



Ideological Polarization in Online News Comment Sections: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Digital Language

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ABSTRACT : This study examines ideological polarization in online news comment sections through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. In recent years, digital platforms have increasingly become sites of discursive contestation where ideological divisions are intensified rather than mitigated. Using a qualitative interpretive design, this study analyzes approximately 300 user comments on political news articles collected through purposive sampling. The analysis applies van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, focusing on textual structures, social cognition, and social context. The findings reveal three dominant patterns: (1) the construction of "us versus them" dichotomies through evaluative and exclusionary language, (2) the use of emotional and stigmatizing discourse as a mechanism of ideological legitimation, and (3) the recursive reproduction of polarization through interactive comment chains. Drawing on recent studies in digital communication and polarization, the findings demonstrate that online language operates as a form of symbolic power that reinforces group boundaries and social fragmentation. This study contributes to contemporary digital discourse research by emphasizing the importance of critical digital literacy and micro-level discursive analysis in understanding ideological polarization.

Keywords: ideological polarization; online news comments; critical discourse analysis (CDA); digital discourse; affective polarization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital media has significantly transformed public communication, particularly through interactive features such as comment sections in online news platforms. While these spaces were initially designed to promote democratic participation, recent studies suggest that they increasingly function as arenas of ideological conflict and polarization (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2022). Rather than facilitating constructive dialogue, comment sections often amplify division and antagonism among users.

Scholars have identified ideological polarization as one of the most pressing challenges in digital communication. According to Shanto Iyengar et al. (2021), polarization has evolved beyond ideological disagreement into *affective polarization*, characterized by emotional hostility toward opposing groups. Similarly, large-scale computational studies demonstrate that online environments foster echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to like-minded perspectives, reinforcing ideological divides (Cinelli et al., 2021; Fabiana Zollo et al., 2022).

In the context of digital discourse, language plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing group identities. Research in *New Media & Society* and *Information*,

Communication & Society shows that online comments frequently employ discursive strategies such as labeling, stereotyping, and delegitimization to mark boundaries between “ingroup” and “outgroup” (KhosraviNik, 2022; Theocharis et al., 2021). These linguistic practices contribute to the normalization of polarized thinking.

Furthermore, studies in network science highlight how platform structures and algorithmic curation intensify polarization by promoting content that aligns with users’ existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021; Walter Quattrociocchi et al., 2022). This structural reinforcement creates a feedback loop in which polarized discourse becomes increasingly dominant.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a gap in understanding how polarization is constructed and reproduced at the micro-discursive level, particularly within comment sections as everyday communicative spaces. Most studies focus on macro-level patterns, overlooking the nuanced linguistic mechanisms through which ideology is negotiated in interaction (Bouvier, 2022; Domínguez Romero, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to: analyze how ideological meanings are constructed in online comments, examine how group identities are discursively produced, and explore how polarization is reproduced through interaction. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with contemporary digital communication theories, this study offers a deeper understanding of ideological dynamics in online environments.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to examine ideological polarization as manifested in online comment discourse. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore how meaning, ideology, and social identities are constructed through language within specific socio-digital contexts rather than to measure variables quantitatively. The research is grounded in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the socio-cognitive model developed by Teun A. van Dijk (2021), which integrates textual analysis, cognitive processes, and broader social structures. This framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how discourse both reflects and reproduces ideological positions in digital communication.

The data for this study consist of approximately 300 user-generated comments collected from online news platforms that publish political content. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the relevance and richness of the data. Specifically, comments were selected based on three main criteria: the presence of explicit ideological positioning, the occurrence of interaction through reply chains, and the use of evaluative or emotionally charged

language. This sampling approach ensures that the dataset captures discursive practices that are indicative of polarization dynamics. Data collection was conducted through systematic digital documentation, in which comment threads were archived, organized, and categorized according to thematic relevance. Each comment was anonymized to protect user identity and to adhere to ethical research standards. The dataset was then compiled into a corpus that enabled iterative reading and analysis. The analytical process followed van Dijk's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis.

First, textual analysis focused on identifying linguistic features such as lexical choices, syntactic structures, rhetorical strategies, and evaluative expressions that signal ideological positioning. Second, the socio-cognitive dimension examined how these linguistic features reflect underlying beliefs, shared knowledge, and group-based mental models that shape the interpretation of social reality. Third, the social context dimension explored how discourse relates to broader socio-political conditions, including power relations, group identity construction, and ideological conflict in digital environments.

