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## POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN DIGITAL POLITICAL NEWS: MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

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### Abstract

Although extensive studies have explored the political polarisation phenomenon in American digital news media and social networks, there has been little discussion about the multimodal analysis across online media platforms and social networks that synthesises linguistic, visual, and interactive elements. The article defends the relevance of investigating the mechanisms of political polarisation in English-language (American) digital political news through a comprehensive multimodal analysis of journalistic content and user interaction across online media platforms and social networks. To address the aim of the study, the paper: 1) reviews and synthesizes the existing scientific works on political polarization in digital media, focusing particularly on the multimodal approach; 2) evaluates the methodological advantages of the integrated multimodal approach in political communication research; and 3) demonstrates the scientific novelty by analysing journalistic content and user commentary through journalistic textual news and user commentaries. Such an approach advances interdisciplinary understanding, linking linguistics, media studies, and political activities. The results of the study are supposed to highlight the significant role of political polarization in shaping public discourse.

**Keywords:** multimodal analysis, polarization, digital political news, social networks.

## Introduction

We live in a modern society in which the circulation and consumption of information have the power to shape reality, influence opinions, and actively construct individual and collective perceptions. In this context, information is not merely a passive reflection of events but an active force that constructs social meaning, shaping beliefs, and reinforcing specific worldviews.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that, in the era of digitalization, traditional methods of disseminating political information are giving way to online news platforms. These platforms are becoming the primary sources of news for a broad audience, especially in English-speaking countries, where digital media is forming a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). It is worth emphasizing that the media—particularly digital and social platforms—play a central role in mediating this process, as they selectively frame content, and filter narratives through exact mechanisms of influence. As a result, the boundaries between objective reality and media representations of the present become increasingly unclear, leading to the emergence of polarized perceptual frameworks. In recent years, the development of digital platforms has changed not only the mechanisms of news interpretation but also how political ideology is constructed.

Therefore, there has been an increasing interest in the language of polarisation, which is explained by the stable tendency of the American public to become polarised (Simchon, A., Brady, W.J. & Van Bavel, J.J., 2022; Klein, 2020; Mason, 2018). The scholars argue that on social media, “polarization is often defined as emerging clusters of like-minded individuals who engage in confirmation bias and curate narratives congruent with their beliefs” (Simchon, A., Brady, W.J., & Van Bavel, J.J., 2022; Del Vicaro, M., et.al., 2016). Natalie Jomini Stroud (2010, 2011) found that people tend to consume news that aligns with their views, reinforcing partisan divides. Robert Entman (2004) showed how media framing amplifies ideological bias. At Harvard, R. Faris, Y. Benkler, and H. Roberts (2018) argued that fragmented media ecosystems amplify polarization. J. Settle (2018) found that even subtle political signals on social media can intensify polarization. Consequently, such an unacceptance of opposing ideological views is widely known as “affective polarisation” (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, Westwood, 2019; Finkel, 2020; Simchon, Brady, Van Bavel, 2022).

Though there are many scientific works devoted to the phenomenon of political polarization in American digital news media and social networks, however, far too little attention has been paid to the integrated, multimodal approach to analysing of political polarization in digital communication. Unlike traditional studies that focus on textual or quantitative content analysis, this research synthesizes linguistic, visual, and interactive elements. Fur-

thermore, it provides professional journalism and user commentary content, offering a comprehensive view of how polarization is constructed across media.

This article aims to defend the relevance of research on the mechanisms of political polarisation in English-language digital political news through a comprehensive multimodal analysis of journalistic content and user interaction across online media platforms and social networks.

The findings provide insight into the discursive, visual, and interactive strategies that contribute to the construction and reinforcement of political polarization in digital media environments. They reveal how multimodal elements - such as language choice, imagery, and user interaction—function together to frame political events, shape public opinion across both journalistic platforms and social networks.

The research focuses on the communicative, linguistic, and multimodal strategies employed in online political discourse. To achieve the defined objectives, the study will pursue the following tasks:

- 1) to review and synthesize the existing scientific works on political polarisation in digital media, with a particular focus on the multimodal approach;
- 2) to evaluate the methodological advantages of the integrated multimodal approach in political communication research;
- 3) to illustrate the scientific novelty by analysing journalistic content and user commentary through journalistic textual news and user commentaries.

## **Theoretical overview**

The study of polarization in American digital political news is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together insights from political communication and media studies. It is worth noting that political polarization refers not only to ideological distance but also to the emotional dimensions of political identity, including distrust toward political opponents. In recent decades, this polarization has deepened due to transformations in the media and the structure of online information environments.

