s intended audience.



Expectations

If online participants in political conversations are simply interested in expressing their own views, we should expect participants to state their political views in the same manner, regardless of the information they are given about their audience. However, if the structure explanation holds true, we should expect participants to adjust the way they state their political views when they are given information about their audience (H1).

H1: When given relevant information about their audience, participants adapt their utterances to their audience’s political views.

Clark (1996) suggested that a speaker makes lexical decisions based on their beliefs about the ‘cultural communities’ to which their interlocutors belong and accordingly, to the information that is available to members of those communities (Fussell & Krauss, 1992; Isaacs & Clark, 1987). The beliefs a speaker can reasonably hold about the information available to their audience, depends on their audience’s belonging to a ‘cultural community’. Theoretically, then, I hold political leaning to be a kind of cultural community, whereby the members of

this community can be expected to hold the same beliefs and to have access to the same kind of information. I thus expect people who align politically to share a high degree of common ground. Therefore I also expect communication between politically aligned interlocutors to be more direct and to use more implied language or domain specific terminology, because much of the common ground can be assumed and does not need to be explained (H1a).

H1a: When participants believe their audience holds like-minded views, the participants will choose the utterance that most directly reflects their own views.

From this, it also follows that I expect interlocutors who are not politically aligned to share a lower degree of common ground. I therefore expect communication between politically misaligned interlocutors to necessitate more explanation and therefore to use more elaborate and explanatory language (H1b)

H1b: When participants believe their audience holds cross-cutting political views, the participants will choose the utterance that reflects their own views, but which is more nuanced.

I am also interested in what happens, when speakers are not able to predict their audience. Theoretically I would expect that when they are not able to take their audience's beliefs into account when they formulate their utterance, they will formulate their utterance taking only their own beliefs into account (H2).

H2: When not given any information about their audience, participants choose the utterance that most directly reflects their own political views.

Research design

Methods

I plan to examine the role of political beliefs about an audience (participation control) on the speaker's choice of wording (audience design) in a series of writing tasks combined with simple statement-choice tasks. The proposed study is an online survey-experiment with a between-subjects design on Danish citizens.

Overview of the Experimental Procedure

After giving their informed consent to the study and answering questions about demographics, individual differences, political attitudes and their social media behavior, participants are randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions that manipulate what they know about their audience (participation control), or they are assigned to a control condition in which no manipulation takes place (i.e. no information about their audience is given). In the treatment conditions, participants read a vignette that describes their audience. The control condition which receives no information on their audience are asked who they imagined their audience was after the task.

In the task, participants are exposed to a news-snippet. They are then asked how they would formulate a post on social media about what they have just read, first in a free writing task, then by choosing between a set of pre-formulated posts that vary in their degree of audience design.

Treatment Material

Information about audience

I vary the information participants have about their audience in the following way:

1. the participant is given information that their audience holds like-minded political views
2. the participant is given information that their audience holds cross-cutting political views
3. the participant is given no information about their audience

Audience vignettes

1. The participant's audience holds like-minded views
Your audience holds the same political views as you and they understand political issues in the same way as you do. They have access to the same kind and amount of information as you. This means that they access news and information about political matters in the same spaces as you do. If you were to discuss political matters, you would always agree and you would understand the thought-processes that lie behind what each other is saying.
2. The participant's audience holds cross-cutting views
Your audience does not hold the same political views as you and they do not understand political issues in the same way as you do. They have access other kinds and amounts of information than you. This means that they access news and information about political matters in different spaces than you do. If you were to discuss political matters, you would always disagree and you would not understand the thought-processes that lie behind what each other is saying.

Tasks

For both tasks, each participant is presented with three news-snippet, one at a time. In a first round they undergo the writing task, and are presented with one news-snippet at a time. In a second round, they undergo the statement-choice task for the same three news-snippets, one at a time. The order of completing the writing tasks before the statement-choice tasks serves as to not have the latter influence the responses to the former. The order of the three news-snippets will be randomized.

