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Selective Avoidance on Social Media: A Comparative Study of Western Democracies

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Authors' version

Abstract

This study examines the phenomena of political unfriending and content removal on social media in three Western democracies – France, the United Kingdom and the United States. We seek to understand the role of cross-cutting discussion, confrontational discussion style, and ideological extremity in triggering unfriending and content removal on social media, while shedding light on cross-country differences. The findings show that selective avoidance behaviors are much more common in the United States than either in France or the United Kingdom. They also show that cross-cutting discussion and confrontational style are predictors of selective avoidance across all the above countries, while ideological extremity plays a role in the United States only. We suggest that while social media provide opportunities for citizens to engage in discussions with people with dissimilar political views and socio-economic backgrounds, they also allow them to easily re-establish more homophilous environments via content removal and tie dissolution.

Keywords: social media; selective avoidance; unfriending; context relapse

Introduction

Scholars have noted the growing tensions between the dramatic rise in both the quantity and the diversity of political information and the increased filtering and curation capacities afforded by new media platforms (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Sunstein, 2007; Vaccari et al., 2016). While there is little doubt that citizens can, and often do get exposed online to a broad variety of political views including those that they disagree with, they also take active steps to shield themselves from dissonant speech and its sources. Indeed, social media platforms offer a range of options for avoiding undesirable content and people, including unfriending, unfollowing, muting and hiding content. These disconnection affordances promote a range of selective avoidance practices, which have distinct political implications.

So far, only about a dozen journal publications have examined political unfriending, with the majority of studies conducted in the non-Western contexts (i.e. Bode, 2016; John & Agbarya, 2020; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John & Gal, 2018; Skoric et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017; Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). Given that politically motivated unfriending is a potential contributor to social and ideological segregation, it is vital to investigate its predictors and prevalence across Western democracies which have been experiencing increasing levels of media-induced political polarization. Research suggests a robust link between online news use and perceived political polarization across Western societies (Yang et al., 2017). In particular, receiving news via social media leads to greater ideological segregation when compared to receiving news by directly accessing news websites (Flaxman et al., 2016). Since selective avoidance on social media not only targets specific content (hiding posts), but may also involve relationship termination or suspension (unfriending and unfollowing), it is likely that it could potentially reflect the fissures among opposing political groups (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Schwarz & Shani, 2016).

This study focuses on the phenomena of politically motivated unfriending and content removal on social media in the context of three Western democracies – France, the United Kingdom and the United States. We seek to examine the prevalence of such selective avoidance practices and the roles of cross-cutting discussion, confrontational discussion style, and ideological extremity in triggering them, while shedding more light on cross-country differences. Our goal is to understand what predicts politically motivated cleansing of ego-centric networks (Schwarz & Shani, 2016) and assess the robustness of social media ecologies as spaces for engagement with different views within Western democracies.

Literature Review

The concerns regarding the power of digital media to promote selective avoidance in a political context are not new. Some scholars have feared that citizens would be able to tailor their media diets in close accord with their own views and ideologies, resulting in the loss of information commons and the rise of echo chambers (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Sunstein, 2007). Others however, have suggested that citizens are not actively sorting themselves into ideologically pure camps. Although individuals exhibit a propensity to select information in line with their existing views, they are still exposed to a wide range of topics and ideas online (Garrett et al., 2013; Jang, 2014; Song, 2017).

Early research on social media focused on their novel technological affordances, suggesting that they promote the expansion of human networks, particularly weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These emerging media ecologies characterized by context collapse – mixing of family, friendship, and professional ties (Marwick & boyd, 2011), should thus promote interactions with diverse individuals, facilitating exposure to different views and perspectives, often serendipitously (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Kim, 2011). As people mostly use social media in everyday life to fulfill their social needs, they are also more attentive to social cues (e.g., the number of “likes”) when processing information, which as a result

makes them more likely to read opinions different from their own (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Winter et al., 2016). In general, research shows that between 20-30 percent of the selected content on Facebook is cross-cutting, thus challenging the claims that people are actively and systematically cocooning themselves online (Bakshy et al., 2015). Furthermore, although people view one third of their Facebook contacts as “deletable” because they provide neither useful information nor emotional support, they still refrain from purging their social networks of these “useless” contacts fearing the loss of ability to get in touch (Krämer, Hoffmann, & Eimler, 2015).

