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ANALYSING NEWS POLARISATION: FROM PRODUCTION TO ENGAGEMENT AND BEYOND

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Panel Introduction

Political polarisation – at the level of individual issues or broader ideologies, and expressed through differences of opinion on policies, divergent affective attachments, contrary interpretations of available information, or distinct patterns of interaction with other partisans – is necessarily always closely related to the information that individuals and groups engage with as they form and reinforce their own opinions about a given issue or topic, and contest the views of others. News in all its forms, from legacy to emerging, and mainstream to fringe media, continues to play a particularly important role in such information diets, but news coverage can itself be polarised and polarising.

This panel addresses polarisation in and by the news through a series of papers that examine the various stages of the news production and engagement process. Drawing on innovative methods and novel datasets, these five papers offer new perspectives on the patterns and dynamics that affect news quality, news distribution, news engagement, and news fact-checking in digital and social media environments. In combination, they offer a new and comprehensive overview of how we might further investigate news polarisation in contemporary contexts.

Paper 1 assesses polarisation in news coverage. Centred on the issue of climate change, it investigates patterns of news coverage across the media landscape in Australia – a

country which has been particularly severely affected by extreme climate events in recent years. The paper highlights the challenges in accessing full-text news content at scale, and utilises a novel combination of manual and computational content coding techniques to investigate the patterns of news polarisation across four dimensions.

Paper 2 investigates what sources of news are frequently recommended to users of prominent search engine *Google News*. Drawing on a long-term data donation project in Australia, the paper reviews the range of sources recommended for a variety of political and controversial search queries, and assesses the breadth of the political spectrum that these prominent recommendations represent. It also examines whether such patterns differ across individual queries or broader topic categories.

Paper 3 shifts our attention to the sharing of news content on social media platforms. Drawing on long-term, large-scale datasets from Facebook and Twitter, it analyses the sharing of links to Australian news sources during 2022, and thereby reveals patterns of interactional and interpretive polarisation. These may be related to the political alignment of users and outlets, but also to news quality and other factors.

Paper 4 takes a network approach to the study of news sharing on Twitter in Germany. Assessing the topical content of links to German news shared during one month in 2023, and the political affinities of the users sharing these links, the study finds marked differences between the sharing practices and patterns of left-leaning, conservative, and far-right users, as well as between sharing practices on different topics.

Finally, Paper 5 closes the loop by examining the role perceptions of political fact-checkers, and their potential to contribute polarisation or depolarisation. Drawing on a series of interviews with staff in Australian fact-checking organisations, it provides a deep insight into their self-understanding, especially with respect to the extent and limitations of their impact on polarised debates in society.

In combination, then, these five papers address questions of news polarisation throughout the stages of the journalistic process from news production to distribution and engagement all the way to the critical scrutiny of political statements reported in the news. Overall, they make substantial new conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions to the study of news polarisation. Extended abstracts for all five papers are included on the following pages.

CHALLENGES IN ACQUIRING AND ANALYSING NEWS DATA AT SCALE: A CASE STUDY OF NEWS POLARISATION IN AUSTRALIAN CLIMATE CHANGE COVERAGE

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Introduction

At a time when the threat of climate change and the urgency of action are unmatched, the role of the news media industry in shaping public discourse and policy cannot be overstated. Sustainable solutions must, by definition, address the broader interests of humanity, not just of those with substantial resources (Malekpour et al., 2023). However, news media coverage is influenced not only by the newsworthiness of issues and claims, but also by who has the necessary political and financial standing to be mentioned in the news, reflecting networks of power and the profit motives of media organisations (Bennett, 1990; Splendore, 2020; Wichgers et al., 2021). Furthermore, news reporting can be partisan and a driver of societal polarisation (e.g., Feldman et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017). News is not purely a representation of reality; the voices that get to speak and the ways their stories are told in the news impact on our lived realities. News shapes our perception of social reality, and news content is thus crucial for understanding current levels of societal polarisation.

