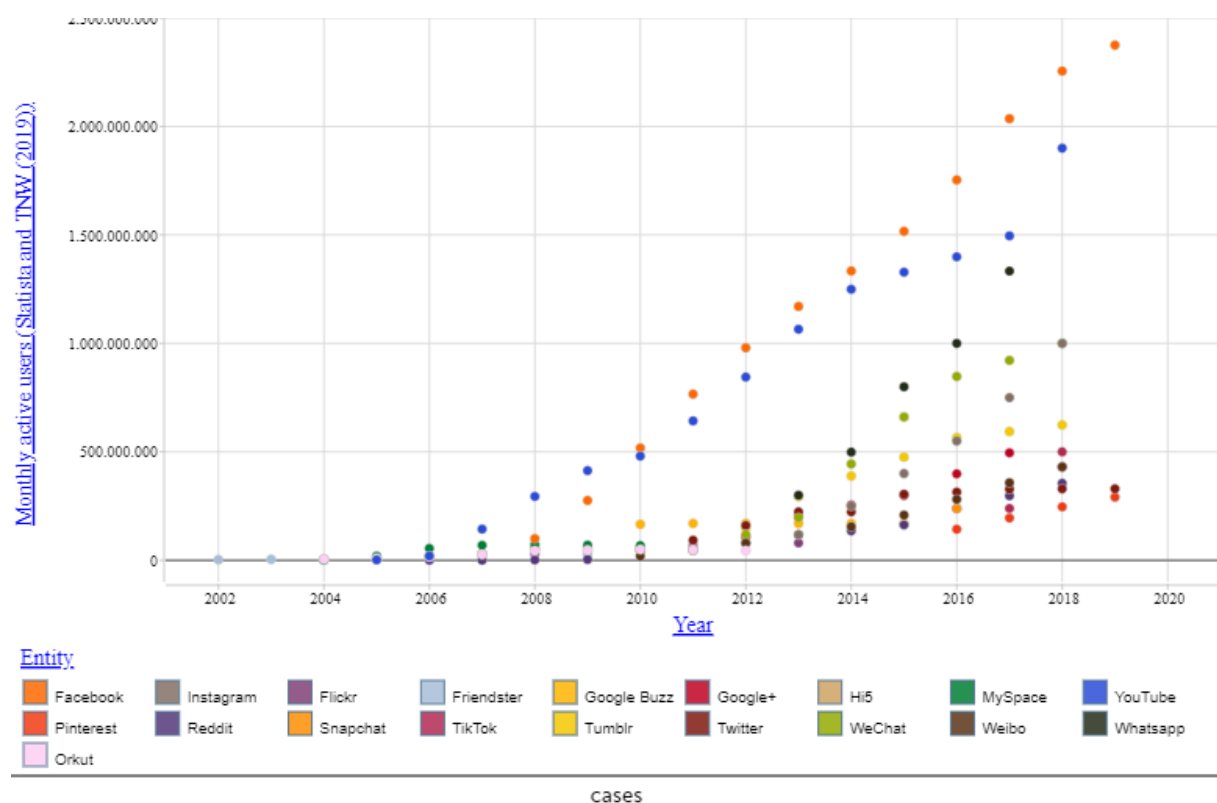


Why Social Media poses a threat to justice

In this essay, I will describe how Social Media negatively influences justice by increasing polarization and hate spread.

