



## PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

### ECHO CHAMBERS AND POLARISATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

A

Early accounts of the social web often carried a utopian undertone: by lowering the cost of publishing and connecting, platforms would diversify public debate, weaken gatekeeping, and expose users to a wider range of perspectives. In practice, the same infrastructures that amplify marginal voices can also intensify fragmentation. When information flows are mediated by feeds, recommendations, and social graphs, the architecture of exposure changes. Users no longer share a common front page; instead, they inhabit personalised streams shaped by interaction histories and network ties. This shift matters because polarisation is not only disagreement over policy. Researchers increasingly distinguish “affective polarisation”—the growth of distrust and dislike between groups—from ordinary ideological difference. Digital systems can amplify affective polarisation by shaping what people see, who they encounter, and how quickly emotionally charged interpretations of events are circulated and rewarded.

B

A common starting point is to clarify terms that are frequently conflated. A “filter bubble” refers primarily to algorithmic selection: content is ranked and recommended according to inferred preferences, so that exposure becomes passively customised even when users do not consciously curate it. Echo chambers, by contrast, involve active social sorting. People follow accounts that confirm their views, join ideologically aligned communities, and mute or block dissenting voices. In other words, algorithmic filtering can narrow what is visible, while user-driven choices can narrow who is socially present. The most consequential cases arise when both mechanisms interact. The platform’s recommender learns from prior engagement, while the user’s selective network supplies a steady stream of reinforcing cues. The result can be epistemic closure, in which alternative interpretations are not merely absent but pre-emptively discredited as illegitimate.

C

To understand why polarisation can accelerate, it is necessary to examine the incentives built into ranking systems. Most large platforms optimise feeds for engagement because time-on-platform and repeated visits generate advertising revenue. Engagement is not a neutral metric: content that triggers strong emotions tends to attract immediate reactions, comments, and resharing. Anger, fear, and moral outrage are particularly “sticky” because they invite rapid judgement and collective signalling. Posts that frame public issues as



battles between villains and victims often outperform nuanced explanations that require attention and uncertainty. Importantly, this dynamic does not require deliberate intent by platform designers to produce division. It can emerge as a by-product of optimisation goals: the algorithm promotes what reliably holds attention, and in many contexts outrage is a powerful attention magnet. Over time, repeated exposure to high-arousal content can shift the perceived “normal” tone of debate, making moderation appear weak and complexity appear evasive.

#### D

At the same time, evidence about how sealed people’s information environments actually are remains mixed. The popular image of users trapped in perfectly homogeneous echo chambers is difficult to sustain empirically across entire populations. Many people still encounter cross-cutting views through friends, family, colleagues, and mainstream news outlets that circulate widely. Paradoxically, some studies report that the most active political users are also among the most exposed to opposing content, simply because their high activity increases the range of material they see. Yet exposure does not necessarily produce understanding. Instead, it may become hostile exposure: people “hate-read” rival viewpoints in order to mock them, harvest examples for their own side, or confirm negative stereotypes about the out-group. In this scenario, polarisation is fuelled not by isolation alone but by antagonistic contact that hardens identities and frames disagreement as evidence of moral failure.

#### E

Group-based identity helps explain why the same piece of information can be processed so differently across communities. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive self-esteem and meaning from group membership, and they therefore protect in-group status while derogating out-groups. Online spaces often intensify this tendency because they reward visible loyalty signals: shared slogans, insider humour, and repeated narratives that mark belonging. When political positions become fused with identity, disagreement can feel like an existential threat rather than a contestable claim. Discussion shifts from persuading outsiders to performing for insiders, with certainty and rhetorical aggression earning social rewards. Under these conditions, confirmation bias becomes socially reinforced. People may not simply prefer confirming information; they may be applauded for it. The same architecture that builds community can therefore reduce openness to revision, because changing one’s mind risks social costs within the group.

