



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

I-P<>LHYS
INVESTIGATING POLARIZATION IN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEMS

Political Polarisation and the Role of Media

Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict, Queens University Belfast

Friday, March 11th, 2022

The viral and virulent spread of ethno-populism and nationalism around the globe including the countries on the democratic side of political continuum has encouraged considerable research exploring effects, causes and mechanisms of these phenomena. We invite papers investigating the role of media in creating social and political divisions where there were none, enhancing polarisation of and within societies, and compromising the quality of democracy. Comparative approaches are particularly welcome to assess whether and to what extent the level of democratic consolidation, relationship between the media and societies, societal segmentation along ascriptive criteria (i.e. ethnicity, language, religion etc) or ideological lines (i.e right vs left), etc increase the likelihood ethnocentric polarisation. Does media stoke nationalist sentiments to encourage political realignment? Has the spread of 'us vs them' rhetoric undermined the long standing social solidarities? How big of a role does economic interest of the media itself play in fuelling the perceptions of divisions?

Our workshop takes place in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the society with an experience of intergroup conflict and persistent societal division that is reflected in its media landscape. We seek to build upon the expertise from the 'plural and divided places' to reflect on:

- 1) experiences of research from social and political sciences on the lasting effects of conflict and identity-based antagonism when assessing opportunities and constraints for media outlets to reach across the socially and politically salient divide;
- 2) rich analysis of case specific material from communication studies, especially focussing the media systems and media communication to reflect on the impact of political polarisation on medias role in ushering in the democratic publics.

****running order****

0915 Opening – UK timezone

0930-1100 PANEL 1- **Segmentation and Polarisation: Divided media in divided societies**

Chair: Elena Pavan, *University of Trento* elena.pavan@unitn.it

From democracy's watchdogs to nationalism's servants? Confronting media and political systems in plural divided societies and Mediterranean countries

Arianna Piacentini, *University of Milano*

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Attitudes towards Basque, Catalan and Galician public broadcasters from the non-speaking audience: The influence of regional politics.

Mr Craig Willis, *European Centre for Minority Issues / Europa Universität Flensburg*

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Information disorders, social media and polarisation in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

Mr Paul Reilly, *University of Sheffield*

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“We are humans, first of all”: Constructing and renegotiating audiences’ identities in conflict discourse

Olga Pasitselska, *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*
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BREAK 11-1115

1115-1245 PANEL 2 Polarisation as a political strategy: Media as political actors

When minority language newspapers become political actors: the role of Flensburg Avis and Der Nordschleswiger in the campaign arguing for the reopening of the Danish-German border during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Sergiusz Bober, *European Centre for Minority Issues*
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The strategic construction of the people on social media during American political campaigns: the cases of Joe Biden and Donald Trump (2020)

Ms Louise Anglès d'Auriac, *Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3)*
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The third person effect as a source of affective polarization upon exposure to political satire

Ivo Bosilkov, *University American College Skopje*
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“Us and them” in Macedonian media space: The phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their reintegration processes

Natalija Shikova & Afrodita Musliu *International Balkan University, Skopje*
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1245 - Roundup discussion & good byes

**** access info ****

ZOOM MEETING

Topic: Political Polarisation and the Role of Media

Time: Mar 11, 2022 09:00 AM UK TIMEzone

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://unitn.zoom.us/j/84796032591>

Meeting ID: 847 9603 2591

Passcode: 073502

**** abstracts ****

09.30 – 11.00 PANEL 1 – Segmentation and Polarisation: Divided media in divided societies

Arianna Piacentini, *University of Milan*

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Media and political systems' polarisation and their impact on the quality of democracy.

Confronting divided societies with the Mediterranean countries.

The viral and virulent spread of ethno-populism and nationalism all over the globe urged researchers to explore these phenomena from a variety of fields and perspectives. This study inquires the role media systems play in affecting democracy's quality, potentially increasing polarisation and (ethno)nationalism; it does so accounting for both consolidated and unconsolidated democracies, as well as for internally homogeneous and heterogeneous societies. Taking the lead from the experience of the so-called 'plural and divided societies', the paper compares the experiences of Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Northern Ireland, and South Tyrol - societies differently placed along the democratic continuum, yet all divided either along ethnonational, religious, or linguistic lines; with the case of Italy - a consolidated democracy emblematic example of the 'Mediterranean model/polarised pluralism' (Hallin, Mancini 2004), historically divided along the right-left divide. The paper argues that, regardless of their actual democratic status, media systems of societies segmented either along ascriptive criteria (i.e. ethnicity, language, religion etc) or ideological lines (i.e right vs left) 'naturally' run the risk of increasing nationalist sentiments by reiterating the 'us vs them' rhetoric - which becomes the pivotal point shaping political alliances, social solidarities, and media news production alike. By accounting for a number of factors ranging from the historical roots of the divide, economic interests, media and political systems' features, as well as socio-cultural specificities, the paper 'complicates' Hallin and Mancini's model proposing a new perspective from which look at political polarisation and media's role in affecting democracy.