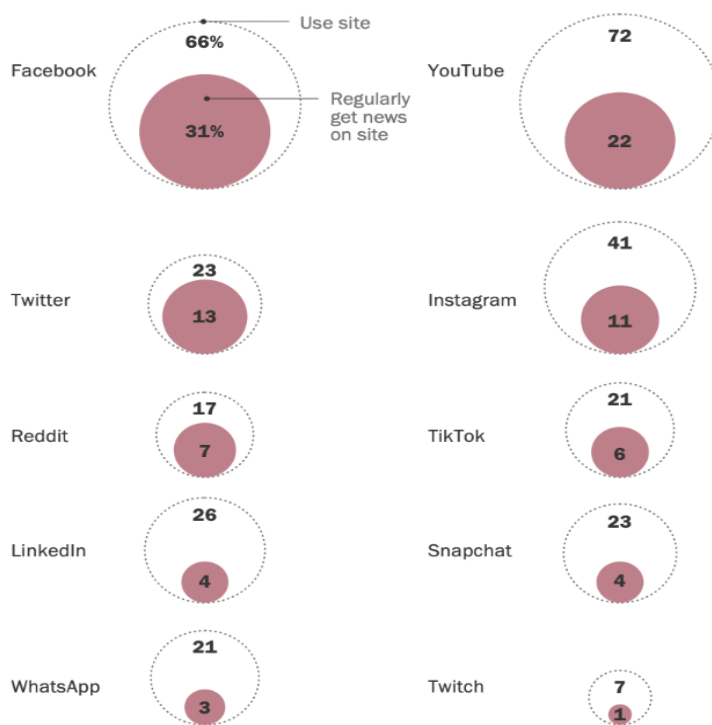
Social Media is a technology dedicated to sharing and exchanging information through text and pictures. The biggest Social Media platforms as of 2022 are Facebook, followed by Youtube, Whatsapp and Instagram¹. All those platforms aim to catch and keep people's attention, thus their fundamental algorithms work reinforcingly: by analyzing the data of the user, they create models of this user's interests and opinions. In order to decrease the risk of driving the user away, they use this data to show users more content in accordance with those revealed interests. In a certain sense, it makes use of the confirmation bias: people prefer to encounter information that supports their already-existing worldview. So far, this approach has been very successful. The number of social media platforms as well as its users has increased drastically over the past years, as can be seen in the following graph²:



Therefore, Social Media is widely influential – even more so, since it became an important source for information access. The following graph shows that many US citizens actively use Facebook and other Social Media platforms to educate themselves on news³. As can be seen, the main platforms used for news access are Facebook and Youtube. Those are specifically the two platforms with most users as shown in the graph before as well. This emphasizes how crucial and impactful Social Media use is for news access.

Nearly a third of Americans regularly get news on Facebook

% of U.S. adults who ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.
"News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021"

Even if not actively intending to gather information through Social Media, each user does so subconsciously. Therefore, Social Media is crucial for forming one's opinion and knowledge. However, due to the mentioned algorithmic functioning, this rather results in Social Media users becoming exposed to information deepening already existing opinions.

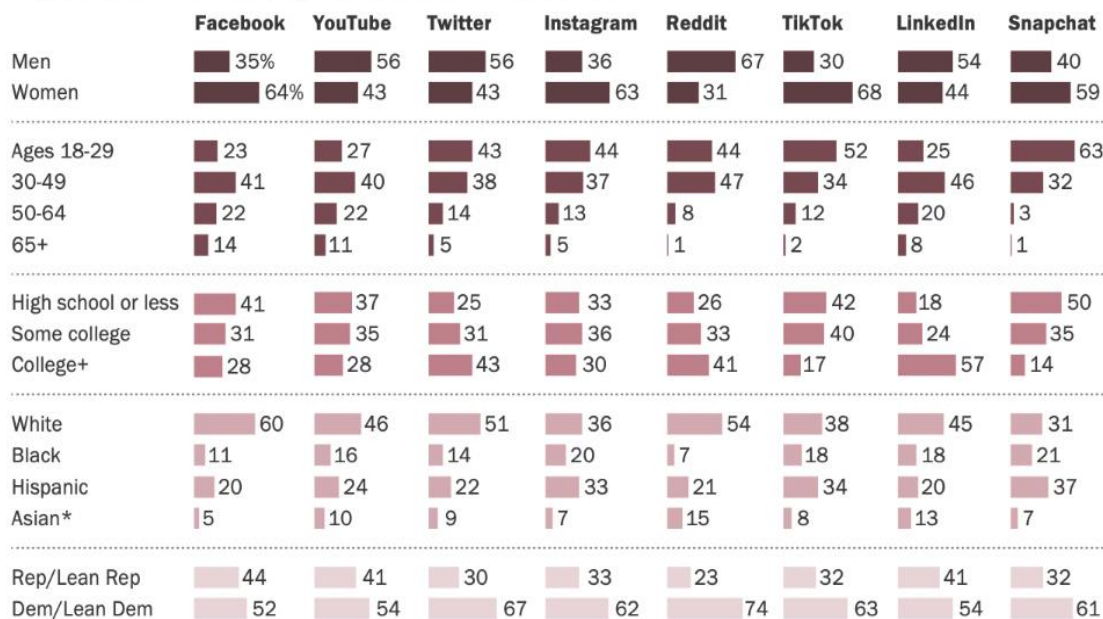
In terms of the social networks that emerge from Social Media, it connects people that share values, interests and opinions. Through the interaction on Social Media, communities emerge.

