



Tues, April 29

Hamerschlag Hall

Room B206

2:30 p.m.



Sharad Goel
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Ideological Segregation and the Effects of Social Media on News Consumption

Sharad Goel is a Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research New York. He works in the general area of computational social science, an emerging discipline at the intersection of computer science, statistics, and the social sciences. Sharad is particularly interested in large-scale empirical analyzes that address questions motivated by sociology and economics. Sharad holds a PhD in Applied Mathematics and a Masters in Computer Science from Cornell, and a BS in Mathematics from the University of Chicago. Following postdoctoral positions in the math departments at Stanford and the University of Southern California, he worked in the Microeconomics and Social Systems group at Yahoo Research.

Ideological Segregation and the Effects of Social Media on News Consumption

Scholars and pundits have argued that the growth of social media and personalized web search increases political segregation by fostering so-called filter bubbles, in which individuals are only exposed to ideologically similar perspectives. Though this worry is supported by several laboratory experiments, survey data suggest that the general U.S. population has not in fact become substantially more polarized in recent years. We investigate this apparent incongruence by examining web browsing histories for 1.2 million U.S.-located users to measure the effects of recent technological changes on news consumption. We find that individuals indeed exhibit higher segregation when reading articles shared on social media or returned by search engines, a pattern driven by opinion pieces. However, opinion articles from social media and web search constitute only 2% of total news consumption. Rather, most people primarily read descriptive reporting, and do so by directly visiting a handful of mainstream, ideologically similar news outlets. Though this results in individuals having little exposure to content from their less preferred side of the political spectrum, it also leads to a moderate overall level of segregation. Consequently, while recent technological changes do appear to increase ideological segregation, the relative dearth of news obtained via the polarizing channels of social media and web search limits the magnitude of the effect.

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