Still, research has demonstrated that people are drawn towards the cognitive and emotional comfort of being with like-minded others and hearing attitude-congruent views (Festinger, 1957a; Frey, 1986; Mcpherson et al., 2001). Although the heterogeneous composition of online social networks could potentially expose people to a wide spectrum of ideas and perspectives, individual choices of whom to connect to and which content to click on substantially restrict the range of cross-cutting views they encounter (Bakshy et al., 2015). More importantly, social media platforms offer powerful tools for users to easily filter out undesirable content and mute or unfriend people they dislike, and consequently avoid unwanted dissonance more effectively than before. Since political discussions on social media contribute to the overall diversity of political discourse that individuals experience (Vaccari et al., 2016; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017), any exposure to dissonant political views may act as a potential trigger for online friendship dissolution, particularly among weak ties (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Rainie & Smith, 2012; Sibona, 2014).

This study focuses on behaviors aimed at re-establishing more homophilous socio-political contexts in online networks, through the removal of dissonant content (hiding content) and dissolution or suspension of social ties (unfriending and unfollowing, respectively). While the former targets specific posts and trains social media algorithms to present fewer posts of

similar nature in the future, the latter is more person specific; that is, by cutting or suspending a digital tie with someone, people can filter out all the content originating from the targeted person and thereby screen out his/her views and activities from their ego networks entirely. While hiding content effectively filters out the unwanted information, unfriending and unfollowing is a more serious act of relationship termination and potentially permanent exclusion from the personal networked space (John & Gal, 2018). As such, it may have important implications for face-to-face relationships as well, including those with family and co-workers (Schwarz & Shani, 2016). We view these selective avoidance practices as indicative of a broader trend of *context relapse* that is occurring across different digital ecologies, demonstrating the continued relevance of cognitive and time constraints for human relationship maintenance (Dunbar, 2016) as well as the preference for homophilous interactions and content (Garrett, 2009). Recent studies found that the strength of political ideology (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et al., 2017), discussion network size, and discussion with dissimilar others (Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018) all predicted the likelihood of engaging in political unfriending and/or hiding of political content. Still, there is no consensus on whether cross-cutting exposure and discussion predict post-hoc filtration on social media (Bode, 2016; Skoric et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017).

Cross-cutting Discussion

Research in the fields of cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias has established the general finding that people naturally prefer pro-attitudinal information and sources over counter-attitudinal ones (Festinger, 1957b; Frey, 1986; Zanna & Cooper, 1974). This pattern of selective exposure has been consistently observed across media platforms ((Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). On social media, studies have suggested that the expansion of weak ties could promote incidental exposure to different viewpoints and perspectives (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Lu & Lee, 2018). However, such cross-cutting exposure in effect often propels

people (especially those with stronger political convictions) to actively seek out information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017). Recent studies have also found cross-cutting exposure to predict politically motivated unfriending (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), although Yang et al. (2017) reported non-significant relationship between the two.

Moreover, engagement with people one disagrees with may further motivate selective avoidance practices. First of all, political discussion largely follows the pattern of ideological segregation on social media to begin with (Colleoni et al., 2014; Robertson et al., 2010). Cross-cutting interaction, when it occurs, in effect tends to further reinforce in-group attachment (Yardi & boyd, 2010) and polarize opinions (Lee et al., 2014). This could be arguably explained by the self-reinforcing effect of expression that, the act of expressing oneself publicly can make the expresser more likely to behave in line with what he/she has expressed (Cho et al., 2016; Pingree, 2007). A recent study of Hong Kong and Taiwan found that politically motivated unfriending and unfollowing were both predicted by political discussion with strangers and people from different backgrounds (Skoric et al., 2018). This is arguably because during such encounters, people often expect differences in opinions and usually do not find it necessary to avoid voicing disagreements in order to preserve social harmony. We therefore expect that similar associations to be found across Western democracies, particularly given the increasingly polarized political climate during and immediately after the recent elections:

H1: Cross-cutting discussion on social media is associated with greater likelihood of a) political unfriending/unfollowing; and b) hiding content.

Confrontational Discussion Style

Since its early days, the Web has been a site of contentious and uncivil political discussions, with scholars debating their impact on democratic deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004). One of the fears is that the exposure to uncivil discourse increases

perceived partisan polarization and erodes citizens' trust in public deliberations (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014). The problem is compounded by social media's filtering affordances that allow users to hide content and block or completely exclude others from their discussion streams, which was generally not possible on the previous generation of online platforms (e.g. discussion forums). In fact, confrontation is one of the main reasons behind politically motivated selective avoidance on social media. According to Rainie and Smith (2012), 8 percent of American SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because "they argued about political issues on the site with the user or someone the user knows" (para.10). Ditrich and Sassenberg (2017) reported that Facebook group members who displayed deviant behaviors during group discussion (e.g., verbally attacking people, posting ironic content) were likely to be excluded from the group. A study conducted in Israel shows that mere ideological differences were rarely sufficient to justify unfriending, but that the style of political expression that included vulgar, rude, racist and generally offensive speech often acted as a trigger for disconnection (Schwarz & Shani, 2016). These findings suggest that social media users tend to cut ties with those who are confrontational or uncivil. However, little is known about the relationship between one's own confrontational tendency and his/her avoidance behaviors.