The analysis was conducted through an iterative coding process, in which data were repeatedly examined to identify recurring patterns and themes. Codes were then grouped into broader categories representing key discursive strategies associated with polarization. This interpretive process enabled the identification of patterns such as dichotomization, stigmatization, and interactional escalation.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through theoretical triangulation by integrating multiple perspectives from CDA and digital communication studies. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent and systematic analytical procedure, while confirmability was supported through reflexive interpretation to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were strictly observed by anonymizing all data and avoiding the reproduction of harmful or identifiable content.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding ideological polarization in online comment sections requires a comprehensive theoretical foundation that integrates linguistic, social, and technological perspectives. Contemporary research in digital communication highlights that online discourse is not merely a medium of expression but a dynamic site where meanings, identities, and ideologies are continuously constructed and contested. In recent years, scholars have emphasized the need to combine discourse-oriented approaches with insights from political

communication and computational social science to capture the complexity of digital interactions (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Cinelli et al., 2021). This interdisciplinary perspective is particularly important given that polarization in digital environments is shaped not only by individual beliefs but also by discursive practices and platform structures (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2022; Theocharis et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have shown that the increasing prevalence of affective polarization, characterized by emotional hostility between groups, has transformed the nature of public discourse in online spaces (Iyengar et al., 2021; Bail et al., 2021). At the same time, the rapid circulation of information and the emergence of algorithmically curated content ecosystems have intensified ideological divisions by reinforcing selective exposure and echo chambers (Zollo et al., 2022; Çömlekçi, 2021). Within this context, language plays a central role as both a medium and a mechanism through which polarization is constructed and reproduced. Therefore, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework consisting of Critical Discourse Analysis, ideological polarization theory, and digital discourse studies to provide a holistic understanding of how online communication operates as a site of ideological struggle.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the primary analytical lens for examining how language functions as a form of social practice embedded in power relations and ideological structures. According to Teun A. van Dijk (2021), discourse plays a fundamental role in shaping social cognition by influencing how individuals construct knowledge, beliefs, and group identities. This perspective emphasizes that discourse is not neutral but actively participates in the production and reproduction of social inequality and ideological dominance. Similarly, Norman Fairclough (2021) argues that language contributes to the construction of social identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge, particularly within contexts characterized by asymmetrical power relations. Recent studies have demonstrated that CDA is especially relevant for analyzing digital communication, where ideological contestation is embedded in everyday language practices (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2022; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2022). Within this framework, ideological discourse is often structured through strategies such as *positive self-presentation* and *negative other-presentation*, which function to legitimize in-group perspectives while delegitimizing opposing groups (van Dijk, 2021; Bouvier, 2022). These discursive strategies are particularly evident in online comment sections, where users employ evaluative language, labeling, and rhetorical framing to construct polarized narratives.

Ideological Polarization

The concept of ideological polarization is essential for understanding the broader social dynamics that shape online discourse. Ideological polarization refers to the increasing division between groups with opposing beliefs, often accompanied by strong identification with one's in-group and hostility toward out-groups. Contemporary research distinguishes between ideological polarization and affective polarization, the latter emphasizing emotional responses such as distrust, resentment, and antagonism toward opposing groups (Iyengar et al., 2021). In digital environments, polarization is significantly intensified by technological mechanisms such as algorithmic filtering, selective exposure, and the formation of echo chambers. Empirical studies have shown that social media platforms tend to cluster users into ideologically homogeneous networks, thereby reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Cinelli et al., 2021; Zollo et al., 2022; Bail et al., 2021). Furthermore, discourse-oriented research highlights that language plays a central role in constructing symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them," often through strategies such as labeling, stereotyping, and moral evaluation (Theocharis et al., 2021; KhosraviNik, 2022; Bouvier, 2022). These linguistic practices not only reflect polarization but actively contribute to its reproduction by reinforcing group identities and deepening social divisions within digital communication spaces.

Digital Discourse

The concept of digital discourse provides a crucial framework for understanding how the characteristics of online communication shape the form and intensity of ideological expression. Digital discourse is typically characterized by features such as anonymity, interactivity, and rapid information dissemination, all of which influence communicative behavior (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Roitman et al., 2021). Anonymity reduces social accountability, allowing users to express more extreme or confrontational views without fear of immediate consequences, which often leads to the intensification of conflict (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2022). Interactivity enables real-time engagement, creating dynamic exchanges in which disagreement can quickly escalate through iterative responses in comment threads (Domínguez Romero, 2022). Additionally, the speed and scale of information circulation in digital environments facilitate the rapid spread of emotionally charged and polarized content, further amplifying ideological divisions (Cinelli et al., 2021; Çömlekçi, 2021). These dynamics suggest that digital platforms are not merely passive channels of communication but active environments that shape discourse and influence how users construct and negotiate meaning. Consequently, analyzing digital discourse requires an integrated approach that considers

linguistic features, social interactions, and technological structures as interconnected elements of communication.

4. FINDINGS

This study identifies three major discursive patterns that characterize ideological polarization in online news comment sections. These patterns are not isolated but interconnected, forming a dynamic process through which polarization is constructed, expressed, and continuously reproduced in digital interaction. The findings are based on a close textual analysis of user comments, focusing on linguistic features, interactional structures, and recurring ideological themes.

The Construction of Binary Opposition (“Us vs. Them”)

One of the most prominent patterns observed in the data is the systematic construction of binary oppositions that divide participants into clearly defined social groups. Users frequently employ pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “they,” alongside categorical labels, to establish group identity and differentiate themselves from others. These linguistic choices function as discursive tools for constructing ideological boundaries.

