
Cheap Friendship

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INTRODUCTION

This Essay argues that the Internet law and policy community has misdiagnosed the causes of political polarization. Rather, more precisely, it has missed a major contributing cause. The dominant theories focus on Big Tech (e.g., the filter bubbles that curate Internet content with self-interested goals at the expense of democratic functioning) and on faulty cognition (e.g., human tendencies to favor sensationalism and tribal dogmatism). Cheap speech, according to these dominant theories, provides the fuel and fodder.

We offer an explanation that is at once more banal and more resistant to policy interventions: cheap friendship.

We use “cheap” here the way it is used in the context of “cheap speech” — namely, that it is less costly, less encumbered by friction. We do not mean that the friendships are insignificant or disposable. To the contrary, friendships have become stronger (at least, in their effect on beliefs) precisely *because* the bonds are so easy to maintain. Facebook allows us to freely communicate with our friends about a wide variety of topics persistently, no matter where we are or what we are doing. Unlike in the past, geographic mobility and the random

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happenstance of neighborhoods, schooling, and employment has not disrupted our ability to stay in constant, close contact with our friends. (That said, there is at least one way in which the web-based bonds of friendship may indeed “cheapen” the friendships if there is a form of constant social scrutiny that impedes honesty and intimacy. We briefly discuss this form of cheapness as well, though it is not our primary focus.)

The strength of socially-motivated communication has many benefits, but there is a dark side when it comes to complex, difficult-to-verify facts. Even a diverse and free-thinking set of friends will typically circulate information that is slightly unrepresentative, and the cumulative impact of selective evidence will cause a serious decline in our knowledge. Unless an individual proactively engages in epistemic countermeasures to gather a more random or more representative set of facts, even a very analytical person who engages in perfect Bayesian updating will wind up harboring misguided beliefs. Thus, even under the *best* conditions, cheap friendship is a threat to epistemic progress. And of course, most of us are not so Vulcan-like. We have additional pragmatic pressures to conform to friends’ expectations and beliefs and to defend shared beliefs from disillusion that make friendship an even greater threat to clear-eyed credence.

This Essay explores the pox of persistent friendship. We lay out the case that as the costs of keeping up with friends is reduced, toxic polarization is more likely to occur. The problem of cheap friendship helps explain some of the empirical findings that are inconsistent with dogmatic tribalism, bounded rationality, and other theories that center around algorithms and content manipulation as primary causes of political polarization. And so, it may well be that the Internet’s effects on friendship is just as profound as its impact on the creation, accessibility, and velocity of expressive content.

This idea, like so many circulating in the Internet law & policy community, can find its roots in Eugene Volokh’s seminal *Cheap Speech* article. Volokh predicted that traditional, aggregated sources of news would be replaced with “custom-tailored” newspapers and opinion pieces curated by our friends.¹ But while scholars and policymakers have worried about exploitative tech firms and extremist interest groups, they have not acknowledged the more fundamental and chronologically prior deleterious effects of ordinary modern friendships.

¹ Eugene Volokh, *Cheap Speech and What It Will Do*, 104 YALE L.J. 1805, 1828-29 (1995).

I. FROM CHEAP TO EXPENSIVE BACK TO CHEAP FRIENDSHIP

The impact of our associational choices on the acquisition and aggregation of knowledge has been acknowledged in policy literature but vastly underappreciated.² Social networks (both online and off) are critical infrastructure for information, and that means they shape how we understand and organize society. Thus, we should expect any major shock to patterns of friendship to have a tremendous impact on our social, economic, and political order.

Prior to the 19th century, most people lived and worked in small, close-knit groups. Friendships in the pre-industrial era were the natural biproduct of low physical mobility, strong local social ties, and poor access to information about other ideas and cultures. The typical person may have felt a strong sense of belonging, but the circumstances were bad for epistemic progress. New, unorthodox information was not only hard to come by but easily quashed by authority figures.³

Industrialization rapidly changed this. The unit of social life was no longer the village but the individual, who had a unique network of networks.⁴ Family, coworkers, neighbors, and church members were different from each other, allowing a certain amount of churn and flexibility within a person's social network. Thus, the industrial era was characterized by a greater quantity of weaker social ties. There was also a significant expansion of access to information. First, when information was gathered, it tended to come from a wider set of sources since modern networks were themselves composed of a more random cross-section of individuals.⁵ This meant access to more, and more diverse, information, marking a time of significant progress in efficiently aggregating information.