Once again however, the algorithms lead to emergence of digital communities that include a rather homogeneous set of perspectives.

The following graph illustrates many aspects in which Social Media threatens diversity⁴.

Demographic profiles and party identification of regular social media news consumers in the U.S.

% of each social media site's *regular* news consumers who are ...



*Asian adults were interviewed in English only.

Note: Twitch and WhatsApp not shown due to small sample size. White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

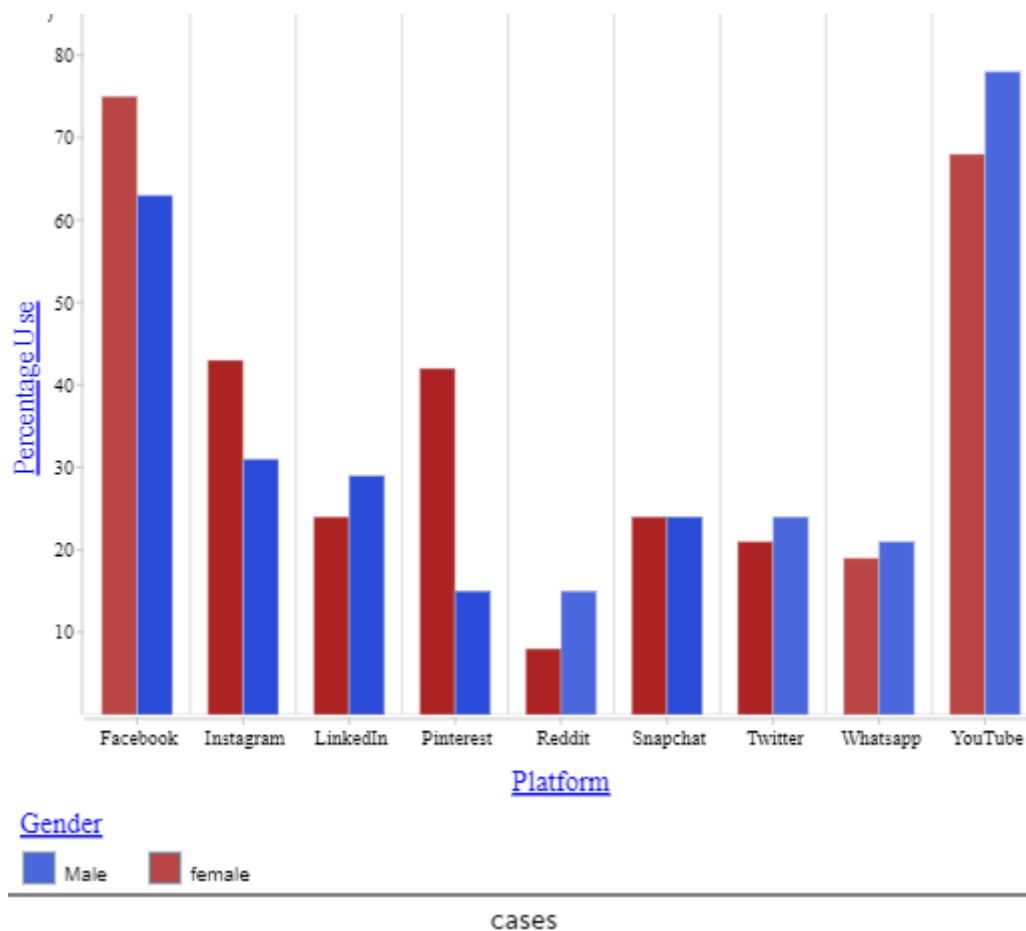
"News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021"