Mr Craig Willis, *European Centre for Minority Issues / Europa Universität Flensburg*

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Attitudes towards Basque, Catalan and Galician public broadcasters from the non-speaking audience: The influence of regional politics.

One of the purposes of minority language media, both from a scholarly perspective and often a stated aim of broadcasters, relates to language normalization – including amongst the non-speaking population. One challenge of maintaining cross-community support, particularly in the Spanish media system, is the politicization of public broadcasting. Given the political control of the three public broadcasters in focus, TV3, ETB and TVG, lies directly with the regional authorities, political aspects and motivations (or just perceptions thereof) have influenced the manner in which the broadcasters have been able to attract the non-speakers within these regions (mother tongue Castilian-speaking). This research is based on 24 semi-structured expert interviews with practitioners within the broadcasters as well as media and sociolinguistics scholars, conducted in Autumn 2021. It forms part of a broader focus on non-speaking audiences which constitutes my ongoing PhD research, which will eventually include a comparison to three cases with English as the hegemonic language; Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, and the respective broadcasters (TG4, S4C and BBC Alba), which have quite a different governance structure for broadcasting. The initial findings from the three cases in Spain can be broadly summarized as follows: ETB has prioritized its Spanish channel for political goals, to the detriment of their Basque language channel; TV3 began as very prestigious and high-brow but became politically polarized, particularly following the 2017 referendum; Galicia's TVG is often considered politically bias and more favourable to Madrid, but possibly alongside a benefit of having a widespread Castilian-speaking audience.

Mr Paul Reilly, *University of Sheffield*

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Information disorders, social media and polarisation in ‘post-conflict’ Northern Ireland.

While there has been much research into the weaponisation of digital disinformation during democratic elections, there has been little exploration of how online platforms facilitate information disorders in societies deeply divided along sectarian lines. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by exploring how social media is used to share misinformation and disinformation during contentious episodes in Northern Ireland. These are moments in which existing levels of polarisation within a society are ‘inflamed’ by ‘takeoff issues’ which are contested on and offline. Drawing on the case of Northern Ireland, a society still transitioning out of a thirty-year ethno-nationalist conflict, the paper suggests that the negative stereotyping of outgroups on social media militates against one of the key tenets of reconciliation, namely that citizens treat each other as individuals rather than anonymous members of the ‘other’ community. Using evidence from a number of contentious episodes during the past decade, including the union flag protests in December 2012, the Ardoyne parade disputes in 2014 and 2015, and the ‘Brexit riots’ in April 2021, the analysis suggests that these platforms amplify content that reinforces tribalism and political partisanship, thus making it harder to promote reconciliation in divided societies.

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“We are humans, first of all”: Constructing and renegotiating audiences’ identities in conflict discourse

Political actors strategically exploit identity politics, constructing and segmenting audiences to mobilise them against the “others” and provoke political conflict. However, empirical research on how elite-driven identity constructions translate into citizens’ social identities remains scarce and inconclusive. To understand how audiences transform the elite discourse, or are transformed by it, this study investigates renegotiation of strategic identity narratives in conflict-torn Eastern Ukraine. Both Russian and Ukrainian elite-dependent media target the overlapping bilingual Eastern Ukrainian audience, instrumentalizing competing narratives about the audiences’ national belonging. This study analyses 93 TV news broadcasts and 14 focus groups, comparing the identity categories in the conflict news coverage with the categories’ negotiations in the focus group discussions. The study finds that while the media discourse imposes rigid national identities upon the audiences, participants recognise their divisive potential and renegotiate the conflict in terms of civic, universal, and local territorial identities. However, power of narratives depends on social dynamics: the narrative categories are often appropriated when the ideologically engaged participants share the identity categories, but their resonance diminishes in disagreement. The article discusses multi-layered identity construction in socially negotiated information environment and its impact for audiences’ understanding of the conflict and for projecting the conflict resolution.

BREAK 11.00-11.15

11.15-12.45 PANEL 2 - Polarisation as a political strategy: Media as political actors.