² See, e.g., Tabatha Abu El-Haj, *Friends, Associates, and Associations: Theoretically and Empirically Grounding the Freedom of Association*, 56 ARIZ. L. REV. 53 (2014) (arguing that free association is vital to a sound democratic process, including by promoting access and dissemination of relevant information); Herbert Gintis & Dirk Helbing, *Homo Socialis: An Analytical Core for Sociological Theory*, 2 REV. BEHAV. ECON. 1 (2015) (proposing a model of general social equilibrium that incorporates the social ties stemming from free association in the analysis of information problems).

³ Keth N. Hampton & Barry Wellman, *Lost and Saved . . . Again: The Moral Panic About the Loss of Community Takes Hold of Social Media*, 47 CONTEMP. SOC. 643, 644-45 (2018).

⁴ *Id.* at 646.

⁵ See Mark Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, 78 AM. J. SOC. 1360, 1370-71 (1973) ("The fewer indirect contacts one has the more encapsulated he will be in terms of knowledge of the world beyond his own friendship circle; thus, bridging weak ties (and the consequent indirect contacts) are important in both ways.").

At the same time, the role of social ties was not as critical for epistemic pursuits as it had been before urbanization. Knowledge could be acquired through new or greatly expanded institutions like public education, modern universities, the industrial press, and broadcast media, and each of these was accessible (to at least some degree) regardless of who one kept as friends. These information aggregating enterprises were expensive, so their limited supply created natural bottlenecks. As a result, they tended to have the economic motivation to serve a common denominator.⁶ Or at least, in any event, they did not have extreme economic pressure that tense competition can cause to compromise truth-seeking in order to serve a niche viewpoint.⁷ So, like the increasingly random social associations, mass media tended to reflect the knowledge of a wide (but not perfectly representative) swath of the population.

The Internet brought another, and altogether different, mode of living. As with the industrial era, people enjoy high levels of physical mobility. But at the same time, the costs of keeping up with previously established friendships have been dramatically reduced.⁸ This allows individuals to find and maintain close ties without disruption from physical separation. Indeed, even when an individual is at work, he can keep up with the opinions and communications of friends outside the workplace, making the task of finding social connections at work marginally less important.

The end result is that, in the socially networked ecosystem, a greater share of information comes from conversation with friends. Thus, we are exposed to less random information simply by dint of our natural desire to maintain our friendships using the communications technologies available to us.

⁶ Simon P. Anderson & Jean J. Gabszewicz, *The Media and Advertising: A Tale of Two-Sided Markets*, in 1 HANDBOOK OF THE ECONOMICS OF ART & CULTURE 567, 568, 573 (Victor A. Ginsburgh & David Throsby eds., 2006); David Waterman, "Narrowcasting" and "Broadcasting" on Nonbroadcast Media: A Program Choice Model, 19 COMM. RSCH. 3, 3-4 (1992).

⁷ Ethan Hartsell, Miriam J. Metzger & Andrew J. Flanagin, *Contemporary News Production and Consumption: Implications for Selective Exposure, Group Polarization, and Credibility*, in NEWS WITH A VIEW: ESSAYS ON THE ECLIPSE OF OBJECTIVITY IN MODERN JOURNALISM 238, 239-40 (Burton St. John III & Kirsten A. Johnson eds., 2012).

⁸ ALESSANDRO ACQUISTI, STEFANOS GRITZALIS, COSTAS LAMBRINOUDAKIS & SABRINA DE CAPITANI DI VIMERCATI, DIGITAL PRIVACY: THEORY, TECHNOLOGIES, AND PRACTICES 437 (2007) ("Digital technology has lowered the costs of collective activity and decreased the importance of geographical proximity.").

II. KNOWLEDGE COMPETES WITH FRIENDSHIP

In the information age, information is so abundant that the key to the quality of an epistemic endeavor is determined not by *access* to information, but by the *selection* of it. We are increasingly placing the responsibility on our friends to make that selection.⁹

From an epistemic perspective, this is an unwelcome trend because the selection of information will be unrepresentative *and* inherently interesting (after all, we want to know what our friends think). People who share a social bond are also likely to have correlated access to facts related to political issues, even if politics had nothing to do with the original formation of the friendship. Thus, the keeping up with our friends, even when we are at work or in other less-homogeneous environment, creates the proverbial “filter bubble.”