We argue that confrontational disposition may be positively associated with selective avoidance behaviors for the following three reasons. First, research shows that individuals who habitually attack others on a personal level rather than criticizing the content of conversation have high aggressive tendencies—they tend to use aggressive verbal tactics, such as character attacks and ridicule, in order to get their points across during arguments (Hmielowski et al., 2014). It can be assumed that those who purposely attack and offend their political opponents on social media platforms are likely to have little concern for maintaining plurality of voices in their networks. Second, people with high aggressive tendencies, when provoked, tend to score high on the trait of anger (Bettencourt et al., 2006). Following the affective intelligence

theory and appraisal theory of emotions, anger activates the disposition system within individuals that is associated with decisions based on existing habits and values; it closes down information processing apparatus, rejects accommodation, and motivates impulsive reactions that disregard scarce resources (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; MacKuen et al., 2010). Third, when it comes to politics, particularly on social media, “rants, drama and virulent disagreement” seem to be the common theme, at least in the United States (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 287). While a hostile political climate discourages more conflict-avoidant people from engaging in politics, it encourages those with low conflict avoidance tendencies– they post about politics likely because they “enjoy being provocateurs” (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 284). We can thus expect that in such an environment where confrontation and incivility make political exchanges heated and personal attacks, people may easily resort to a repertoire of exclusionary tactics such as unfriending, unfollowing, and hiding content. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Confrontational discussion style on social media is associated with greater likelihood of a) political unfriending/unfollowing; and b) hiding content.

Ideological Extremity

Strength of partisanship or political ideology is a common predictor of selective exposure across media types. This is arguably because, for those holding strong political predispositions, political beliefs are more personally relevant and accessible, and dissonant views are more likely to provoke a strong and negative affective response (Stroud, 2008). This relationship extends to politically motivated selective avoidance such as unfriending and unfollowing on Facebook (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et al., 2017), likely because people with strong ideologies tend to be less tolerant of opposing views. Unfriending has also been linked with more radical forms of political participation such as street protests and demonstrations (Zhu et al., 2017). In times of political crisis, groups and communities often demand public displays of loyalty on social media and seek to defend their moral and

ideological boundaries (Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Given the unusually contentious and ideologically polarizing campaign discourses observed during and after the 2016 US presidential election, the Brexit referendum, and to a lesser extent the 2017 French presidential election, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Ideological extremity is associated with greater likelihood of a) political unfriending/unfollowing; and b) hiding content.

Cross-Country Differences

In addition to the hypotheses outlined above, this study also seeks to examine potential cross-country difference regarding the prevalence and the predictors of selective avoidance behaviors. Although the United Kingdom and the United States have seemingly similar political and media environments, characterized by the dominance of two parties and the liberal model of the press (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), France and the UK share a strong tradition of public service broadcasting, in sharp contrast to the US.

Research shows that public service broadcasting is still an important facilitator of a diverse public sphere, and that emerging digital practices have greater positive impact on participation in countries with strong public service media (Humprecht & Esser, 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018a). The presence of a national public service broadcaster paired with restrictions on paid political advertising on television in both France and the UK therefore create media environments vastly different from a partisan-dominated media ecology of the United States. Thus, although the prevalence of political talk on social media may be similar across France, the UK and the US, ranging from 40-45 percent (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018b), the nature of these conversations is quite different, particularly as social media messages often contain references to the content from traditional news channels. In particular, research shows that countries with strong public service-oriented news outlets like the UK and France have higher proportions of content diversity in their online news media than countries with low

status of public media like the United States (Humprecht & Esser, 2018). While one could argue that the divergent voices might prompt disagreement and hence motivate selective avoidance, the tradition of diversity in the public sphere may in effect cultivate civic virtues and skills, such as political tolerance and understanding (Mutz, 2002; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), which deters avoidance. In contrast, the social norm in the American society favors a middle-of-the-road approach and moderate views when it comes to politics (Mutz, 2006). This culture of conflict avoidance may thus encourage people to dissociate themselves from those who express dissonant political views.