Mr Sergiusz Bober, *European Centre for Minority Issues*

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When minority language newspapers become political actors: the role of Flensburg Avis and Der Nordschleswiger in the campaign arguing for the reopening of the Danish-German border during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the article 17 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, state parties should refrain from limiting rights of persons belonging to national minorities concerning “contacts across frontiers” (for example involving kin-states). This has been largely complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during its initial phase reaching towards the summer of 2020. In the Danish-German border region border closures were introduced in mid-March 2020, resulting in the infringement of such rights of both the Danish minority residing in Germany and the German minority residing in Denmark. During that period, the disproportionate effects of border closures on minorities had been reported by Flensburg Avis and Der Nordschleswiger (minority language newspapers operating in the region), alongside recurring calls for amended regulations better reflecting the regional complexities. Both media outlets, therefore, can be considered as becoming active participants in broader political processes. The aim of the proposed paper is to analyse comparatively those two cases of engaged journalism. Methodologically this will be approached through content analyses, scrutinizing editorials and news items discussing border closures, with the aim of identifying the main characteristics of both outlets’ argumentation against such measures. In addition, the importance of their role in the pressure campaign arguing in favour of the re-opening of the Danish-German border will be assessed. Ultimately, this should allow a contribution to the theoretical discussions concerning the purpose of minority language media, related to the issue of the proximity of such media outlets to the communities they serve.

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The strategic construction of the people on social media during American political campaigns: the cases of Joe Biden and Donald Trump (2020)

During the 2020 American political campaign, Joe Biden and Donald Trump used social media platforms not only as “a mechanism to communicate directly with the public”, but also as “a means of exerting power” . Their message was weaponized: its repetition and assimilation contributed to the shaping of the political environment. What kind of movement did Biden and Trump’s campaigns foster during their campaigns? Did they encourage the formation of a unified mass or did they divide the electorate in a constellation of polarized communities? In order to answer that question, I explored the construction of the notion of “people” on Twitter. The Twitter accounts @realDonaldTrump and @JoeBiden reveal how the candidates used diverse rhetorical tools to include and exclude various communities—the “in-groups” and the “out-groups”. These include framing and storytelling, grammatical devices such as the use of the plural or of pronouns, or modulations of tonality—between violence and empathy. Put together, the rhetorical construction of the American people highlights the electoral strategy of the candidate. First, its analysis allows us to nuance the stereotype which asserts that Trump’s rhetoric is resolutely divisive, and that Biden’s is univocally unifying. Then, it questions the role that Twitter itself had to play in this rhetoric—both as a means of communication and as an overarching entity which regulated discourse. Finally, it underlines the ideological lineages of the notion of “people” in American history.

This analysis also suggests that social media’s democratic role needs to be clearly defined. Indeed, the platforms foster a more direct interaction between the candidates and their electorate. In that sense, they favour the transition to a new kind of representation, based on authenticity and intimacy.

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The third person effect as a source of affective polarization upon exposure to political satire

With the salience of parties in the political arena, many citizens apply principles of group identification to their support, developing emotional bonds with other people who support the same party, and at the same time increasing their hostility towards people who support opposing parties. This process is called affective polarization. Studies show that affective polarization is exacerbated by exposure to media content with a partisan bias. Such content is most often news which portrays parties in a positive or negative way. However, previous studies have not shown how does political satire affect this type of polarization. Political satire inherently covers political actors and sends political messages to viewers, and therefore is able to change levels of affective polarization similarly to biased news. The objective of this study is to show that affective polarization among citizens can be increased by their processing of satirical messages, both with political satire that is in line with citizens' previous attitudes, and that which opposes them. The research aims to show that in the first case, satire through mockery of the other side will reinforce the citizen's perception that the side supported by them is the right one and the other is bad. However, we also want to demonstrate that when confronted with opposition satire, psychological needs for consistency will force individuals to employ heuristics and motivated reasoning, resulting with a backfire effect, and again reinforcement of existing attitudes. In short, the aim is to understand better the mechanisms of affective polarization and what contributes to it. This will help improve the understanding of individual electoral behaviour and the resistance to rational and informed vote casting, which leads to suboptimal political choices and greater social divisions.

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“Us and them” in Macedonian media space: The phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their reintegration processes

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), or people who traveled the battlefields of Iraq and/or Syria and have since returned to European soil, be it voluntarily or involuntarily – as well as the facilitators and recruiters of FTFs – pose a grave threat to society. The phenomenon of FTFs is not new and it has not evaded North Macedonia. North Macedonia is participating in Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans and undertakes the activities in that respect. The legal framework is in place and it is aligned with all the relevant international instruments. The above mentioned plans and strategies have been fulfilled with a relatively high degree of success. However, there is a need to further work on transparency and accountability since the general public is not aware of the phenomena and how the activities are implemented and what are their results. Consequently, the media space is dominated by sensationalist news, full of prejudices and stigmatisation. That doesn't help in the implementation of the set goals. Verified and sustained information is needed when informing about those sensitive topics, especially because of the fragility of the Macedonian multi-ethnic society where everything is placed within an ethnic context and most of the social phenomena are ethnically labeled.

12.45-13.15 ROUNDUP DISCUSSION & GOOD BYES

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