The significance of the seemingly innocuous fact that we learn from our friends is easily lost if we are not precise. We are *not* referring to cognitive distortions like confirmation bias or social phenomena like tribalism that can cause people to seek out or better retain information that is consistent with their priors or their group identity. Biases and “post-truth” phenomena may occur as well, but we are suggesting something altogether more shocking: even if individuals are engaged in good faith attempts to understand the truth, and even if they are rational, and want to avoid confirmatory filter bubbles, they will *still* become more polarized in their beliefs if their friends are a source of political information.¹⁰

Let’s work through an example. Suppose that, based on some experiences in the real world, a man named Jim has observed weak evidence to form a tentative conclusion that a certain policy promotes

⁹ Social media platforms are a leading source of news and political information, and are the most frequently used source for American adults under thirty. See Jeffrey Gottfried & Elisa Shearer, *News Use Across Social Media Platform*, PEW RES. CTR. (May 26, 2016), http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/05/PJ_2016_05.26_social-media-and-news_FINAL-1.pdf [<https://perma.cc/G2T2-JVZA>] (reporting that 62% of US adults get their news from social media and 71% of that is from Facebook); Elisa Shearer, *Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. as a News Source*, PEW RES. CTR. (Dec. 10, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/> [<https://perma.cc/2YXX-84VP>].

¹⁰ To be clear, the socially-driven information selection problem we describe also differs from psychological theories of “selective exposure,” where people only look for supporting evidence and discard dissonant evidence where the source of selection is cognitive dissonance (i.e., the psychic discomfort of encountering disagreement). See Dieter Frey, *Recent Research on Selective Exposure to Information*, 19 ADVANCES EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 41, 41-42 (1986).

women at the expense of men.¹¹ Jim's friends are more likely than a random sample of people to share these initial beliefs, even if they have never discussed the policy, simply by dint of being more similar across a range of other factors. The news items that Jim sees shared on Facebook are likely to provide a slightly tilted (non-random) sample of facts. Over time, as Jim updates his beliefs based on the facts he sees, he could become radically polarized.

This polarization process does not require any bias in the sense that psychology and legal scholars often use that term. Jim doesn't need to be an ideologue, and Facebook doesn't need to give him tunnel vision, in order for his news exposure to be segmented. He just needs to have a typical human experience where bonding correlates with other, politically salient factors.

Also, there need not be anything factually inaccurate or misleading in any of the pieces of information or in Jim's interpretation of them to lead to polarization. Instead, the collection of factually accurate and independently shared pieces of information is true but

¹¹ We treat Jim as a rational Bayesian. See Paul R. Milgrom, *Good News and Bad News: Representation Theorems and Applications*, 12 BELL J. ECON. 380, 380, 382-83 (1981) (modeling methods in information economics). In a stylized example, adapted by a prior study of us, let's thus assume that Jim begins with a prior of $cr(\varphi = T) = \frac{1}{2}$ on whether the proposition φ , that feminism promotes women at the expense of men, is true. See Jane R. Bambauer, Saura Masconale & Simone M. Sepe, *The Nonrandom Walk of Knowledge*, 37 J. SOC. PHIL. & POL'Y 249, 252-54 (2021). Suppose Jim can receive one of three possible signals, a , b , or c , by chatting with somebody on the street (a), reading an op-ed in the first newspaper he finds (b), or casually listening to talk radio (c). Each of these pieces of evidence is a signal that Jim can use to update his credence, where $s \in \{a, b, c\}$. Based on these signals, Jim is able to update his initial credence to $cr(\varphi = T|s)$, where this credence will depend on the likelihood distribution functions of receiving each signal under conditions where φ is true or φ is false and in accordance with the Bayes' rule (where the Bayes' rule here reads: $\frac{cr(s|\varphi=T)}{cr(s|\varphi=T)+cr(s|\varphi=F)}$). Suppose that, depending on the signal he receives, Jim will update his prior as follows: $cr(\varphi = T|a)=0.391$, $cr(\varphi = T|b)=0.483$, and $cr(\varphi = T|c)=0.605$ (where these credences obtain under the Bayes' rule from the following likelihood distribution functions conditional on φ being true, $cr(a|\varphi = T)=0.25$, $cr(b|\varphi = T)=0.29$, $cr(c|\varphi = T)=0.46$, and conditional on φ being false, $cr(a|\varphi = F)=0.39$, $cr(b|\varphi = F)=0.31$, $cr(c|\varphi = F)=0.30$). Let's further assume that Jim receives signal c so that he updates his credence to a moderate credence, $cr(\varphi = T|c)=0.605$, that feminism promotes women at the expense of men. Of course, the precision of these calculations and the likelihood distribution functions that product them, like the hypothetical as a whole, is far-fetched. But if our illustration works under the demanding and constrained assumptions of objective Bayesianism (which assumes that likelihood distribution functions are objective and known), it will also work a fortiori under more relaxed assumptions.

