Participation and Polarization
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It has been more than a decade since researchers first raised alarms that the Internet may lead to increased fragmentation and polarization. Homogeneity may be harmful in a variety of contexts but also may help groups come together to take action. I propose three diversity research goals as part of a research agenda for technology mediated social participation: (1) developing a better understanding of diversity preferences, (2) assessing the benefits and drawbacks of diverse information and participations in a range of contexts, and (3) developing tactics that increase the diversity of information diets and that help diverse participants work together.

Researchers and others have long expressed concerns that despite the hope and potential for the Internet to unite diverse individuals and communities, it may instead lead to increased fragmentation and polarization in society [19, 22]. The general premise of these concerns is that people prefer homogeneity – to interact with people who share similar opinions, values, interests, and backgrounds – but that offline environments have forced some degree of heterogeneity in day-to-day interactions. As technology offers people more control over their environments, either by filtering out disagreeable information and interactions or by joining specialized communities of similar others, individuals’ information diets and interactions may become more homogenous.

If people prefer homogenous information and interactions in their online participation, many of the benefits of diversity are at stake. Deliberation experiments have shown that interaction with like-minded people leads to polarization: participants tend to end up with more extreme views than they started with [20]. Selective exposure to reinforcing news and opinion articles can cause people to take even more extreme positions, and fragmentation of the audience to different communities may lead to polarization. Increased polarization would make it harder for organizations or society to find common ground on important issues. Second, exposure to, and inclusion of, diverse opinions can also lead to more divergent, out of the box thinking, which can improve individual and group problem solving and decision-making [13, 14, 15]. Third, there is a natural tendency for people, particularly those in the minority, to think that their own views are more broadly shared than they actually are [16]. Having a better assessment of their true popularity increase people’s acceptance of the legitimacy of disagreeable outcomes, rather than concocting conspiracy theories to explain how the supposed majority will was thwarted.

Political Polarization
Many researchers studying balkanization and the Internet have focused on access to and discussion of political news and opinion. The research offers a mix of encouraging and discouraging results.

Some studies finding that people access supporting information and filter out opposing views. For example, left-leaning and right-leaning blogs rarely link to each other [1]. These results are consistent with selective exposure theory, which suggests that people seek out affirming items and avoid challenging items [2, 11], though Garrett has proposed a variation of this theory, finding that people seek supporting items but rejecting the idea that they avoid challenging items [3]. Other studies refute the idea that selective exposure is widespread. Sears and Friedman reviewed the literature from the 1950s and 1960s, finding five studies showing a preference for supportive information only, five showing a preference for diversity, and eight inconclusive [17]. In interviews with users of several online political spaces, Stromer-Galley found that those participants sought out diverse opinions and enjoyed the range of opinions they encountered online [18]. A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project during the 2004 election
season found that, overall, Americans were not using the Internet to access only supporting materials [6]. Instead, Internet users were more aware than non-Internet users of a range of political arguments, including those that challenged their own positions and preferences. In a recent study, Paul Resnick and I found that at least some people seek opinion diversity in online political news aggregators [9]. These diversity-seeking individuals do not appear to be the majority, though, and others prefer to avoid challenging opinions. We do not yet know if these different individual preferences are stable over time or across topics.

Other work has examined political the tendency of people to associate with similar others, homophily [8]. In many political and issue-oriented newsgroups, there is frequent interaction among participants who held opposing views. In contrast, a recent study of blogs found that only 13% of the comments on political blogs expressed disagreement [4]. Even when people with diverse opinions interact, they tend to express their views around others who agree but not those who they believe disagree [10, 13]. Research also shows, however, that people do not always have a very good awareness of friends’ and others’ viewpoints. While there is political homophily among people connected on Facebook, users considerably overestimate the similarity between their friends’ views and their own opinions [5]. While discussing my work with others, however, I have heard several anecdotes of people unfriending, unfollowing, or otherwise hiding updates from their connections after they posted status updates or Tweets espousing differing political views.

Benefits of homophily
While listening to the alarms about homophily and selective exposure, it is easy to overlook evidence that groups composed of similar others may have some advantages. In groups with homogenous preferences, people may feel that they do not have to change their opinions to fit in. This may lead to greater feelings of self-efficacy; people in workgroups with a greater sense of shared meanings and shared histories report higher self-efficacy compared to people in groups with less psychological similarity [7]. When people feel that they fit into a group and identify more strongly with it, they are more likely to work to support group goals [21]. The organizational socialization literature has long recognized this tension. In order to maintain their day-to-day activity, organizations teach newcomers the traditions and solutions the organization has previously developed. In doing so, however, they reduce the chance that newcomers will ask questions or disrupt the established ways of doing things, and thus reduce opportunities for innovation [23]. Researchers and designers hoping to increase diversity should understand these advantages and tensions and may need to find alternate ways of delivering achieving these benefits while reducing homophily.

Research agenda
There is a continuing need for research that describes the extent to which participation in online communities – and not just political communities – is polarized or fragmented. Comparative or controlled studies that explore the benefits and drawbacks of diverse interactions and participation in a variety of technologically mediated settings and contexts are needed.

Research on polarization will also be aided by a better understanding of individuals’ preferences for similarity and for diversity, and will need to move beyond the idea of homogenous, 100% stable preference individuals. Questions include: what is the distribution of individual preferences for diversity? How do preferences change over times and in different contexts? Are there spaces where people who prefer to avoid challenge are exposed to and discuss differing points of view anyway? Whether a designer seeks to simply meet these preferences or to persuade people to change their preferences, answering these questions will help them better know a system’s potential participants.
Even without a more detailed understanding of diversity preferences, designers may be able to identify and evaluate tactics that reduce balkanization of online communities and the filtering of challenging information. Because many people appear to prefer challenging opinions, this work must address both the selection challenge (how to aggregate diverse information) and the presentation challenge (how to make the diverse information appealing). I believe that the presentation challenge may be the harder of the two to address, but it is not unsolvable. We might, for example, help people with differing points of view work together by increasing perceived similarity, such as by highlighting shared interests or values, using virtual ice-breakers, or enhancing group identity.

Conclusion
Other researchers and I have focused on politics in previous studies of homophily and diversity in online participation. Diversity, though, matters in many contexts [15], and can lead to better solutions and to outcomes that are more inclusive and representative. When we talk about technology mediated social participation, then, we must consider the diversity of the participants. How can systems bring together as many perspectives as possible while still helping people to feel that they fit in, motivating them to speak up, and enabling them to achieve goals?

References