Against this background, this study proposes and evaluates a framework to analyse news polarisation within national media landscapes, specifically applying it to climate change coverage by Australian professional news media. Our study recognises Australia's unique challenges: patterns of extreme weather (Bradshaw et al., 2024) and corresponding public attention (Crellin & MacNeil, 2023), vulnerability to global warming across

environmental (Legge et al., 2020) and social impacts (e.g., on health: Lansbury et al., 2020; and social justice: Porter et al., 2020), an increasingly concentrated media landscape dominated by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Environment and Communications References Committee, 2021), and the presence of outright climate change denialism among political and corporate elites (Lucas, 2021). Despite 87% of Australians believing that climate change should be a governmental priority (Bradley et al., 2022), the topic remains ensnared in a highly polarised public discourse, marked by political disagreement and disengagement. Political leanings influence Australians' expectations of news coverage on climate change, with left-leaning audiences favouring activist journalism and right-leaning ones seeking diverse viewpoints (Park et al., 2022). This leads to our central research question:

How polarised is the Australian news media landscape in its coverage of climate change?

Types of News Media Polarisation

Despite its relevance in public debate, the concept of polarisation is poorly defined in media and communication research. Different forms or types of polarisation (e.g., political, ideological, issue, positional, policy, affective) have been identified in media contexts (e.g., Arguedas et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2020), but these sometimes overlap or are used interchangeably. Building on theoretical approaches from political science and media and communication studies, we examine four types of polarisation that we suggest are critical to determining news media polarisation: *source polarisation* (which actors get to speak?), *positional polarisation* (what positions are represented?), *value polarisation* (what societal and/or individual values are explicitly or implicitly privileged?), and *affective polarisation* (what emotions are attached to different actors and perspectives?).

In order to address these questions, the empirical component of this paper also addresses the profound challenge of news data availability at scale, a significant obstacle for news research well beyond our specific area of interest. It tackles this issue through a systematic comparison of leading digital news databases—GDELT, MediaCloud, GNews, NewsAPI, NewsDataIO, Factiva, and ProQuest—that evaluates key attributes such as the diversity of media outlet coverage, wildcard search capabilities, access to historical archives, full-text data export capabilities for computational analysis, associated costs, and quality metrics, such as data completeness.

This represents the first comprehensive effort to address the issue of *fluid news content* in today's digital media landscapes (e.g., Karlsson, 2012). Our findings reveal that—despite the fulsome claims of commercial news data vendors—no single database can provide a comprehensive news content sample representative of a national media landscape like Australia's, a limitation that extends to other Western democracies. This difficulty in obtaining a reliable news sample is a fundamental barrier to the systematic assessment of news polarisation, as well as for other studies that require large-scale, full-text news data access. The potential consequences of this are clear in the Australian case, where the combination of limited media diversity and both restricted and obscured news access could lead to disproportionately impacted findings, particularly when the balance between public-access and paywalled journalism is unevenly distributed across a polarised political spectrum.

Standardised Manual and LLM-Supported Content Analysis

Using both algorithmic and manual methods, we have compiled a hybrid dataset from NewsDataIO, Factiva, and ProQuest, and conducted a content analysis of climate change coverage across major mainstream and alternative Australian media outlets. Through this content analysis, we introduce and assess a multi-dimensional framework for the study of news polarisation, covering source, positional, value, and affective polarisation. This framework provides an innovative, in-depth understanding of how news content varies across political and financial power structures, ideological positions, emotional responses, and social and individual value systems.

We operationalise this framework through an innovative mixed-methods approach that builds on standardised manual content coding of a subset of the data and extends it to a much larger dataset by training a Large Language Model (LLM) to code the remainder of the dataset. In taking this approach we also evaluate the capability of current LLMs to augment human content coding efforts. In doing so we test for and iteratively improve intercoder reliability both between human and LLM coding as well as between multiple distinct repetitions of the LLM coding process, in order to reach acceptable levels of coding agreement. The paper documents this process, and thereby also contributes to advancing this new frontier in mixed-methods content analysis.