unrepresentative, leading to epistemic failure even if Jim appropriately interprets each individual piece of evidence and appropriately weights the credibility of the source. Mere exposure to a nonrandom stream of facts that Jim's friends have revealed in good faith will negatively affect Jim's understanding of the truth even if he and all his friends are free from cognitive biases. Thus, even if Jim starts with a moderate credence in his conclusion, and even if he treats each piece of data he sees on Facebook as weak evidence, he can wind up with a much more radical belief on the topic.¹²

A study of over ten million Facebook users during six months in 2015 bears this out: about 13% of the content circulating among these users were news items, and if the Facebook users were forced into random friendships, 40-45% of the news shared by "friends" would cut against the users' political preference.¹³ But their actual friendships, which are not random, reduced access to cross-cutting information. For conservatives, 35% of the news items shared by friends were cross-cutting, and for liberals the proportion was lower still — 24%.¹⁴ In both cases, the Facebook news feed (based on the user's past engagement) further reduced cross-cutting content.¹⁵ So, the average user will receive a set of information that is not "filtered" into totally separate universes, but nevertheless is segmented enough to gently, repeatedly, push beliefs to the edges.

The exposure to evidence that Jim sees on Facebook can quickly eclipse the value of better evidence from subject matter experts, even if Jim gives that expert evidence the greater credibility it deserves. Again, this does not require Jim to be dogmatic and tribal.¹⁶ Rather, Jim will

¹² Continuing with the example, let's pose that Jim talks online with two friends who also independently received a signal c that feminism promotes women at the expense of men, each will wind up with a stronger posterior credence that feminism promotes gender inequality — $cr(\varphi = T|c, c, c) = 0.782$. And if the next search or post from either of the three results in another, seemingly independent discovery of c , and then another, and another (which could happen, for example, if other people who independently received the same signal c join the conversation), it would not take long for Jim's priors to be updated to a radical extreme (for example, $cr(\varphi = T|c \times 10) = 0.986$).

¹³ Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing & Lada A. Adamic, *Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook*, 348 SCIENCE 1130, 1130 (2015).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 1131.

¹⁶ Contrary to popular understanding, partisans *do* change their beliefs when presented with factual information. HUGO MERCIER, NOT BORN YESTERDAY 49 (2020); Thomas Wood & Ethan Porter, *The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence*, 41 POL. BEHAV. 135, 136-37 (2018) (finding empirical evidence that

rationally discount the value of that additional evidence based on the steady stream of evidence he has already received.¹⁷ This sort of plausibility checking is a sound epistemic practice that tends to *improve* a person's perception of reality in most contexts.¹⁸ It only backfires here because the preexisting beliefs were formed from a consistent trickle of information from trustworthy and (seemingly) independent friends. To correct his misimpression, Jim would have to take a break from listening to his friends or proactively seek out a more representative, random sample of signals.

The example with Jim is a refinement of an experiment first introduced in the 1970s. David Myers divided his students into two groups based on their initial attitudes toward feminism and then left them alone to talk.¹⁹ The discussion, of course, caused the individuals in each group to become more extreme in the direction of their initial inkling, and many similar studies have produced similar results.²⁰ But the *reasons* for group polarization remain the subject of debate.

citizens heed factual information, even when such information challenges their ideological commitments).

¹⁷ In our example, suppose an expert can receive qualified signals, $q \in \{d, e, f\}$, where the likelihood distribution functions of these signals are much more informative than those of the set of signals $s \in \{a, b, c\}$ about φ that Jim could receive (i.e., the likelihood distribution functions conditional on φ being true here are $cr(d|\varphi = T)=0.06$, $cr(e|\varphi = T)=0.11$, $cr(f|\varphi = T)=0.83$, and conditional on φ being false, $cr(d|\varphi = F)=0.82$, $cr(e|\varphi = F)=0.10$, $cr(f|\varphi = F)=0.08$). See our previous examples using Bayesian logic, *supra* notes 11, 12. If the expert receives signal d such that $cr(\varphi = T|d)=0.068$, she will be strongly convinced that the proposition is false. The expert's testimony can still have some influence on Jim's beliefs, but the influence will be much attenuated if Jim has already become radicalized by his interactions with friends — $cr(\varphi = T|c \times 10, d)=0.840$, despite the expert's greater familiarity with better evidence (where here the Bayes' formula is
$$\frac{cr(s|\varphi=T) \times cr(q|\varphi=T)}{[cr(s|\varphi=T) \times cr(q|\varphi=T)] + [cr(s|\varphi=F) \times cr(q|\varphi=F)]}$$
).