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First of all, the demographics on the platforms have huge differences concerning race, political views and gender of their users. For instance, most platforms except for TikTok and Snapchat have a significantly bigger amount of White users. Another example for a huge gap between users' demographics is Reddit, having a huge gap in terms of user percentage between Democrats and Republicans, as well as men and women.

This is problematic because all those users continuously interact with each other on a daily basis, which creates a reinforcing feedback-loop. The users come to think that their own worldview, which connected them to so many others, can be seen as representative and average for society in general. This decreases their open-mindedness towards other opinions

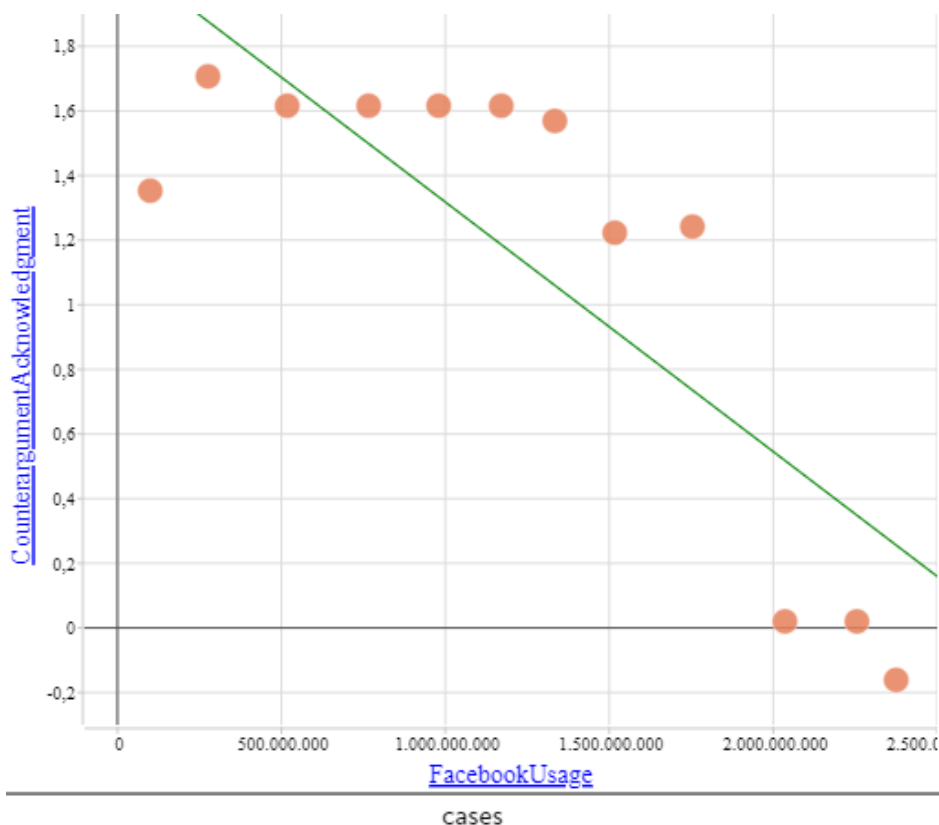
and drives groups of different heritages or political views further apart. Therefore, Social Media is very dangerous in terms of diversity. It isolates its users from both theoretical information as well as social contacts that might challenge their worldview. The following graph illustrates this in terms of gender⁵:



The graph demonstrates how the percentage of males using Reddit is almost twice as big as the female percentage. This corresponds to the phenomenon of multiple patriarchal and sexist communities that manifested on Reddit⁶—groups like “Beatingwomen”, “Incels”, “MensRights”, or “TheRedPill”, all of whom have in-common that they promote misogynistic and hateful worldviews.