What results from this effort is a coded dataset of news content, at scale, across four dimensions of polarisation in news content. This enables us to identify the patterns of commonalities and cleavages in the coverage of a given issue (here, climate change) between and across different news outlets in Australia, and to trace the evolution of such patterns over time. This approach is also translatable to the study of news polarisation on other societal issues beyond climate change.

Different outlets (or groups of outlets, defined for instance by their organisational affiliations with the same media group) may turn out to favour distinct approaches to the coverage of climate change: variously minimising or exaggerating its impact; supporting action at the domestic or international level; or promoting industrial or societal responses. They may also feature distinct sets of sources (politicians; activists; scientists; industry) in their coverage. We interpret these patterns against the backdrop of past research into the Australian media landscape and its economic and political structure (e.g., Cunningham & Turnbull, 2020), and assess whether they serve as evidence of polarisation in the outlets' approaches to their reporting, in order to document and evaluate the Australian news media's performance on the coverage of climate change and its impacts.

Our study thus conceptualises and measures polarisation in news content across a selection of major mainstream and alternative Australian news outlets, thereby assessing the ability of contemporary news to inform, represent, and serve its intended publics. The case study of climate change coverage contributes to the broader discourse on news media polarisation by offering empirical evidence on whether and how news content, influenced by economic and political pressures, may perpetuate and exacerbate divisions within society.

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POLARISATION VIA SEARCH? ASSESSING THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM OF GOOGLE NEWS RECOMMENDATIONS

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For the past decade, the predominant concern relating to the recommendations returned by search engines has been about their potential to create ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser, 2011): that is, to personalise the information sources recommended for a given search term to such an extent that different searchers may use them to form widely divergent views of the world. Such concerns have been debunked (Bruns, 2019): a series of studies undertaken using varying methodological approaches and addressing several national contexts (e.g. Krafft et al., 2019; Haim et al., 2018; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018; Meese et al., 2023) have documented an overall lack of search result personalisation at the individual user level. Instead, these studies show that the information sources commonly recommended by leading search engines like *Google Search* and *Google News* are in fact highly consistent and privilege a small handful of major news outlets, reinforcing the market dominance of those news brands (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018: 302).

However, while concerns about the algorithmic creation of ‘filter bubbles’ must therefore be dismissed, this does not imply that even the largely mainstream sources recommended by leading search engines are inherently unproblematic. In a new study that updates the earlier findings by Nechushtai & Lewis (2019), for instance, Nechushtai et al. (2023: 17) document the rise to prominence of the far-right news channel *Fox News* amongst the sources most recommended by *Google News*, *Google Search*, and *YouTube*. Not only prominent, *Fox News* has also been prioritised in YouTube recommendations as an “authoritative” source – a category that appears to default to traditional media outlets, regardless of the quality or trustworthiness of their coverage

(YouTube, 2019). Its Australian NewsCorp counterpart *Sky News Australia* similarly appears frequently amongst search results in Australia – even though its video content was temporarily removed from *YouTube* for spreading misinformation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Meade, 2021).

Even in the absence of per-user personalisation, search results may therefore produce problematic effects if they recommend sources providing fringe and highly biased content, and thereby point users to material that promotes increased issue, interpretive, and ideological polarisation. Drawing on a unique dataset of hundreds of millions of search results provided as data donations by citizen participants over the course of a 10-month period in 2021 and 2022, this paper investigates the range of news sources recommended by *Google News* for a selection of queries on political, COVID-related, and otherwise controversial topics. We examine the political spectrum of the sources that are most commonly recommended for these queries; assess whether the breadth of this spectrum varies between queries (and whether this may point to human intervention in query results for some topics that could be considered by platforms to be both controversial and societally significant); and examine whether this breadth grew or shrunk over the course of the study period (which included part of the COVID pandemic).