¹⁸ See MERCIER, *supra* note 16, at 59.

¹⁹ David G. Myers, *Discussion-Induced Attitude Polarization*, 28 HUM. REL. 699, 707-10 (1975).

²⁰ See, e.g., CASS R. SUNSTEIN & REID HASTIE, *WISER: GETTING BEYOND GROUPTHINK TO MAKE GROUPS SMARTER* 81-82 (2015) (conducting an experiment where liberal people from Boulder and conservative from Colorado Spring were brought together to discuss controversial political issues and finding that in almost every case experiment participants held more-extreme positions after they spoke with like-minded others). Polarization studies originated in social psychology in the late sixties, with scholars first pointing out that members of a deliberating group will move toward more-extreme points on the scale. See Serge Moscovici & Marisa Zavalloni, *The Group as Polarizer of Attitudes*, 12 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 125, 125 (1969).

Some theories, like social pressure and silencing of dissent, are not consistent with the experimental settings where researchers polled participants anonymously and where the social stakes of disagreement were minimal.²¹ A more plausible explanation, which comes closer to our own, is Cass Sunstein's theory of "enclave deliberation" in which groups that are more homogeneous (without regard to how they were formed) are more likely to draw their information from overlapping "argument pools."²² Bias in the argument pools in turn decreases the epistemic ambivalence that each participant had started with.²³ But Sunstein doesn't explain why a person would consistently wind up receiving and believing information from one non-representative group, or why the mistaken beliefs wouldn't be corrected once the individuals go mingle in other groups.

Persistent communication among friends provides the explanation. And of course, friendship has an even more nefarious effect on knowledge if friends are not only conduits of information, but sources of pressure — whether intentional or not — to conform to particular political beliefs.

There is reason to believe that some amount of social pressure does cause what Timur Kuran calls "preference falsification" — that is, the phenomenon in which people attest to a factual proposition that they do not actually believe, and these false assertions can, in time, cause an increase in genuinely held beliefs in the false proposition.²⁴ If an individual does not share information he has with friends because he is concerned about the reputational cost of doing so, his friends will suffer because their exposure to factual input will be even more biased than the homophily within their friendships already would predict. It's plausible that social networks are a particularly potent form of the panopticon that cause restraint and over-caution even among friends

²¹ The Sunstein and Kahan studies used anonymous, private pre- and post-discussion surveys, for example. SUNSTEIN & HASTIE, *supra* note 20, at 81-82; see Dan M. Kahan, *Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection*, 8 JUDGMENT & DECISION MAKING 407, 410 (2013) (randomly selecting participants in the study, having them self-identify, and performing on-paper tests, resulting in a very low-stakes environment).

²² See Cass R. Sunstein, *The Law of Group Polarization*, 10 J. POL. PHIL. 175, 177, 181 (2002).

²³ See Penny S. Visser & Robert R. Mirabile, *Attitudes in the Social Context: The Impact of Social Network Composition on Individual-Level Attitude Strength*, 87 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 779, 783 (2004) (finding that social groups increase attitude strength by decreasing ambivalence).

²⁴ TIMUR KURAN, *PRIVATE TRUTHS, PUBLIC LIES: THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF PREFERENCE FALSIFICATION* 4-5 (1997).

(or, maybe, *especially* among friends) during conversation about politically charged topics. If this occurs, then knowledge is lost *and* friendship is cheapened since one of the primary values of friendship is the comfort of a benefit of the doubt and generosity of spirit when honestly sharing beliefs.

But strictly speaking, social pressure to conform is not necessary for a serious assault on epistemic progress. Only two conditions need to be met in order for perfectly rational people to be taken way off base in their political beliefs, and neither condition is inherently troubling. Polarization will occur if: (1) friends are likely to have homophily (and predispositions) not only about the topics of their initial friendship, but on political and other topics as well; and (2) friends and associates will take some stock in the political information shared by each other. That is to say, even if the friendship is not political in nature, and even if an individual appropriately discounts the authority of an associate's position on a political topic, as long as they do not dismiss it entirely, social media will cause epistemic failure.