Writing Task

The writing task serves the purpose of assessing how and whether the participants engage in audience design, when using their own words. It has the potential advantage of enhancing the study's external validity and it might foster more rich material. However it also has two major potential disadvantages. First, the outcomes from it might have low internal validity, because it is difficult to control what is varied. Second, there is a risk of it being a response burden since it is a more cumbersome task, so participants might be scared off by it and drop-out, or it might lead to instances of satisficing, if participants try to minimize the effort by giving answers that are good enough rather than optimal or well-considered. This in itself could produce low-quality data and lower internal validity. This is why the writing task is supplemented with a simple statement-choice task.

Statement-Choice Task

The pre-formulated posts vary in their degree of audience design in the following manner:

1. a direct statement that reflects their political views (audience design adapted to audience that holds like-minded views);
2. a nuanced / toned down statement that reflects their political views (audience design adapted to audience that holds cross-cutting views);
3. a direct statement that reflects the opponent's view (audience design adapted to audience that holds cross-cutting views, suppressing own views);
4. a nuanced /toned down statement that reflects their opponent's view (audience design adapted to audience that shares like-minded views, suppressing own views.)

Statements 3 and 4 serve as deliberately unlikely choices, blurring the dichotomy between statements 1 and 2.

Analysis

Measuring Audience Design

The dependent variable, audience design is measured in two ways. First, by means of the writing task. The written statements will be coded through a content analysis, but I have not yet decided exactly how, I will analyze this data. Second, by means of the choice of statements in the statement-choice task, which is recoded as a binary variable which is set to '1' if the statement chosen is adapted to the given audience, and to '0' if the statement chosen is not adapted to the given audience.

As stated above, statements 3 and 4 serve as deliberately unlikely choices, blurring the dichotomy between statements 1 and 2. Choices of statements 3 and 4 will likely be a reflection that participants haven't understood the task, and can be excluded from the analysis.

I also plan to recode the answer the control-group gives to the post-task survey on who their imagined audience was to 1= no imagined audience; 2= pro-attitudinal imagined audience; 3= counter-attitudinal imagined audience.

Statistical Methods

I plan to test my hypotheses by comparing the change in means between experimental conditions. I am interested in whether participants who are given information about their audience, adapt their statements towards their audience, and whether they do so to a degree that differs significantly from the control group.

In addition, I will perform regression analyses to determine the effect of pre-treatment survey variables (age, education, ideology, party identification, frequency of social media use, platforms for social media use of the participant) on the likelihood of engaging in audience design.

It is not yet decided how the statements produced in the writing tasks will be prepared for and included in the statistical analysis. But it will be relevant to see if they vary within-participants. A low variation within-participants would increase the validity of the statement-choice task. Conversely, if there is very little agreement between the outcomes of the written task and the statement-choice task within-participants, this could indicate a flaw in the research design and might give indications as to what could be improved in further studies. On the other hand, variations between outcomes on the writing task and outcomes on the statement-choice task might also simply be an expression of the potential disadvantages listed above of participant burden and satisficing.

Contributions

The online political sphere harbors an enormous democratic potential in allowing political conversations across divides that usually separate us. The basic idea of deliberative democracy is that political conversations between citizens will yield more informed, tolerant, and reflective citizens who therefore have “higher quality opinions” (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 49). By enabling millions of individual contributors, it also has the potential to revive offline politics and challenge the dominant agenda that is often imposed by traditional mass media and by policymakers, thereby empowering citizens (Habermas et al., 1974; Jaidka et al., 2019; Papacharissi, 2010).

So, while the hope among many scholars has been that online interactions would bring about increased interactions between citizens with differing political views, some worry that these interactions have the adverse effect of exacerbating polarization. It is therefore imperative to understand what it is about online interactions that makes them so difficult. With the proposed study, I aim to take a first step in exploring how the structures (in this case the ability to hold participation control) affect users’ ability to engage in basic language-use

mechanisms (in this case audience design).

The design of this study rests on two main underlying assumptions. First, that the deliberative quality in the ensuing conversation are likely to be higher when participants adapt their initial statements to the perceived views of their audience, compared to when they do not consider their audience's political views. Second, that the inability to predict one's audience's political views will lead to instances of audience mismatch between the intended or expected audience and the actual, receiving audience, and that this in turn is likely to lead to less fruitful conversations.

For now, I am able to test whether participants do in fact engage in audience design in political conversations, when given participation control. The hope is that the findings can yield further research into how the structures imposed on online conversations enable or hinder the application of basic language-use mechanisms.

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