Furthermore, affective polarization has been a rising force in shaping America's political landscape in the past decades; partisans view the opposing party and its members with strong dislike and prefer greater social distance from them (Iyengar et al., 2019). Since the 2016 election campaign, the US political environment has been characterized by hyper-partisan news coverage and vitriolic personal attacks on social media (Wells et al., 2016), while in the case of British and the French election similar levels of polarization and negativity have generally not been observed (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). We thus expect that American citizens will be more likely than their French and British counterparts to engage in selective avoidance and propose the following hypothesis:

H4: American citizens are more likely to engage in a) political unfriending/unfollowing and b) hiding content on social media than French and British citizens.

Method

Data

The data originates from three online panel surveys that were conducted in France ($N = 1521$), the United Kingdom ($N = 1510$) and the United States ($N = 1510$) in 2017 using nationally representative sample of respondents (assured via the quota method: gender, age,

region, income/social class and education). All three surveys were conducted by Lightspeed Kantar Group and the average response time was 15 minutes. Instead of traditional response rates, the survey company uses a weighting efficiency as an indicator of sample quality, which shows how closely the sample matches the target population; in this study, the overall weighting efficiency was 90.5%. The surveys were conducted from 16 May – 1 June 2017 in France and from 9 – 30 June 2017 in the UK and the US. In the analysis we used only data from the participants who reported to have social media accounts for analysis ($N = 3471$).

Measures

Selective avoidance. Under the umbrella term of selective avoidance, we measured two types of behaviors, namely politically motivated unfriending or unfollowing and hiding content. As we mentioned before, unfriending and unfollowing are tools for removing someone's posts and activities from one's online social network entirely through relationship termination or suspension. Hiding content in comparison targets specific content. In other words, although I may hide one post from a person, I will still see other posts from him/her. Unfriending and unfollowing are therefore more personal avoidance strategies than hiding content. To assess them, we asked the respondents whether they had "unfriended or unfollowed anyone over their support for a candidate or issue that they disagreed with", and whether they had "hidden posts or comments related to the support for a political candidate or cause on social network sites" in the past 12 months (0 = no, 1 = yes, 2 = don't know). Among the self-designated social media users ($N = 3471$), 19.10% ($N = 663$) reported to have engaged in political unfriending or unfollowing, while 16.05% ($N = 557$) reported to have hidden content over political reasons. 3.05% ($N = 106$) and 3.43% ($N = 119$) of them answered "do not know" to the two questions respectively, which were treated as missing data.

Cross-cutting discussion. To assess the levels of cross-cutting discussion, we first asked respondents whether they had talked about politics with others via social media. Those who

reported to have engaged in political talks further answered three questions regarding how often they talked about politics with (1) “people whose political views are different from yours and who generally disagree with you”, (2) “people of different race or ethnicity”, and (3) “people from a different social class”, on a 4-point scale (1 = never, 4 = often). Those who reported to have never engaged in political talks on social media had their answers coded zero. In other words, our cross-cutting discussion variable was measured using a 5-point scale wherein 0 means “never talked about politics with people via social media”, 1 means “talked about politics via social media, but never with people different from me”, and 4 means “talked about politics via social media, and often with people different from me”. Responses were subjected to a Principal Component Analysis, which found the items to load on a single factor. The reliability test yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha of .97. Cross-cutting discussion was estimated by taking the mean of the three items ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.29$).

Confrontational discussion style. Confrontational discussion style measured in this study consists of two behavioral traits, namely, arguing with someone holding different views and intentionally starting a discussion using hostile or inflammatory words. We assessed it using two items regarding the frequencies of showing the two traits (expressed on a 4-point scale, 1 = never, 4 = often), and created the variable by computing their means ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .79$, $r_s = .73$, $p < .001$).

Ideological extremity. To measure the extremity of political ideology, we first asked the respondents how they would place themselves on the left-right political ideology spectrum on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). Ideological extremity was operationalized as the absolute value of the difference between the respondents’ own ideological inclination and the scale’s midpoint, ranging from 0 (moderate) to 5 (extreme). We also considered those who identified themselves as “neither left or right” among the moderate, as the answer indicates an apolitical stance ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.68$).

Control variables. As controls, we included demographic information including age, gender, and education (see Table 1). We also measured political attitudes including political interest and efficacy. For political interest, participants answered one question, “Are you interested in politics”, using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested). Political efficacy was measured by 3 items using a 5-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly): “People like me can influence government”, “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics”, and “No matter whom I vote for, it won’t make a difference” (last item’s scores reversed, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .58$, $M = 3.24$, $SD = .97$). Last, social media use intensity was also controlled for. It was estimated by two items that measured the number of hours per day one spent on Facebook and the number of “friends” one had on Facebook. Each item was first standardized before taking an average to create the scale ($r_s = .37$, $p < .001$, $M = -.01$, $SD = .77$).

