

Editorial

## The Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion: A Double-Edged Sword

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### Abstract

Social media plays a major role in public communication in many countries. Therefore, it has a large impact on societies and their cohesion. This thematic issue explores the impact social media has on social cohesion on a local or national level. The nine articles in this issue focus on both the potential of social media usage to foster social cohesion and the possible drawbacks of social media which could negatively influence the development and maintenance of social cohesion. In the articles, social cohesion is examined from different perspectives with or without the background of crisis, and on various social media platforms. The picture that emerges is that of social media as, to borrow a phrase used in one of the articles, a double-edged sword.

### Keywords

crisis communication; social cohesion; social divide; social media; social movements; polarization; political communication

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and WhatsApp are used by the majority of the population in many countries (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Stieglitz et al., 2018). Social media enables users to create and share content and to participate in social networking (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Mass media have also entered the digital age and play an active role on social media. Within seconds, any content can be circulated among thousands of people (Mirbabaie et al., 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Due to the large amount of information and the variety of data sources, it has become increasingly difficult for citizens to decide on the trustworthiness of social media content (Alkawaz et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2018).

In times of global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, wars, or financial crises, societies are in danger of losing stability and social cohesion (Dayrit & Mendoza, 2020). The rise of fake accounts, mis-

information, social bots, and hidden attempts of manipulation pose additional challenges for democratic societies (Alkawaz et al., 2021; Röchert et al., 2022; Stieglitz et al., 2017). On the other hand, social media can help to foster communication among citizens and reinforce shared feelings of identity, e.g., in Europe (Kaakinen et al., 2020). It can also enable citizens to communicate across borders and strengthen shared ideologies.

In this thematic issue, we are publishing theoretical and empirical articles exploring social cohesion on social media from different perspectives.

### 2. Promoting Social Cohesion and Connectedness Through Social Media

The use of social media shows great potential in fostering and maintaining social cohesion, at least for some groups or publics. This opportunity is examined from different perspectives in the first two articles in this issue. Robaeyst et al. (2022) examine how communication

practices on Online Neighborhood Networks (ONN) influence the social cohesion of neighborhood communities. Their findings reveal the importance of, among others, information exchange practices for trust, reciprocal support as well as a sense of community while the results also indicated a reversed relation when the ONN was explicitly considered as a tool for information exchange. With their work, the authors enhance the theoretical understanding of ONN in relation to social cohesion.

The thematic issue then shifts to social connectedness promoted by social media usage. In their article, Pit et al. (2022) critically review past research findings suggesting that passive social media use adversely affects individuals' wellbeing, in contrast to active use which has been shown to improve well-being. The authors conducted two experiments to test the ability of active vs. passive Facebook use to restore social connectedness after being ostracized. They confirm that active Facebook use can restore social connectedness compared with using a non-social website; however, they found evidence suggesting that passive social media use does not harm social connectedness and that it can, in certain circumstances, actually improve it, in contrast to claims in the literature which suggest that it is harmful.

### 3. Social Media Harming Social Cohesion

While these articles make it clear that social media use can have some benefits for social cohesion, the following five articles shed light on its drawbacks, as well as threats to social cohesion that may not be directly caused by social media but that are revealed and, in some cases, perhaps exacerbated by it.

In the first of these articles, Frischlich (2022) focuses on conspiracy-theoretical virtual groups. The assumption is that the consumption of conspiracy theories contributes to the mobilization and radicalization of Covid-19-related protests. Using a mixed-method approach involving qualitative content analysis and hierarchical clustering, the author investigates conspiracy theories in German public Facebook groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. The author shows how these Facebook groups provide opportunity structures for mobilizing non-normative collective action, and in particular how prevalent related psychological variables are in these groups.

Amaral et al. (2022) investigated anti-vaccination movements in the German and Brazilian Twittersphere. For that, the aim was to map and compare the social media communication of anti-vaccination movements that circulate misinformation in Germany and Brazil. In a qualitative analysis of German and Brazilian narratives of the anti-vaccination movements on Twitter, content from social media communication of opinion leaders of these movements was coded. In both countries, the main narratives against vaccination are similar, but the main difference relies on the stronger politicization of vaccines in the Brazilian context.

This qualitative analysis of Covid-19 communication is complemented by Pérez-Curiel et al. (2022) who compared the Covid-19-related communication of politicians and experts in five countries quantitatively. The authors analyze issue and game frames and find widespread differences between politicians and experts; the experts' communication is more fragmented and less purposeful. The role of fact-checking initiatives was examined as well. It was found that they mainly respond to the frames applied by politicians to avoid the spread of misinformation.

Politicization played a crucial role in the article by Bozdağ and Koçer (2022). The study focuses on Turkey since the Turkish society and media landscape are highly polarized politically. The article analyzes the role of polarization for news users and their perception of misinformation on social media. The authors followed a mixed-method approach combining focus groups, media diaries, and interviews. The results demonstrate that individuals develop different strategies to validate information, for example by searching the suspected information on search engines. Participants tended to be critical of their own partisan attitudes in news consumption and evaluation. Still, they mostly trusted media sources that mirrored their political attitudes. The authors propose the term *skeptical inertia* to describe this self-critical but passive attitude of the users in the context of Turkish news polarization.

Lastly, the risk of promoting racism due to social media was investigated by Matamoros-Fernández et al. (2022) who examine racist aural memetic media on TikTok during Covid-19 as humorous content that harms. Measures to facilitate social cohesion focus on obviously problematic content such as misinformation and hate speech and neglect more mundane practices such as humor. The authors point out how humor on social media can be harmful. Its influence on social inequality by normalizing racial stereotyping was examined with a mixed-method approach. The results, based on an analysis of TikTok content, help correct the trivialization of harmful humor. Their contribution broadens the field beyond existing debates about online extremism, hate speech, and misinformation as the main challenges to social cohesion.

### 4. Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

While we can attempt to roughly group the effects of social media on social cohesion into positive and negative ones, such a categorization will always fall short of doing the complex reality justice. This becomes clear in many of the articles in our issue. To borrow a phrase used by Le-Phuong et al. (2022, p. 192) in their contribution, social media is truly a double-edged sword. In their article, they examine Vietnamese female migrants and show that social media can benefit disadvantaged groups by giving them opportunities to engage with the public sphere, yet access to these opportunities is limited,

which reinforces social inequalities. In in-depth interviews, they found reasons that significantly hinder social media participation, related to gender, ethnicity, and social class. Still, the authors conclude that social media remains a crucial platform for communicative purposes for minority groups.

Social inequality is also at the heart of the argument in Bisiada's (2022) article, who argues that the public debate throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, which has largely been held on social media, has exposed fundamental structural inequalities and that class is a major factor in the social polarization witnessed since. This article serves as a reminder that scapegoating and moralizing, also on social media, may contribute to the further fragmentation of society. The author stresses how important is it that we are aware of this to avoid similar mistakes in the climate emergency.

## 5. Conclusion

This thematic issue gives a broad view of the potentials and risks of social media for the development and maintenance of social cohesion. Social cohesion is examined from different perspectives in nine research articles which illuminate the various way in which social media can help society thrive, hinder social cohesion, or highlight existing social divides. These thought-provoking articles raise important research questions that will stimulate future research to further explore the impact of social media on social cohesion.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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