Modern digital media employ multimodal means of delivery, including text, images, infographics, and other visual components, which affect the user through multiple modes of perception simultaneously (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Contemporary media linguistics research emphasizes the analysis of multimodal communicative resources that enable the creation of complex and emotionally charged texts, which contribute to the construction of specific ideological stances. These elements not only convey information but also participate in the construction of frames

and ideological interpretations of political events (Entman, 2007). The visual rhetoric of news can both enhance neutrality and provoke polarisation of opinions (Caple, 2013). Caple and Bednarek (2016) emphasize that vocabulary, layout, and visual imagery work together to shape meanings and influence reader perception. In addition, the selection of information sources often reflects the ideological preferences of the media (Druckman, 2005; Groeling, 2013).

At the same time, there has been an increase in political polarisation in society, particularly in the United States of America. It manifests itself not only in the editorial policies of the media but also in the reactions of the users themselves - in comments, discussions and digital activism (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Lelkes, 2016). These interactive spaces have not become just specific places for ideological polarisation but also a digital and accessible place for their reproduction and amplification. A considerable amount of literature has been published on verbal political news and media discourse (Fairclough, 1995a; Richardson, 2007) and the analysis of user practices (Papacharissi, 2015; Freelon, Wells & Bennett, 2020). In studies of political rhetoric and media discourse, the focus is on rhetorical strategies that shape audiences' perceptions, construct in-group and out-group identities, and convey ideological positions (Fairclough, 1995b; Chilton, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2011).

The latest studies demonstrate that user comments not only reflect but shape the modern discourse (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Rowe, 2015). Personalized content delivery and platform algorithms enhance the perception of selective information and deepen the impact of "information bubbles" (Pariser, 2011; Flaxman et al., 2016; KhosraviNik, 2018). The multimodal approach reveals how textual and visual elements interact to create political meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

However, no research has been found that investigates the interplay between the form of news information presentation and its interpretation by the audience in the framework of the multimodal approach, with a specific focus on how this interaction contributes to the political polarization formation.

It is worth noting the basic hypothesis that English-language digital political news and user commentaries employ distinct but closely connected linguistic, visual, and semiotic strategies, focusing on discourse polarisation. Journalistic news texts are supposed to employ more formal and ideologically coloured multimodal digital resources, reflecting editorial positioning.

In contrast, user commentaries are expected to be more informal, emotionally charged, and rhetorically confrontational, which intensifies polarisation. Additionally, from a multimodal perspective, user-created content is distinguished by a more varied range of multimodal options used to express affective evaluation and ideological stance both explicitly and implicitly.

Hence, the interaction between news content and audience reaction creates a kind of a discursive arena in which meanings are not only perceived by readers but also their polarisation is formed and reinforced in the process of communication between professional journalism and active user comments on digital platforms.

Thus, the highlighted gaps support the hypothesis that a multimodal analysis of political news and user comments is intended to enable a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of formation and reproduction of political polarisation in English-language digital discourse.

## **Research methodology**

As it has already been mentioned despite the increasing interest in political polarization and digital communication, far too little attention has been paid to the role of multimodal strategies, including linguistic, visual, and semiotic ones, inter-playing in journalistic texts and user comments that reinforce polarization. Furthermore, in contemporary studies, commentary discourse is rarely analysed from a comparative point of view.

Hence, the defended research is supposed to focus on the comparative characteristics of the official journalistic materials and user commentaries of the same political events. The analysis has to explore the lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and multimodal strategies used to express ideological evaluation. It covers the investigation of stylistic devices (for example, metaphors, ironies, repetitions, etc.), manipulation, and tone changes in formal and informal discourses.

To achieve the mentioned purposes, the study requires a comprehensive approach that combines the methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to study the mechanisms of discursive polarisation in the digital political space.

Critical discourse analysis aims at studying how ideological positions in language shape assessment and its polarisation. CDA enables researchers to uncover ideological positioning through discourse features such as lexical choices, grammatical and pragmatic constructions. This approach is rooted in the work of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001), who emphasized the role of language in the reproduction of social power, and Teun A. van Dijk (1998), who focused on the cognitive and social dimensions of political and media discourse.

The multimodal approach is intended to study the interaction of verbal and non-verbal resources such as imagery, layout, video, and graphic symbolism in creating variants of event interpretation. Scholars such as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001) have pioneered this approach, arguing

that meaning-making in modern media is inherently multimodal. MDA enables the study to explore how images and visual arrangements reinforce ideological content in digital news.