[Table 1 near here]

Results

We compared the key variables across the three country sub-samples prior to hypothesis testing (see Table 2). Chi-square tests showed that the percentage of respondents who unfriended or unfollowed others over politics differed significantly across the countries, $\chi^2(2, N = 3365) = 124.47$, $p < .001$, as did politically motivated content removal, $\chi^2(2, N = 3352) = 82.63$, $p < .001$. Specifically, the US sample had the highest percentages of unfriending/unfollowing (29.75%, $N = 349$) and hiding content (24.59%, $N = 287$), followed by the UK sample (unfriending/unfollowing: 16.97%, $N = 184$; hiding content: 11.82%, $N = 127$) and the French sample (unfriending/unfollowing: 11.73%, $N = 130$; hiding content: 12.87%, $N = 143$).

[Table 2 near here]

One-way analyses of variance showed that the levels of cross-cutting discussion differed significantly across countries, $F(2, 3468) = 31.76, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses using the Sidak adjustment for multiple comparisons indicated that the average level of cross-cutting discussion was significantly higher in the US sample ($M = 1.33, SD = 1.37$) than were those in both the UK ($M = 1.10, SD = 1.24, p < .001$) and the French sample ($M = .91, SD = 1.23, p < .001$). It was also significantly higher in the UK sample than in the French sample ($p < .01$). Likewise, the average level of confrontational discussion style was significantly higher in the US sample ($M = 1.62, SD = .90$) than were those in the UK ($M = 1.40, SD = .72$) and the French sample ($M = 1.37, SD = .72$), $F(2, 3357) = 34.63, p < .001$. The pairwise comparison of the UK sample and the French sample was non-significant ($p = .75$). In terms of ideological extremity, both the US ($M = 2.82, SD = 1.78, p < .001$) and the French sample ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.74, p < .001$) had significantly higher average scores than did the UK sample ($M = 2.51, SD = 1.47$), $F(2, 4176) = 20.77, p < .001$. There was no significant difference between the US and the French sample ($p = .61$).

[Table 3 near here]

Table 3 presents zero-order correlations among the key variables. To test our hypotheses, we performed two logistic regressions to examine the predictors of unfriending/unfollowing and content removal respectively with the total sample, and estimated two-way interaction effects using country as a moderator (the US as the reference group) to test how the relationships vary across the countries. They were followed up with three logistic regressions using each country dataset separately. Odds ratios ($\text{Exp}(B)$) were calculated and the results summarized in Tables 4 and 5.

Consistent with the chi-square tests, the results of logistic regressions (Model 1) indicate that the UK respondents had significantly lower odds of engaging in unfriending/unfollowing ($B(SE) = -.49 (.14), \text{Exp}(B) = .61, p < .01$), as well as lower odds of

engaging in content removal than their American counterparts ($B(SE) = -.65 (.16)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = .52$, $p < .001$). Similarly, the French respondents had lower odds compared to the Americans of engaging in unfriending/unfollowing ($B(SE) = -.99 (.15)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = .37$, $p < .001$), and in hiding content ($B(SE) = -.58(.15)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = .56$, $p < .001$).

Cross-cutting discussion was significantly and positively associated with the log odds of unfriending/unfollowing ($B(SE) = .26(.07)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.29$, $p < .01$), which did not vary significantly across the countries (Model 1). H1a was thus supported. In contrast, in terms of content removal (Model 5), the main effect of cross-cutting discussion was found to be non-significant ($B(SE) = .08(.08)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.09$, $p = .295$). However, moderation analysis indicated significant cross-country variances, with the relationship being significantly stronger in the UK sample than in the US sample ($B(SE) = .26(.13)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.30$, $p < .05$), and also stronger in the French sample than in the US sample ($B(SE) = .25(.12)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.29$, $p < .05$). Further analysis with individual country samples identified non-significant relationship with small effect size in the US ($B(SE) = .06(.08)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.06$, $p = .46$), but significant and substantial effects in the UK ($B(SE) = .40(.12)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.50$, $p < .01$) and the French samples ($B(SE) = .34(.09)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.41$, $p < .001$). H1b was thus conditionally supported, depending on the country profile.

