Nobody Knows You’re a Dog but Everybody Knows You’re a Republican: Finding Diversity in Political, Religious, and Personal Association on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Geography often serves as at least a partial determinant of economic and cultural characteristics. For example, individuals who live in affluent neighborhoods are likely to come into contact with other individuals who have similar income and education levels, which often tend to be associated with political views and personal interests. However, within electronic social networks (ESNs), geographical barriers weaken or disappear; interacting with someone from another country is as easy as interacting with someone next door. This survey study asks respondents to compare their close friends, people with whom the respondents interact both within an ESN and face-to-face, with their distal friends, people with whom the respondents interact only inside an ESN. Specifically, respondents are asked about the political, religious, and social views of their groups of friends. The results suggest that respondents do perceive significant differences in the views of their close friends versus their distal friends. In addition, respondents who have a higher percentage of close friends and respondents that are more comfortable sharing their own political, religious, and social views are more likely to spend time reading ESN content that conflicts with their views, but are also more likely to block content that conflicts with their views.

Keywords: Communication, Geographical Barriers, Self-Esteem, Social Influence, Social Networks

INTRODUCTION

In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, George Bush narrowly won with just 50.7% of the popular vote. However, over 48% of the votes cast for Bush came from “landslide” counties, in which Bush won by 20% or more of the region’s votes (“Political Segregation”, 2008). One conclusion that has been drawn from such statistics is that people tend to live near others who...
are similar to themselves. When people change neighborhoods—a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly more frequent in America—their choices are limited by economic factors. But within an economic range, people are likely to choose neighborhoods that provide easier access to their preferred activities, religious institutions, and schools. Stated more broadly, people tend to choose neighborhoods in which the inhabitants are culturally similar, and this phenomenon is often correlated with political and religious affiliation. Over time, a “feedback loop” results as individuals are continually exposed to the same political and religious viewpoints (Bishop, 2008). This has the detrimental effect that people become less open to discussing opinions different than their own (Mutz, 2006).

Many of the factors that limit exposure to a diversity of viewpoints are less relevant in an online setting. ESNs such as Facebook, Orkut, and Google+ have made it easier to stay connected with many others. People are connected in ESNs to many of the same people to whom they are connected in the physical world, but they are also likely to be connected to others who they seldom, if ever, encounter in real life (Balint & Rau-Foster, 2014). For example, on Facebook, one of the authors is “friends” with a number of high school classmates whom he has not seen or spoken to in nearly 20 years. He is also “friends” with several distant family friends and relatives who he only sees every few years at events such as weddings and funerals. To the extent that these distant connections live in different geographies than he does, they are more likely to exhibit different economic and cultural characteristics. By interacting with these distant connections, he is more likely to be exposed to these characteristics, which may include different political viewpoints, religious beliefs, and personal interests.

While a simple statistical count cannot prove that online social networks expose and draw individuals to a wider array of political, religious, and personal values, we can find evidence of this phenomenon in recent cultural shifts (Meisher-Tal, 2014). One such shift is occurring in US public school systems as a nascent social movement against standardized tests is being used to determine grade advancement eligibility for grade school children. Though standardized tests have been questioned as reliable determinants of academic capability for decades, almost every American child in the public education system has continued to take these tests in order to move on to higher grade levels, to enter college with qualifying scores, or to qualify for merit scholarships. However, about a year ago, a significant and growing number of students and parents have forged the “opt out” movement over social networks by informing families that they have the choice to refuse to have their children take advancement tests at the end of the school year. A New York school superintendent reported that only two students in the two years before the movement began opted out of testing; last year, there were almost 150 opt-outs in his district alone (Napolitano, 2014). Before social networking became popular among middle-aged parents, most families were unaware that opting out of advancement tests was an option. However, as social networks break down the geographical barriers to the spread of novel social values, parents are learning about new educational options for their children. What began as a few children nationwide refusing to take tests each school year has grown to a legitimate movement coordinated through online organization.

Although electronic social networks such as Facebook have existed in American consumers’ lives since the early 2000’s, evidence about ESN’s ability to effectively create and spread new political, religious, or social ideas across social groups is mixed (Furner, 2013). Some experts believe that ESNs are more successful than traditional, offline forms of communication in spreading new viewpoints, but others feel that ESNs are useless, or even detrimental, in the dissemination of diverse beliefs. For example, in his commentary on the controversial Trayvon Martin court case, Huffington Post writer Shane Paul Neil blamed ESNs for causing more apathy toward the political implications of the trial by allowing people to simply broadcast their opin-
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