Comparative and pragmatic analysis enables the determination of the communicative intentions of the participants by comparing the strategies of journalistic and user discourses according to thematic and lexical-stylistic parameters. The analysis aims to explore the lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and multimodal strategies used to express ideological evaluation. It covers the investigation of stylistic devices (for example, metaphors, ironies, repetitions, etc.), manipulation, and tone changes in formal and informal discourses.

This approach enables an understanding of how political polarization is linguistically and visually constructed in American digital political media.

Political polarization in American digital news environments is shaped by the interplay of multimodal discourse, media ideology, and rhetorical strategies. At the core of this analysis is recognized that news content today is rarely communicated through text alone. Visuality plays a key role in shaping audience perception. Caple (2013) argues that visual elements such as photographs and layout function rhetorically to guide interpretation and construct meaning. These elements, when combined with vocabulary and structural features, form an integrated multimodal system that affects audience reception (Caple & Bednarek, 2016). This approach is followed with multimodal discourse analysis, which investigates the interaction between semiotic modes such as text, image, and design in the processes of meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Media organizations frequently engage in selective sourcing that reflects their political ideologies. As noted by Groeling (2013), media outlets make deliberate editorial choices about whom to quote, which experts to consult, and what narratives to prioritize. Druckman's study (2005) investigates how the selection of information sources in media texts often reflects underlying ideological preferences, shaping the interpretation of news content.

Iyengar and Westwood (2015) argue that political identity has become a dominant social divide, shaping how individuals interpret news, engage with opposing viewpoints, and participate in online discussions. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly visible in online comment sections and social media interactions. Lelkes (2016) points out digital spaces serve not only as reflections of division but as active sites for the intensification of conflict.

Moreover, the rise of participatory media has shifted the dynamics of political communication. As the observations suggest, political discourse is now actively shaped by users. Papacharissi (2015) notes that digital platforms enable citizens to become co-creators of political narratives, while Freelon, Wells, and Bennett (2020) emphasize the role of user engagement, such as commenting, sharing, and tagging, in the framing of political content.

User comments in particular have been found to influence discourse and shape interpretation (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Rowe, 2015).

Summarising up, these theoretical perspectives highlight the complexity of digital political communication. Polarization is a dynamic process shaped by ideological framing, rhetorical construction, and user participation. Understanding this process requires an integrated approach that accounts for both the content and the context in which political discourse operates.

To substantiate the scientific novelty of the proposed research, it is important to demonstrate the potential of the chosen methodological framework. For this purpose, the paper presents a case study – multimodal analysis of journalistic news texts and user commentaries – which serves as an illustrative example of how the mechanisms of political polarisation can be studied in English-language (mainly American) digital political news across media.

## Case study

Digital news articles employ a range of words, images, layouts, and interactive features to guide readers' understanding of the news. Headlines often include strong connotations to shape people's perceptions. Pictures highlight emotions or symbols to draw readers' attention to the information, and interactive features guide interpretation and credibility. It is worth noting that user comment sections also serve as dynamic spaces where readers contest and even reframe journalistic narratives. Comments are marked by informal, emotive language, emoji, and multimodal expressions, often resisting or challenging dominant frames by introducing alternative viewpoints.

To explore the dynamics of political polarization in American digital political news driven by journalistic discourse and audience comment interaction, this study analyses both media and user-generated commentary. Specifically, it focuses on selected sentences from *The Washington Post* article titled "6 takeaways from Trump's inaugural address" (January 20, 2025), alongside user responses posted on Reddit and the X (renamed from Twitter) platform.

For example, the sentence from *The Washington Post* article "6 takeaways from Trump's inaugural address", "Trump's speech wasn't focused on score-settling and attacking his political foes as his usual fare. He made more false and dubious claims," uses lexical choices that frame Trump as regularly aggressive and dishonest. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) shows how terms like "score-settling" and "false claims" delegitimize the speaker.

From a lexical perspective, the vocabulary used is overtly evaluative. Words such as "score-settling", "attacking", "false", and "dubious" are loaded with negative connotations. These lexical items are definitely not neutral de-

scriptors but ideologically charged terms that imply emotional reactivity (“*score-settling*”), aggression (“*attacking*”), and dishonesty or manipulation (“*false and dubious claims*”). The phrase “*his usual fare*” also plays a crucial role in lexical framing. It categorizes Trump’s discourse as combative, normalizing this behavior through repetition and familiarity.

Grammatically, the use of negation in “*wasn’t focused*” is significant. Rather than affirming what the speech *was* about, the sentence emphasizes what it *was not*, thereby presupposing that Trump’s previous speeches usually *are* focused on personal attacks. This use of negative polarity not only highlights deviation from a norm but also implicitly reinforces that norm. Additionally, the second sentence, “*He made more false and dubious claims,*” uses a declarative structure that presents judgment as fact.

