Is This the Right (or Left) Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Caitlin Lancaster [1][0000-0002-1479-7597]

[1] Clemson University, Clemson SC 29634, USA

Abstract. This paper explores two politically partisan media organizations, the Gravel Institute and Prager University, that present themselves as alternative online educational sources. I examine these organizations' discourses about the COVID-19 pandemic on social media through the echo chambers concept. My findings suggest that PragerU focused on questioning experts and evaluating risks while the Gravel Institute emphasized economic and corporate issues. Both organizations discussed the government's failures, though they framed their critiques differently. I discuss the significance for social media echo chambers research.

Keywords: Echo Chambers, Political Polarization, Social Media, Pandemic.

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, partisan organizations on social media shared information to manipulate facts in an 'infodemic' that sowed division and encouraged extremist beliefs [1,3,5,10]. One of these organizations, Prager University (PragerU), aims to bypass traditional classrooms and educate people on issues, like the pandemic, through a conservative lens [11]. The Gravel Institute mirrors PragerU's approach from a liberal perspective, capitalizing on the heuristics-driven information sharing approach from the conservative platform [10]. This paper explores the pandemic discourses of these partisan 'educational' media organizations to understand how they present information to their audiences and how it may contribute to polarization during this global crisis.

2 Theory: Echo Chambers

Echo chambers, groups that reinforce shared beliefs and attitudes, are commonly associated with social media and are nested within group polarization theory [2] and selective exposure theory [1]. These homophilic groups can be sources of political polarization that entrench followers in more extreme viewpoints over time, and much research on this phenomenon focuses on how echo chambers encourage binary thinking on contentious issues [1,2]. Some scholars claim that echo chambers are overstated and claim high-choice environments mediate the effect [4]. However, platforms like Twitter are shown to encourage homophilic grouping that fits the echo chambers definition [2]. As such, this concept is a helpful lens for exploring contentious pandemic discourse.

3 Method

For this project, I used tweets and YouTube videos from both organizations. Using SocialStudio [9], I gathered 456 tweets about COVID-19 published between 2/1/2020 and 2/28/21. I also collected and transcribed 16 pandemic-themed YouTube videos, including informational content and interviews with experts and laypeople. In the sample, 456 lines were tweets and 431 lines were from videos, giving the platforms roughly equal representation.

I used an open coding process to develop my initial codes grounded in the data. After refining these, I grouped them into seven codes validated with *nCoder* (see: Table 1). After automatedly coding my data, I applied Epistemic Network Analysis [8] using the *ENA1.7.0 Web Tool* [7]. I aggregated networks with a moving stanza window, applying a binary summation in which the networks for a given line (a tweet or transcript paragraph) reflect the presence or absence of co-occurrences.

Table 1. Codebook

Code	Definition	Example	$\varkappa$ for H1, H2, AC
Economic Concerns	Worries about the economic impact.	*The effects of the #coronavirus shutdown are particularly heartbreaking for small businesses facing financial ruin.*	.97*, .97*, .97*
Media	Distrusts the media and challenges their narrative(s).	*The media cares about narrative more than the truth, exhibit # 58,462*	.91*, .94*, .94*
Government Failings	Critiques the government's response.	*When the politicians say you need to stay home, it is the emperor's new clothes.*	.94*, .91*, .97**
Questioning Experts	Questions (scientific) experts.	*Over 50000 Americans, according to the CDC, died of the flu. Why was there no panic over that?*	.91*, .91*, .91*
Corporate Issues	Examines issues with corporations.	*The real looting in America is the Walton family becoming $53 billion richer during a pandemic.*	.91*, .97**, .97**
Risk/Reward	Evaluates pandemic risks.	*The Horrifying Sadness of destructive hysteria over a pandemic that 99.999% of college-aged Americans survive.*	1.0**, .99**, .99**
Pandemic Victims	Discusses pandemic victims.	*COVID-19 isolation is causing massive mental health problems for Americans.*	.90*, .90*, .91*

*rho ≤.05, **rho < .01

4 Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Qualitative Findings

These organizations discussed the pandemic along partisan lines, promoting content that reinforces their ideological positions in line with the echo chambers concept.