Dataset and Methods

For this analysis we build on the data gathered by the Australian Search Experience (ASE) project in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (Bruns 2022). ASE recruited several hundred volunteer Australian users who installed a browser plugin that automatically ran queries for a set of approximately 40 search terms across *Google Search*, *Google News*, *Google Video*, and *YouTube* every four hours, if their computers were switched on, from September 2021 to July 2022. The plugin reported the first page of search results for each query to a central database, resulting in a dataset with several hundred million individual search results as well as additional metadata on their ranking on the results page, query terms and timestamps, and other ancillary information. Search terms used in our queries included the names of leading Australian politicians and parties, COVID-related terms such as ‘COVID’, ‘vaccine’, ‘quarantine’, and ‘lockdown’, as well as potentially polarised topics related to social issues, such as ‘Critical Race Theory’ and ‘feminism’. Data were processed to account for demographic skews in the ASE user population.

In this paper, and in keeping with the overall theme of the panel within which it is located, we focus on the search results obtained from *Google News*. For each of the search terms, we establish the 30 most commonly recommended news sources over the course of the entire study period, and assess fluctuations in their relative prominence over time; our past analyses of these data (Authors, redacted) have already shown that a small number of sources generally account for a very large proportion of all search results (thus also echoing similar observations made for the US by Nechushtai & Lewis), and these top 30 sources will therefore usually cover the vast majority of news recommendations.

We then draw on available secondary data to assess the political positioning and trustworthiness of these sources; such sources include the Australian edition of the *Digital News Report* (Park et al., 2023), which provides survey-based information on the political

leaning of the online and offline audiences of major Australian news brands, as well as equivalent reports covering any international news sources (*BBC*, *CNN*, etc.) that *Google News* may also recommend to Australian users, and trustworthiness assessments such as those produced by *NewsGuard* (NewsGuard Technologies, 2024) or the *Global Disinformation Index* (Glazunova et al., 2021). Where required we also consult the scholarly literature as well as government, industry, and NGO reports to assess the positioning and quality of news sources which are not covered in these reports.

Analysis and Implications

This critical assessment and annotation of the dominant news sources recommended by *Google News* for each search term then enables us to investigate the political spectrum represented by these search results, and its potential fluctuation over time. Where we identify a notable expansion or contraction of the breadth of that spectrum during the period investigated here, we will explore the relevant contexts – for instance, government initiatives to reduce the circulation of COVID disinformation, or publicly announced changes to Google’s own ratings of the quality of news sources, could both result in the systematic up- or down-ranking of specific news sources in search results.

We interpret the results of this study through the lens of the literature on polarisation. A variety of perspectives on a given topic is generally desirable in search results, but the persistent recommendation of vastly divergent news sources that present mutually incompatible worldviews can also foment further *interpretive* polarisation (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), as search users from all backgrounds are provided with material that supports and further entrenches their pre-existing biases about a given issue. (If search results recommend only sources located towards the extremes of the political spectrum, without also including prominent balanced and centrist voices, this would be exacerbated.)

Similarly, differences – between individual search terms – in the breadth of the political spectrum of recommendations may serve as an indicator of greater or lesser *issue* polarisation relating to the specific issues that these search terms address; conversely, an absence of such search term-specific differences in the dataset would mean that such issue polarisation is perhaps less likely than more general patterns of *ideological* polarisation that transcend specific issues (Lelkes, 2016).

We note here, however, that the patterns in the breadth of the political spectrum represented by *Google News* search results that our study observes point only to the *potential* for polarisation, rather than to a definitive *diagnosis*: it is up to search users to select from, engage with, and critically interpret the resources that *Google News* and other search engines recommend to them. The mere availability of different interpretations of a given issue or event does not necessarily lead to interpretive polarisation amongst the users who engaged with these interpretations (or at least not to a point where such interpretive differences become destructive).

We also do not intend to propose an ‘ideal breadth’ for the political spectrum represented by these search results. While there may be principled justifications for such a normative postulation, our principal aim for the present paper is to document and analyse the current

status quo, and thereby to enable further debate about whether that status quo appears appropriate in the current political context.