Confrontational discussion style was found to be a significant predictor of both types of selective avoidance behaviors; it had a noticeably stronger relationship with hiding content (Model 5, $B(SE) = .73(.11)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.08$, $p < .001$) than with unfriending/unfollowing (Model 1, $B(SE) = .53(.11)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.70$, $p < .001$). H2a and H2b were thus both supported. In addition, the relationship did not differ significantly across the countries for unfriending/unfollowing, and it was only marginally weaker in the UK sample than in the US sample for content removal ($B(SE) = -.30(.18)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = .74$, $p = .098$).

Ideological extremity contributed to both unfriending/unfollowing (Model 1, $B(SE) = .23(.04)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.25$, $p < .001$) and content removal (Model 5, $B(SE) = .24(.05)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.27$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. In terms of cross-country differences, there was only one marginally significant interaction effect when predicting unfriending/unfollowing; the relationship was weaker in the UK sample ($B(SE) = -.15(.08)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = .86$, $p = .057$) than in the US sample. Logistic regressions with individual country samples indicated significant relationship in the US sample (Model 2, $B(SE) = .23(.05)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.26$, $p < .001$) but not in the others (Model 3 UK: $B(SE) = .07(.07)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.08$, $p = .275$; Model 4 France: $B(SE) = .09(.06)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.10$, $p = .14$). In terms of content removal, there was no significant interaction effect (Model 5); logistic regressions with individual country samples indicated significant relationship in the US sample (Model 6, $B(SE) = .25(.05)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.28$, $p < .001$) but only marginally significant in others (Model 7 UK: $B(SE) = .14(.08)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.15$, $p = .076$; Model 8 France: $B(SE) = .11(.06)$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.12$, $p = .077$).

[Table 4 near here]

[Table 5 near here]

Discussion

This study shows that politically motivated selective avoidance on social media is much more common in the United States than either in France or in the United Kingdom. It is also more prevalent than previously reported in the studies conducted in the United States and elsewhere (although the measures of unfriending are not identical across these studies), indicating an emerging trend of (re)establishment of socio-political homogeneity on social media networks (Duggan & Smith, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Rainie & Smith, 2012; Skoric et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017). While not very surprising, it is the first empirical demonstration of “American exceptionalism” when it comes to politically motivated selective avoidance online. Moreover, we find that American citizens are more confrontational in their

social media discussions than their European counterparts, which points to the overall patterns of affective or even hostile political engagement online (Iyengar et al., 2012). This has been particularly true in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election campaign, which normalized the use of personal attacks, incendiary comments, and distorted facts as rhetorical devices on social media, all amplified by the chorus of followers (Wells et al., 2016).

Our analyses provide solid support for the majority of our research hypotheses, while indicating substantive cross-country differences in the predictors of politically motivated tie dissolution, suspension, and content removal. More specifically, we find evidence that engaging in cross-cutting discussion was significant predictor of unfriending and unfollowing across all three Western democracies in times of heightened political conflicts. This finding provides further evidence suggesting that citizens take active steps to cleanse their online social networks of people from the “other side”, which is one of the indicators of context relapse – a natural human tendency to re-establish meaningful social context via various disconnection practices (Light & Cassidy, 2014). Unlike most previous studies that examined exposure to cross-cutting views (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et al., 2017) this study measured engagement in discussions on social media with people who were ideologically or demographically different from the respondents, i.e. weak ties. It is likely that this “engagement with difference” (vs. simple exposure) triggers more affective responses, resulting in more severe relationship management solutions such as unfriending and unfollowing in which weak ties are the most common casualty (John & Gal, 2018). We thus agree with John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) who highlight the weakness of weak ties – even if such ties potentially provide exposure to a variety of opinions and perspectives, their fragility in the face of conflict seriously erodes their democratic potential.

In contrast to unfriending and unfollowing, across all three Western democracies we find no overall relationship between cross-cutting discussion and hiding content, although the

relationship was significant in France and the United Kingdom. Compared to the United States, in France, cross-cutting discussion is more likely to result in hiding content on social media. We therefore suspect that in a more polarized society such as the United States, the engagement with political opponents does not lead to the removal of specific content but rather relationship termination and suspension that filters out someone's views and activities completely, as it triggers social identity-based dislike for opponents rather than ideological dissonance (Garrett et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2012; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). This does not imply that ideological extremity is not important, as it was found to be a significant predictor of both content removal and unfriending in the United States, but not in either France or the United Kingdom. It suggests that ideologically extreme Americans are more likely to cleanse their online social networks of political incongruence by using selective avoidance strategies.