PragerU (conservative) evaluated the purported risks related to COVID-19, questioning experts and the government. For instance, Dennis Prager shared that society portrays scientists as "*the clergy of science*" who claim to be "*unbiased,*" but he believed they "*lie on behalf of goodness*" to "*justify evil*." He believed scientists use their perception as "unbiased" to manipulate significant decisions in the name of "goodness." In this view, the "clergy of science" role enables scientists to take a powerful position with the American public to "justify evil" like lockdowns.

In comparison, the Gravel Institute (liberal) focused on the intersection of economic, classist, and governmental issues, embodied by their tweet: "*People are struggling. Congress doesn't get it [...] they used COVID to bail out big corporations and give billionaires a tax break.*" From their perspective, "billionaire" elites and "Congress" served their self-interests while "struggling" Americans were ignored and exploited.

While these organizations framed the pandemic differently, they both blamed the government for being ineffective. PragerU viewed these failings as government over-reach, sharing, "*the bigger the government, the less free you are*." Pandemic policies, such as mask mandates, made the government "bigger" and interfered with citizens' daily lives, making them "less free" through literal restrictions on their lives. The Gravel Institute also criticized the government's decisions but felt that the pandemic "*is a national crisis that requires immediate and massive action by Congress.*" While the government failed citizens, they failed because they were not involved *enough,* and "massive action by Congress" was needed.

4.2 Quantitative Findings

The ENA network inspired these qualitative findings. The Gravel Institute (blue) shared economic concerns and their issues with corporations, evidenced by the far-left placement of the nodes and the thick lines connected to government failings. In contrast, PragerU (red) discussed risks and questioned experts. Both emphasized government failings, as evidenced by the code's central position in the network.
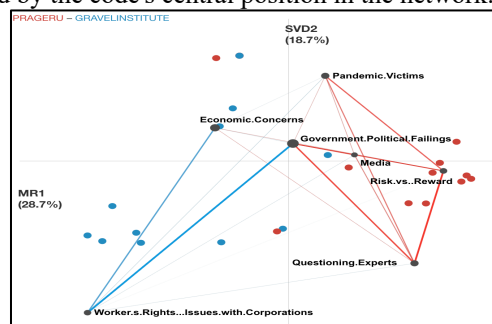
Fig. 1. ENA comparison plot for the Gravel Institute (blue) and PragerU (red).

Statistical tests reflect these findings: Along the X-axis, a two-sample t-test assuming unequal variance showed PragerU (mean=-0.84, SD=0.79, N=12) was statistically significantly different at the $\alpha=0.05$ level from the Gravel Institute (mean=0.77, SD=0.63, N=13; $t(21.08)=5.59$, $p=0$, Cohen's d=2.26).

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5   Discussion and Conclusion

Both organizations emphasized different discourses about the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that social media can serve as an echo chamber that reinforces beliefs and encourages polarization, a clear issue when combating a global pandemic. The content shared in these echo chambers offers room for speculation about potential effects on viewers. For example, PragerU tends to question scientists. I can postulate that followers may think and act in ways that defy expert advice, such as mask mandates, creating divisiveness with compliant citizens. Despite echo chamber characteristics, both organizations focused on the government's failings, demonstrating that even polarized groups can share core beliefs. Thus, this work adds complexity to echo chambers and reflects the need to go beyond binary examinations of this phenomenon. This work is limited in scope to social media, and claims made here cannot be generalized to the actual effects on the organization's followers. Furthermore, social media data is limited in depth and quality. Future research interviewing key figures and followers may elucidate deeper meaning and should explore how partisan echo chambers can share common ground or exist in liminal spaces.

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