The effect is not constraint to the digital world as it endangers diversity on an individual and societal level: On an individual level, a person’s social circle and set of knowledge becomes very

homogenous instead of diverse. On a societal level, this prevents endorsement of justice. In order to endorse justice, it is necessary for the un-oppressed part of society to become aware of the occurring oppression and marginalization and take action against it. However, due to the isolating effect Social Media creates, those two sides of society -the one experiencing injustice vs. the one unaffected by it – are less likely to come into contact. And even if they do come into contact, their Social Media use most probably already affected them in an emotional and polarizing way. Their acknowledgment and awareness of experiences differing from their own has decreased, while their emotional frustration with phenomenon they are critical of has increased exponentially. This is especially problematic and dangerous as it makes conversation and debate almost impossible. People become too emotional and convinced of their own perspective, so that they don't want to consider others anymore. They stop being open to discussions in general. The following graph illustrates the phenomenon I refer to, showing how with passing time, thus increasing Facebook usage, the tolerance for counterarguments of American political leaders has decreased⁷.



I created this graph using two datasets with values from the years 2008 to 2019 referring to the US. One dataset contained the monthly users for Facebook, the main Social Media platform used in general and specifically for news access, as shown earlier in this essay¹. I joint this with a dataset containing acknowledgment and respect for political counter-arguments shown by the political leaders of the US⁷. This value captures the open-mindedness for other positions and backgrounds I referred to earlier and which I see endangered through the polarizing culture and community development on Social Media. Indeed, my graph shows a negative correlation between those two datasets: the more people used Facebook, the less respectful and acknowledging were political leaders in the USA, which themselves are elected by, thus at least to a certain extent representative of, the mentality present in the American society. Though this is a correlation, not causation, and can be due to many additional aspects, I still am convinced that it illustrates the impact Social Media has had on our society, even if only as one of many other influences. Researchers have investigated those influences as well, and there are multiple research results demonstrating that Social Media factors into fundamentalism due to this algorithmic core⁸. Within the isolated communities it creates, any type of information, especially controversial and hateful one, can be spread fast without any potential intervention from outgroups that would have had the power to prove the misinformation and hate wrong. To sum it up, Social Media has a negative impact on justice. Its algorithmic functioning leads to the creation of social bubbles, isolating people from other perspectives and polarizing society. This threatens diversity and reinforces unjust power dynamics in the real world, as the people differently affected by justice issues encounter each other less. Additionally, Social Media creates an unhealthy approach to the concept of debate and discussion itself in our day-to-day life, which usually poses the first step in the fight for justice, and instead fuels into extremism.

Sources (sorted by purpose)

Link to the SNAP project: <https://snap.berkeley.edu/project?user=elinascum&project=FinalEssay> Elina

Sources for Data visualizations

2 Dataset “users-by-social-media-platform” from <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>, **visualized** with <https://concord-consortium.github.io/codap-data/>

3 Graph “Nearly a third of Americans regularly get news on Facebook” from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/>

4 Dataset “Demographic profiles and party identification of regular social media news consumers in the U.S.” from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/>

5 Dataset “percent-of-men-and-women-using-social-media-platforms-in-the-us” from <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>, **analyzed** with SNAP (view SNAP project for details) and visualized with <https://concord-consortium.github.io/codap-data/>

7 Dataset “democracy” from https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/democracy?tab=chart&time=1973..latest&country=CHN~OWID_WRL~USA~GBR&Dataset=Varieties+of+Democracy&Metric=Deliberative+democracy&Sub-metric=Respect+for+counterarguments **joint** with dataset “users-by-social-media-platform” from <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media> via SNAP (view SNAP project for details) and **visualized** with <https://concord-consortium.github.io/codap-data/>

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