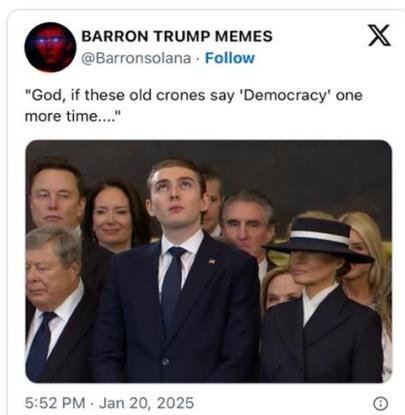
From a pragmatic point of view, the utterances perform more than a simple reporting function. They are expected to serve as speech acts of criticism. The statement presupposes that Trump typically engages in dishonesty, and by declaring that he continued making “*false and dubious claims,*” it positions the speaker as untrustworthy. This indirectly guides the reader toward a specific interpretation.

Similarly, the phrase that was taken from the Reddit platform “*This is a hell of a speech*” carries layered meaning dependent on tone and context. The use of the intensifier “*hell*” reflects strong emotion. Lexically, the sentence contains informal and idiomatic elements. “*Hell*” is a slang term functioning as an intensifier, used to emphasize how noteworthy the speech is. The phrase “*a hell of a*” is a fixed idiomatic expression that means “very impressive”. Grammatically, the sentence “*This is a hell of a speech*” is a simple declarative clause. The subject of the sentence is “*This*”, a demonstrative pronoun that refers to a specific speech currently being discussed. Pragmatically, the sentence expresses an evaluation of the speech. It acts as praise for the speech’s quality or impact. The word “*hell*” adds emotional intensity, so listeners must rely on tone, facial expressions, and context to understand the speaker’s true attitude. It also assumes the speech is noteworthy enough to deserve such a strong reaction.

The tweet “*God, if these old crones say ‘Democracy’ one more time....*” uses sarcastic language. (Picture 1)

The phrase “*old crones*” is a negative term used to describe political opponents. The quotation marks around “*Democracy*” suggest irony. This lexical choice targets a group perceived negatively and seeks to belittle their arguments or views. From the point of grammar, the unfinished conditional sentence and ellipsis create a tone of frustration. This structure invites the audience to imagine the consequences, adding tension and emotional charge to the statement. Pragmatically analysing, the tweet mocks critics, encouraging solidarity by expressing shared annoyance. The image reinforces this

with Barron Trump looking upward, symbolizing exasperation, while Melania Trump's serious expression adds to the solemn mood. Elon Musk's presence adds political weight. The photo's formal setting contrasts with the sarcastic tone, creating irony.



Picture 1

X (Renamed Twitter) platform user commentary on Donald Trump's inaugural speech

From the multimodal discourse perspective, Barron's upward gaze can be seen as a visual representation of the phrase "God, if these old crones...", suggesting a moment of silent frustration or prayer. Melania Trump's formal attire and serious facial expression contribute to a tense atmosphere, while Elon Musk's neutral but concerned look adds another feeling of seriousness. However, the formal setting and the serious expressions of the individuals contrast with the sarcastic tone of the text. The author uses this image to amplify the meaning behind the phrase, making the emotional state of the people in the photo central to the overall message.

Summing up, a text and image convey political frustration on the inauguration day of January 20, 2025, emphasizing the speaker's weariness with repeated calls to "Democracy." The combination of language and visuals strengthens the overall critical and mocking message.

Overall, these examples demonstrate how political communication in digital media relies on an intricate interplay of verbal and visual modes to frame, contest, and co-produce meaning in the public sphere.

## Conclusion

This article has justified the novelty of examining political polarisation in English-language digital political news through a comprehensive multi-

modal analysis of journalistic content and user interaction across online media platforms and social networks.

This study has demonstrated that digital news platforms and social networks significantly contribute to the formation and intensification of political polarization in the United States. Information in contemporary media does not merely reflect reality; it helps shape people's perception of the world. Digital media often selectively presents news, leading to divergent worldviews.

This research uses a combined approach that looks at language, images, and user interactions to understand better how political divisions are built and maintained online. The findings reveal that both professional news and user comments collaboratively influence political attitudes and reinforce polarized interpretations.

The results underscore the significance of examining political events in digital media by considering all these elements together. Understanding how language, visuals, and social interactions connect can help us better grasp how political polarization grows. This knowledge can also help find ways to reduce division and encourage more open and respectful discussions in online spaces.

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