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POLARISATION IN NEWSSHARING: REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE FROM FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

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Introduction

Conventional conceptualisations of polarisation in political science frequently focus on interpersonal and intergroup differences of opinion on specific issues, broader ideologies, and overall identities (Lelkes, 2016; Esau et al., 2023). These are often investigated through participant self-assessment, for instance using responses to feeling thermometers on a collection of issues (e.g. Alwin, 1997). But in addition to such self-reported measures, recent political communication research has described several other forms of polarisation that may also be observed independently: these include, for example, interpretive polarisation (where different individuals and groups interpret the same issue or event in widely divergent ways; cf. Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) and interactional polarisation (where individuals and groups preferentially engage only with like-minded others; cf. Yarchi et al., 2021).

These latter forms of polarisation lend themselves to operationalisation through digital trace data, and this paper investigates the evidence for interpretive and interactional polarisation on Facebook and Twitter in Australia. In keeping with the overall theme of this panel, we do so specifically in the context of the news, focussing here on how users of both platforms share the news. Newssharing is a widespread, habitual practice on mainstream social media platforms (Bruns, 2018), and can be part of dedicated personal and collective news curation practices (Thomson & Wells, 2016); news content may be shared as is, or accompanied by framing texts that may be supportive or critical of the news reports being shared.

Data and Methods

We draw for our analysis on a number of large-scale datasets. For Twitter, we utilise an excerpt of the decade-long Australian Twitter News Index (ATNIX; see Bruns, 2017), which captured all tweets linking to one of 35 Australian news sources from 2012 to the discontinuation of the Twitter API under Elon Musk in 2023. For Facebook, we draw on a similar dataset (AFNIX), obtained from CrowdTangle, of all posts from public pages and groups that contained links to the same set of Australian news sources between 2018

and 2023, and further supplement this with data from the Facebook URL Shares dataset (Messing et al., 2018), providing aggregate metrics on the circulation of links to these sources in both public and non-public Facebook spaces but excluding the texts of the posts in which these URLs were shared. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on a year-long extract from these datasets, covering the year 2022. We select this year because it was significant for several political events both domestically (including the Australian federal election in May 2022) and internationally (including the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the US mid-term elections), and may therefore feature heightened levels of polarisation.

We process and analyse these datasets in order to assess levels of both interactional and interpretive polarisation. First, although *interactional* polarisation is often conceptualised as occurring between peers (e.g. social media users), here we operationalise it as describing patterns of interaction between social media users and news outlets: in line with and extending the concept of selective exposure (Stroud, 2010), this assumes that social media users preferentially access – and subsequently share – a selection of news sources with which they have a particular affinity. A simplistic assumption would therefore be that our analysis will produce several groups of accounts that have distinct and divergent newssharing repertoires (predominantly sharing progressive or conservative media, for instance). The strength of such distinctions would indicate the level of interactional polarisation in Australian newssharing.

However, reality is likely to be more complex, and social media users may at times also share news content that does not align with their ideology, for instance in order to critique it. Such critical sharing is likely to exhibit features that differ from supportive sharing: in the former, news headlines and URLs may be accompanied by an oppositional framing, while in the latter, users may simply amplify (on Twitter: retweet; on Facebook: share on) the news outlets' posts themselves, possibly with some limited additional commentary.

Second, therefore, in the ATNIX dataset (for Twitter) and the AFNIX dataset (for public pages and groups on Facebook) we distinguish these posting practices – both by distinguishing direct retweets and on-shares from posts that contain the news headlines and URLs but also add further commentary, and by evaluating that commentary for its stance towards the issues reported in the article. Through this part of our analysis, then, we are able to investigate *interpretive* polarisation: in addition to their overall newssharing repertoires, how do users differ in their interpretive approaches to the various news outlets (for instance, do they generally amplify one set of outlets uncritically, but often add their own commentary as they share others)? (The limitations of the Facebook URL Shares dataset prevent us from extending this analysis to the sharing of news URLs outside of public groups and pages, unfortunately.)

We investigate these intersecting patterns of interactional and interpretive polarisation through a mixture of large-scale network analysis and natural language processing and close qualitative interpretation of our findings. In addition to analysing our datasets for the full year 2022, we also examine the presence of any fluctuations in sharing patterns over the course of the year – for instance as the Australian federal election campaign potentially produces a temporary increase in political partisanship, or as Russia's attack on Ukraine creates a shared sense of outrage that transcends partisan camps.