Since political opponents are the most likely casualties of political unfriending and muting, we would expect that these selective avoidance actions in a polarized society might serve as a homogenizing force. People are likely to reconfigure their online social networks in line with the existing divides in the society and as a result possibly move towards a more extreme version of their previous views. Of course, it is beyond the scope of our study to argue that selective avoidance could reinforce ideological segregation, as people continue adding new friends to their online networks as they cut ties with the older ones. Nevertheless, behaviors like unfriending and unfollowing to some extent signal a desire for greater social distance from those whose political orientations are different from one's own. These acts also potentially lead to less densely-connected citizen networks which could be particularly troubling in the case of minorities who would be more likely to be excluded from the political mainstream (John & Agbarya, 2020).

Lastly, our study provides strong evidence that citizens who engage in confrontational and uncivil discussions on social media are also more likely to unfriend, unfollow and hide

content—across all three Western democracies, confrontational style was by far the strongest predictor of selective avoidance. While previous research has demonstrated that individuals with such tendencies are more likely to be excluded from group discussions (Ditrich & Sassenberg, 2017), our findings point out to a broader pattern of political animosity and intolerance that emerges from such behaviors. While heated disagreement and even incivility were praised as having potential democratic merits in the Web 1.0 era (Papacharissi, 2004), in the social media environment they are associated with both political content filtering as well as social disconnection and exclusion. Still, such selective avoidance behaviors are typical of personal profiles on Facebook and Twitter and do not directly apply to online discussion forums and public Facebook pages where users cannot simply exercise their network “sovereignty” with a click of a button (John & Gal, 2018).

Limitations and Conclusion

This study relies on a cross-sectional snapshot of self-reported survey data and as such is faced with important limitations regarding the quality of its measurements and inferences. We acknowledge that survey-based measures of online behaviors such as unfriending may not be as reliable and valid as behavioral trace data that social media companies have direct access to. We would therefore like to encourage more research on disconnection strategies that utilizes such data, preferably collected over extended periods of time (e.g. pre-post elections). This would strengthen any causal inferences that are to be made about the antecedents as well as the consequences of politically-motivated selective avoidance on social media.

Still, we believe that the present study offers fresh evidence indicating that heated political discussions happening across ideological and demographic divides may create conditions for context relapse on social media. These acts of disconnection are likely to lead to (re)emergence of more homogenous online ecologies that more closely mirror our existing offline networks. Social media environments are thus becoming more similar to private salons

in which the owners control the invitation lists (and the doors), moving away from the coffeehouse public sphere ideal. Still, it is important to note that a large majority of citizens in all three Western democracies do not engage in political unfriending, unfollowing and muting, indicating that they do not consider politics to be a sufficient reason for avoiding people or content. Alternatively, citizens may be using softer avoidance strategies, such as adjusting their privacy settings (Lopez & Ovaska, 2013) and shifting their political conversations to more private instant messaging environments. Future research should thus examine the conditions and the contexts under which social media platforms can continue to provide spaces for democratic engagement with difference.

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Table 1. Summaries of demographics among the participants who use social media.

	US (<i>N</i> = 1210)			UK (<i>N</i> = 1113)			FRA (<i>N</i> = 1148)		
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Median	%	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Median	%	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Median	%
Age	44.35 (16.90)			44.66 (16.43)			45.16 (15.78)		
Gender (Male)			48.93			49.42			50.17
Education	2.29 (1.06)	2		1.91 (1.04)	1		2.03 (1.13)	2	
Social media use intensity	.19(.94)			-.06(.66)			-.17(.63)		

Education 4-point scale (1 = high school degree, 2 = lower college, 3 = bachelor, 4 = higher education)

Table 2. Summaries of between-country comparisons.

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) or % (<i>N</i>)			<i>F</i> (<i>df1</i> , <i>df2</i>) or χ^2 (<i>df</i> , <i>N</i>)
	US	UK	FRA	
Unfriending/unfollowing	29.75% (349)	16.97% (184)	11.73% (130)	124.47(2, 3365)***
Hiding content	24.59% (287)	11.82% (127)	12.87% (143)	82.63(2, 3352)***
Cross-cutting discussion	1.33(1.37)	1.10(1.24)	.91(1.23)	31.76(2, 3468)***
Confrontational discussion style	1.62(.90)	1.40(.72)	1.37(.71)	34.63(2, 3357)***
Ideological extremity	2.82(1.78)	2.51(1.47)	2.89(1.74)	20.77(2, 4176)***

*** $p < .001$

Table 3. Zero-order correlations

	1	2	3	4	5
Cross-cutting discussion	1				
Confrontational discussion style	2	.63***			
Ideological extremity	3	.21***	.19***		
Unfriending/unfollowing	4	.35***	.38***	.16***	
Hiding content	5	.30***	.36***	.16***	.53***

Note: *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Summary of logistic regressions predicting political unfriending/unfollowing.