Our theory of friend-selected information supply can help explain why James Fishkin does not find evidence of group polarization in his experiments on deliberative polls in various contexts.²⁵ Fishkin was very careful in selecting participants from an heterogeneous pool (“a national probability sample of the citizen voting age population”) and making sure they were exposed to substantial and equally heterogeneous evidence (“balanced, accessible briefing materials to help inform them and get them thinking more seriously about the same subject(s)”).²⁶ Perhaps more importantly, selection for group deliberation within the participant pool was explicitly designed to be random. Fishkin used this design to ensure that the “discussions feature a far wider variety of perspectives than most participants are likely to encounter in real life.”²⁷ That is, he designed the experiment so to reduce selection effects from our actual associations. The trouble is, Fishkin's study is highly synthetic *precisely because* he prepared random groups. Now that the Internet has made it virtually costless for people who are similar in ways

²⁵ See JAMES S. FISHKIN, *THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE: PUBLIC OPINION & DEMOCRACY* 205-221 (1995); James S. Fishkin & Robert C. Luskin, *Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion*, 40 *ACTA POLITICA* 284, 290-292 (2005) (summarizing results).

²⁶ See Robert C. Luskin, James S. Fishkin & Roger Jowell, *Considered Opinions: Deliberative Polling in Britain*, 32 *BRIT. J. POL. SCI.* 455, 458 (2002) (analyzing in depth one of Fishkin's experiments that focused on a deliberative poll conducted in Britain in 1994 on the issue of combating crime and the tools to use for it).

²⁷ *Id.* at 459.

that matter socially (and, therefore, often similar politically, too) to find and engage with each other, the precepts of healthy deliberation are violated.

The problems that stem from friend-selected information supply are not strictly limited to the lay public. Scholars and experts are also vulnerable to these effects since we, too, have non-random friends and associations.²⁸ Concededly, there may be a qualitative difference between expert and laymen polarization as long as we have reason to expect experts to cultivate scientific norms, to seek out disproof and to value countervailing evidence as some of the most informative. But if academics run across probative information while interacting with friends and colleagues, the difference will be one of degree rather than of kind. In the digital era of persistent connection, we cannot presume experts to be immune from what McIntyre has dubbed “the dark side of interactive group effects.”²⁹

Here lies the ugly implication: our friendships help make us the rabid sports fans of politics that we are. Platforms like Facebook have imperiled democracy simply by doing exactly what we want them to do, what liberal democratic values urge them to do, and what the Constitution protects them to do: enabling people to interact in good faith with their friends and associates in order to learn from each other.

CONCLUSION

Because the Internet reduced the costs of staying in persistent communication with our social ties, polarization and epistemic dysfunction will be the default mode. Human nature will drive us to stay connected and share information to our friends and associates. It will also drive us to take stock of the new factual information we receive. While we have developed many instincts to protect us from lies and distortions of people who may have ulterior motives,³⁰ we have not had

²⁸ Reid Hastie & Cass R. Sunstein, *Polarization: One Reason Groups Fail*, CHI. BOOTH REV. (July 21, 2015), <https://review.chicagobooth.edu/magazine/spring-2015/one-reason-groups-fail-polarization> [<https://perma.cc/Y63D-WAM4>] (“[E]ven US federal judges — experts in the law, who are supposedly neutral — are highly susceptible to group polarization. A past study demonstrates both Democratic and Republican appointees showed far more ideological voting patterns when sitting with other judges appointed by a president who shared the same political party.”).

²⁹ LEE MCINTYRE, POST-TRUTH 60 (2018).

³⁰ While we intuitively update our beliefs based on the evidence we see, it is very difficult to intuitively adjust for the information we know or suspect we are *not* seeing. Benjamin Enke, *What You See Is All There Is*, 135 Q.J. ECON. 1363, 1366 (2020) (describing the “naïve intuitive statistician”). This is a break from our assumption of

to be as vigilant about the quality of information we receive from the people we trust (indeed, the very notion of trustworthiness is meant to be a bulwark against misinformation).

Thus, cheap friendship is a wonderful and horrible feature of modern life.

rationality, but it is a more modest one, a sort of baseline fallacy, rather than the cognitive biases that are usually used to explain group polarization.