Additionally, of course, any systematic divergences in newssharing polarisation patterns between Facebook and Twitter will also be of interest.

Prospective Contributions

We expect any patterns of both interactional and interpretive polarisation that emerge from this analysis to be determined at least in part by the political alignment of users and news outlets, and will draw in interpreting them on existing assessments of the relative political positioning of Australian news outlets on a spectrum from left to right (Park et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2020). However, other aspects – such as the relative quality of individual news outlets, from authoritative to tabloid – may also play a considerable role. Indeed, it is also possible that a small number of widely used news outlets (such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's major public media organisation) are so dominant with social media users that overall newssharing patterns produce no evidence of widespread polarisation, and instead point only to a lack of diversity in Australian Twitter and Facebook users' news repertoires. From some perspectives, such a state might even be seen as desirable – it would demonstrate that Australians have a broadly similar informational basis for their societal and political participation, and do not exist in highly divergent information environments.

Even if our study were to document such general homogeneity, however, significantly divergent interactional and interpretive patterns may still exist at the fringes of our datasets, and their presence could point to the existence of smaller polarised hyperpartisan individuals and groups in opposition to the broader societal mainstream. Our focus on (in 2022) fairly mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where they are perhaps underrepresented, might obscure their true strength; future extensions of the present work, to the extent that they are possible in other platform contexts, could therefore also compare our findings in this paper with alternative platforms such as Telegram or Reddit.

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MAPPING NEWS SHARING ON TWITTER: A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH BASED ON NETWORK EMBEDDINGS

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News sharing on digital platforms is a crucial activity that determines the digital spaces millions of users navigate. Sharing a news article can influence the visibility of the item in global networks as well as in small networked publics. Especially in the study of political news sharing, previous research based on digital trace data has focused on news that were labelled as misinforming or partisan *ex ante* (Vusoughi et al., 2018; Wischnewski et al., 2021). This can be useful in many study attempts, but reduces the diversity of news content into binary categories and obstructs a systematic view on news sharing on social media. Moreover, newsfeed environments contribute to the unbundling of news (Trilling, 2019) and disconnect the source from the news item, such that users might come across content from a variety of outlets – not only a few (e.g. partisan) ones.

All in all, we still know very little about collective news circulation online, and to what extent news sharing behavior crosses partisan, topic, or outlet lines.

To address this research gap and overcome the *ex-ante* definition of partisan news sharing, this study utilizes three different original data sources and combines them so that we can understand news sharing from the bottom up – that is, based on actual user sharing behavior. On the basis of all shares of a broad selection of German news outlets (both legacy and alternative), this approach can elucidate to what extent news engagement of certain political groups (such as partisans) is confined to certain outlets/topics or has unknown diversity. This also helps to understand how the publication of content by specific outlets contributes to a greater opinion climate around specific topics.

The research questions for this study are hence:

1. Are there systematic patterns of news sharing in the German political Twittersphere on the (i) outlet and (ii) topic level?
2. How diverse are the news shared in different regions of the German political Twittersphere in terms of (i) outlets and (ii) topics?
3. For which outlets does cross-partisan sharing occur?

To answer these questions, we combine multiple data sources (namely tweets, Twitter follower networks, and article full texts) via state-of-the-art network embedding methods

and automated text analysis. The study uses digital trace data of shared news from a very broad selection of news outlets. Moreover, it is one of the first works that combine political network embeddings with automated full-text analysis of news items. These different methods are brought together in the following research pipeline:

- We collected all tweets which contained a link to one of 26 legacy or alternative German news outlets for March 2023 (2.5M tweets).
- We crawled the full texts of the articles if available (60K unique texts); articles were assigned topics with a paragraph-based BERTopic model (Grootendorst, 2022).
- We collected the follower network of German MPs active on Twitter; this follower network was used to embed all followers of the MPs (and the MPs themselves) in a latent political space using correspondence analysis (Morales et al., 2022). This embedding technique has been shown to yield good agreement with widely-established latent space embeddings (see e.g. Barberà et al., 2015). The advantage of such an embedding over, e.g., community detection techniques is that it does not produce clear-cut clusters but a more nuanced, continuous space of users. In this case, since the followed users are politicians, we interpret the space as a political space. We primarily direct our analysis to two clearly interpretable dimensions of this latent space, where we observe a clear distinction between the right-wing populist *AfD* and the MPs of all other parties in parliament along one axis, while on the other, the latter ones are arranged along a left-right axis.