	Model 1: All countries		Model 2: US		Model 3: UK		Model 4: FR	
	<i>B(SE)</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B(SE)</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B(SE)</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)	<i>B(SE)</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Cross-cutting discussion	.26(.07)**	1.29**	.26(.08)**	1.29**	.31(.10)**	1.37**	.36(.10)***	1.43***
Confrontational discussion style	.53(.11)***	1.70***	.54(.11)***	1.71***	.39(.13)**	1.47**	.57(.14)***	1.77***
Ideological extremity	.23(.04)***	1.25***	.23(.05)***	1.26***	.07(.07)	1.08	.09(.06)	1.10
Country (reference group= USA)								
UK	-.49(.14)***	.61***						
FR	-.99(.15)***	.37***						
Cross-cutting discussion X country								
UK	.08(.12)	1.08						
FR	.10(.12)	1.11						
Confrontational X country								
UK	-.13(.17)	.87						
FR	.03(.17)	1.03						
Ideological extremity X country								
UK	-.15(.08) [#]	.86 [#]						
FR	-.12(.08)	.89						
Age	-.02(.00)***	.98***	-.02(.01)**	.98**	-.02(.01)**	.98**	-.01(.01)	.99
Gender (0= M, 1=F)	-.16(.11)	.85	-.30(.16) [#]	.74 [#]	-.12 (.20)	.89	.08(.22)	1.08
Education	.07(.05)	1.07	.16(.08)*	1.17*	.03(.09)	1.03	-.02(.10)	.98
Political interest	-.10(.07)	.90	-.09(.11)	.91	-.17(.14)	.84	-.04(.14)	.97
Political efficacy	.02(.06)	1.02	-.04(.10)	.96	.12(.12)	1.13	.00(.13)	1.00
Social media use intensity	.32(.06)***	1.38***	.33(.09)***	1.38***	.34 (.13)*	1.41*	.27(.13)*	1.31*
Constant	-1.33(.10)***	.26***	-1.92(.41)***	.15***	-1.75(.55)**	.17**	-3.14(.61)***	.04***
<i>N</i>	2922		1043		878		1001	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	.21		.32		.21		.19	

[#] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, US= 1, UK= 2, France=3, Model 1: Continuous variables mean centered

Table 5. Summary of logistic regressions predicting hiding content for political reasons.

	Model 5: All countries		Model 6: US		Model 7: UK		Model 8: FR	
	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B(SE)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Cross-cutting discussion	.08(.08)	1.09	.06(.08)	1.06	.40(.12)**	1.50**	.34(.09)***	1.41***
Confrontational discussion style	.73(.11)***	2.08***	.73(.12)***	2.08***	.48(.15)**	1.61**	.64(.14)***	1.90***
Ideological extremity	.24(.05)***	1.27***	.25(.05)***	1.28***	.14(.08)#	1.15#	.11(.06)#	1.12#
Country (reference group= USA)								
UK	-.65(.15)***	.52***						
FR	-.58(.15)***	.56***						
Cross-cutting discussion X country								
UK	.26(.13)*	1.30*						
FR	.25(.12)*	1.29*						
Confrontational X country								
UK	-.30(.18)#	.74#						
FR	-.07(.17)	.93						
Ideological extremity X country								
UK	-.12(.09)	.88						
FR	-.12(.08)	.89						
Age	-.00(.00)	1.00	-.01(.01)	.99	.00(.01)	1.00	-.01(.01)	1.00
Gender (0= M, 1=F)	-.49(.12)***	.61***	-.61(.18)**	.55**	-.56(.23)*	.57*	-.29(.22)	.75
Education	.16(.05)**	1.17**	.23(.08)**	1.26**	.07(.11)	1.07	.12(.10)	1.12
Political interest	-.10(.08)	.90	-.18(.11)	.83	-.06(.16)	.94	-.04(.13)	.97
Political efficacy	.01(.07)	1.01	.10(.10)	1.10	-.16(.14)	.86	.01(.13)	1.01
Social media use intensity	.37(.07)***	1.44***	.49(.10)***	1.64***	.28(.14)*	1.32*	.19(.14)	1.22
Constant	-1.75(.11)***	.17***	-3.02(.45)***	.05***	-2.92(.63)***	.05***	-3.48(.59)***	.03***
<i>N</i>	2914		1040		871		1003	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	.19		.30		.18		.19	

$p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, US= 1, UK= 2, France=3, Model 1: Continuous variables mean centered