#### F

Misinformation and conspiracy narratives can thrive in such environments, but not only because false claims are irresistibly persuasive. A key mechanism is repetition. Repeated



assertions can generate familiarity, and familiarity can be misinterpreted as truthfulness—an effect sometimes discussed in relation to the “illusory truth” phenomenon. Social reinforcement compounds this: when a claim is endorsed by trusted peers, it feels credible even when external evidence is weak. Coordinated actors can exploit these dynamics by targeting niche communities with tailored messages, but misinformation also spreads organically when issues are complex and institutional trust is fragile. In communities where official sources are assumed to be biased, corrective information can be reinterpreted as further proof of conspiracy. The result is not merely the presence of falsehood, but a breakdown in shared standards for what counts as reliable knowledge.

## G

Platforms have experimented with interventions, but results are uneven and politically contested. One approach is to introduce friction: prompts that ask users to read an article before resharing, warnings about potentially misleading links, or small pauses designed to disrupt impulsive diffusion. These measures can be framed as “speed bumps” for virality, attempting to slow the outrage loop without banning content outright. Other interventions modify recommendation systems to reduce the reach of extreme material, yet such changes can lower user satisfaction and trigger accusations of censorship or viewpoint discrimination. Fact-checking labels can help in some contexts, particularly when users are uncertain, but they can also provoke partisan backlash among audiences who interpret labels as ideological signalling. In highly polarised settings, the intervention itself becomes politicised, and trust in the referee is as contested as the content being refereed.

## H

Ultimately, echo chambers and polarisation are best understood as sociotechnical phenomena rather than as mere software glitches. Algorithms shape exposure, but they operate within existing divisions, media ecosystems, and incentives for political entrepreneurs who benefit from mobilising outrage. Likewise, user choice matters, but choices are made within interfaces that reward rapid reaction and public signalling. Long-term solutions therefore likely require multiple layers: platform design that discourages high-arousal amplification, governance that increases transparency around recommendation and moderation practices, and media literacy that improves users’ judgement under conditions of information overload. Beyond platforms, institutional reforms that rebuild trust—through accountability, competence, and fairness—may be necessary to reduce the demand for conspiratorial explanations. The challenge is to limit harmful polarisation while preserving legitimate disagreement, recognising that democratic debate requires conflict but not permanent hostility.

## Questions 27–32



Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

### List of Headings

- i Why misinformation can feel credible through repetition and social reinforcement
- ii Evidence that many users still encounter opposing viewpoints
- iii Identity signals that strengthen belonging and reduce openness to revision
- iv How platforms can intensify division by shaping exposure and interaction
- v Distinguishing algorithmic filtering from user-driven sorting
- vi Engagement-driven ranking and the rapid spread of moral outrage
- vii Measures platforms have tried, and why results are inconsistent
- viii Multilayered responses to a sociotechnical problem
- ix Political actors who benefit from mobilising outrage

27 Paragraph A

28 Paragraph B

29 Paragraph C

30 Paragraph D

31 Paragraph E

32 Paragraph F

### Questions 33–36

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

**33** The passage suggests that polarisation can be amplified by both algorithmic ranking and users' own social choices.

**34** The passage states that most users never come across viewpoints that challenge their own beliefs.

**35** Prompts asking users to read an article before resharing may slow impulsive diffusion without banning the content.

**36** Fact-checking labels are effective in every context and do not provoke partisan backlash.

### Questions 37–40



Complete the table below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

**Mechanisms shaping online polarisation**

| Dimension     | System element             | Mechanism                                                | Likely effect                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Exposure      | Algorithmic filtering      | Passively customises recommendations.                    | Narrows what is visible.                       |
|               | User-driven sorting        | Selects aligned accounts and excludes dissenting voices. | Narrows who is socially present.               |
| Amplification | Feed ranking               | Optimised for <b>37</b> ..... .                          | High-arousal content gains greater visibility. |
|               | Group loyalty signals      | Fuse political positions with <b>38</b> ..... .          | Changing one's views may carry social costs.   |
| Credibility   | Repeated claims            | Generate <b>39</b> ..... .                               | False information may feel truthful.           |
| Response      | Sharing prompts and pauses | Introduce <b>40</b> ..... .                              | Impulsive diffusion may be slowed.             |

**Answer Key**

27. iv

28. v

29. vi

30. ii

31. iii

32. i

33. TRUE

34. NOT GIVEN

35. TRUE

36. FALSE

37. engagement



38. identity

39. familiarity

40. friction