We find that users placed close to the right-wing populist *AfD* tend to be much more active in sharing media links compared to the rest of the users.

We investigate which types of articles are shared in which political regions of the latent space. Generally, sharing patterns are heterogeneous: left-leaning outlets are also shared by users in different political regions if the topic serves their political cause (qualitative example: an article of left-leaning *Der Spiegel* about a judge who justified a decision by referring to the Koran was shared mostly by users following *AfD* or *CDU/FDP* politicians). On the other hand, certain topics seem to be shared only by users in confined political regions (example: articles classified as dealing with the topic of a speed limit on German highways are nearly only shared by users close to *SPD/Greens*).

We quantify and map outlet diversity, which turns out to be highest among left-leaning users and lowest among market-liberal/conservative ones. In terms of outlet circulation along the two different political axes, tabloids and alternative-right outlets are shared relatively widely along the axis between *AfD* and the established parties – whereas left-leaning (alternative) media are spread more strongly along the left-right axis spanned up by the established parties. We also provide such an analysis on a topic level.

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EXAMINING CONSTRUCTIVE (DE)POLARISATION: THE CASE OF AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENT FACT CHECKERS

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Introduction

In this paper we share insights into how Australian fact checkers conceive of their roles and activities when scrutinising the claims of political actors (in contrast to their conceptions of their roles in platform-supported debunking efforts to verify online falsehoods). We present findings from an analysis of 9 interviews conducted with independent fact checkers operating in Australia, who are accredited members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Members of the IFCN apply industry-standard anti-partisan codes and principles as the foundation for correcting problematic narratives circulating on social media platforms (Poynter Institute, 2024). Yet, a commitment to anti-partisanship practices alone may not be sufficient for combatting political polarisation. We explore how Australian fact checkers describe their professional practices, which may or may not contribute to (de)polarisation efforts.

The Role and Effectiveness of Political Fact Checking

The professional roles that fact checkers adopt and the effectiveness of their practices in engaging with political misinformation, propaganda and the radicalisation of social media audiences has been extensively studied. Some researchers argue that the independent fact-checking field (Graves & Lauer, 2017) is pivotal in holding up the “objectivity” norm of political journalism (Graves, 2013; Amazeen, 2015) and disrupting flows of online dis/misinformation (Singer, 2023). Through a positivist and objectivist approach, fact checkers establish a common ground of “hard facts” that can be demonstrated to correspond with an accepted construction of reality (Graves, 2017). However, recent studies have found that dealing with context and framing is important in political fact checking. For example, Hamleers et al. (2019) found that fact checking can be more effective in correcting politically-charged misinformation if fact checkers avoid triggering identity-based in-group values. These authors found that positive results from specific fact-checking efforts varied from issue to issue. Other studies have found that common fact-checking practices, including selecting political campaign-related statements, verifying numerous political claims within one fact check, or using “truth scales” can weaken the effectiveness of fact checking efforts (Walter et al., 2020).

Of particular relevance for our work, Lee et al. (2021) first conceptualised the term, *factual belief polarization*, which refers to how partisans not only differ on ideological worldviews, but also on their evidence-seeking practices and their perceived legitimacy of particular data sources. Rekker (2022) argues that this unique type of polarisation threatens civil cooperation and democratic functioning because political adversaries “lack a basic sense of shared reality” (p. 223). In terms of the implications of this conceptualisation for fact checking, it is clear that there is little point in fact checkers establishing that a claim adheres to facts if the facts themselves are questioned by audiences. Factual belief polarisation is additionally complicated by the activities of partisan actors who appeal to “social networked models of knowledge” (Wihbey, 2019), in contrast to institutional models of knowledge.

The move from political fact checking to debunking (Graves et al., 2023), sustained by policies and funding from social media platforms, also highlights important tensions for fact checkers regarding their contributions to (de)polarisation. While fact checking the claims of political actors on their social media platforms is discouraged by platform sponsors, researchers recognise that ideologically-motivated and polarising claims often spread from politicians and other elite actors to broader online audiences (see, for example, Bruns. 2020).

Destructive Polarisation and Constructive Depolarisation Efforts

To explore the (de)polarisation efforts of fact checkers with empirical research, we draw on Esau et al.’s (2023) criteria of destructive polarisation. Esau and colleagues characterise destructive polarisation using criteria including: 1) *breakdown of communication*, 2) *discrediting and dismissing information*, 3) *erasure of complexities*, 4) *exacerbated attention and space for extreme voices*, and 5) *exclusion through emotions*. This panel contribution identifies several ways that independent fact checkers in Australia may contribute to depolarisation through constructive depolarization.

Australian Fact Checkers’ Contributions to (De)polarisation Efforts

Fact checkers participating in our study saw themselves as playing supporting roles in helping audience members (re)establish constructive dialogue with others by giving them correct information to inform conversations. Some also implemented “right of reply” policies to encourage constructive dialogue with the politicians whose claims they were checking.

They described their roles as adhering to evidence-based verification and reintroducing the primacy of evidence, or truth, to political debate. For fact checkers in the Australian context, this took place in the claim selection process, where consequential or contested claims were first identified, and through the research process, evidence was gathered to reach a verdict. As one participant described it:

We look for contested claims...[and] follow the claim through, if it's contested, towards its conclusion. If it ends up being correct, we will still publish that.
(Participant 11)

The political fact-checking model differs significantly from the debunking model of fact checking, which is only incentivises the verification of claims that are demonstrably false:

It's a different type of fact checking if you like, so we're looking at narratives and nuances and how society is communicating information, and what are the information needs [...] It's more than just an information crisis. (Participant 3)

Fact checkers also focused their efforts on prebunking expected claims and narratives, and relied on producing evidence-informed explainers as a core practice when they anticipated that the claims could be particularly problematic. The fact checkers we interviewed explained that they often dealt with claims that required a lot of contextual explanation. For example:

[we look at] tactics...sort of anything that's not necessarily misinformation, so like harmful narratives, hate speech, things like that. And it's usually based around the elections or The Voice, or the sort of big events that tend to dominate. (Participant 4)

Some fact checkers also saw an important educational role for themselves in explaining complexity and nuance as a depolarisation strategy. Fact checkers also emphasised cultivating reader trust through practices conveying balanced political representation and fairness. They also prioritised taking emotions out of the deliberations and avoiding personal attacks by focusing on the evidence and facts.

The reports from fact checkers captured in this study also contained descriptions of practices that inhibited the ability of fact checkers to engage in depolarisation efforts. Fact checkers recognised that they could only focus their investigations on those who participate in communication in public settings. They imagined their audiences as readers or viewers with moderate views or those who had a deficit in knowledge on issues.

This choice of audience could have significant implications when the legitimacy of the data used for decision making was under question. Fact checkers recognised that their legitimacy depended on public trust in official institutionally-recognised data, such as data from official channels, academic research and advice from experts. Fact checkers in our study considered the Australian public to be relatively trusting of official data and experts but expressed concern that developing patterns in the United States could also emerge in local contexts.

I get the distrust of media and government... what's particularly worrying is the distrust of scientific institutions and academia. You know...it's a very kind of, like, Trumpian thing, I guess... (Participant 19)

This approach to data legitimacy was not necessarily shared by fact checkers working under the debunking model, which incentivises fact checkers to grapple with only verifiably false information, rather than claims that undermine the credibility of democratic and evidence-based systems of governance.

These findings, and others from our study of Australian independent fact checkers will be discussed and expanded on during this panel session at AoIR 2024.

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