In many instances, in-group representation is associated with positive attributes such as rationality, morality, and legitimacy, while out-groups are depicted as irrational, corrupt, or harmful. This asymmetrical representation reflects a discursive strategy that reinforces group solidarity while delegitimizing opposing perspectives. For example, comments often frame opposing groups as inherently flawed or incapable of understanding “the truth,” thereby excluding them from legitimate participation in discourse.

Furthermore, the use of generalized statements and collective labeling contributes to the simplification of complex social realities into rigid dichotomies. Such constructions reduce nuance and encourage categorical thinking, which is a key feature of polarized discourse. This binary framing not only reflects ideological positioning but also actively shapes how users interpret social and political issues.

Emotional Intensification and Stigmatizing Language

Another significant finding is the pervasive use of emotionally charged and stigmatizing language. Users frequently employ insults, derogatory terms, sarcasm, and moral judgments to express disagreement. This emotional intensification serves multiple discursive functions, including reinforcing in-group cohesion and undermining the credibility of opposing groups.

Rather than engaging in rational argumentation, many comments rely on affective expressions that appeal to emotion rather than evidence. This includes the use of terms that

question the intelligence, morality, or integrity of others. Such language transforms disagreement into personal or group-based attacks, thereby escalating conflict and reducing the possibility of constructive dialogue.

Additionally, stigmatizing language often operates through implicit assumptions and shared stereotypes. Users may invoke culturally or politically loaded terms that carry negative connotations, thereby reinforcing existing prejudices without explicitly stating them. This suggests that polarization is not only expressed through explicit hostility but also through subtle forms of discursive exclusion.

The prevalence of emotional language indicates that polarization in online discourse is strongly linked to affective processes. Emotions such as anger, frustration, and resentment are not merely byproducts of disagreement but central elements in the construction of polarized communication.

Interactional Dynamics and the Reproduction of Polarization

The third key finding relates to the interactional structure of comment sections, which plays a crucial role in the reproduction of polarization. Unlike static texts, online comments are inherently interactive, often forming extended reply chains in which users respond to one another. These interactions frequently escalate into cycles of disagreement, where each response intensifies the tone and reinforces existing divisions.

Analysis shows that users tend to respond selectively to opposing viewpoints, often with the intention of challenging or discrediting them. Rather than fostering dialogue, these interactions tend to produce a pattern of reciprocal antagonism. Each comment not only expresses an individual stance but also reacts to and amplifies the stance of others, creating a feedback loop of polarization.

Moreover, agreement within groups is often expressed through supportive comments, affirmations, or repetition of shared viewpoints. This reinforces in-group solidarity and creates a sense of collective identity. At the same time, opposing comments are met with rejection, ridicule, or hostility, further deepening the divide between groups.

The recursive nature of these interactions suggests that polarization is not a static condition but an ongoing process that is continuously reproduced through discourse. The structure of digital communication—particularly its immediacy and interactivity—facilitates this process by enabling rapid exchanges that escalate conflict over time.

Discursive Normalization of Polarization

An additional pattern emerging from the data is the normalization of polarized discourse within the comment environment. Repeated exposure to antagonistic language and binary framing appears to make such discourse increasingly acceptable and routine. Users rarely challenge the use of stigmatizing or exclusionary language; instead, these practices are often reinforced through repetition and imitation.

This normalization process contributes to the entrenchment of polarized communication, where extreme expressions become part of the expected discourse. Over time, this can shift the boundaries of acceptable communication, making it more difficult to reintroduce balanced or constructive dialogue.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that ideological polarization in online comment sections is constructed through a combination of linguistic strategies, emotional expression, and interactional dynamics. The use of binary opposition, stigmatizing language, and recursive interaction creates a self-reinforcing system in which polarization is continuously reproduced. These patterns highlight the role of digital discourse as an active site of ideological construction rather than a neutral medium of communication.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that ideological polarization in online comment sections is not merely a reflection of pre-existing social divisions but an active discursive process that is continuously constructed and reproduced through language and interaction. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, this study reveals how linguistic strategies, emotional expressions, and interactional patterns collectively function as mechanisms of ideological production in digital environments.

The construction of binary opposition identified in the findings aligns closely with the socio-cognitive framework proposed by Teun A. van Dijk (2021), particularly the concept of the ideological square, which emphasizes the distinction between positive self-representation and negative other-representation. The frequent use of pronouns such as “we” and “they,” as well as categorical labeling, illustrates how users construct clear boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. This process not only reflects ideological positioning but also reinforces group identity by simplifying complex social realities into rigid dichotomies. Similar patterns have been observed in recent digital discourse studies, which highlight how online communication often relies on reductive categorizations that intensify division (Bouvier, 2022; KhosraviNik, 2022).

Furthermore, the prevalence of emotionally charged and stigmatizing language supports the concept of affective polarization, as discussed by Shanto Iyengar et al. (2021). The findings indicate that polarization in online comment sections is driven not only by differences in opinion but also by emotional dynamics such as anger, resentment, and hostility. This emotional intensification transforms disagreement into antagonism, reducing the possibility of rational deliberation. Studies in political communication and digital media have similarly shown that emotional expression plays a central role in amplifying polarization, particularly in online environments where anonymity reduces social accountability (Theocharis et al., 2021; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2022). In this context, language becomes a tool not only for expressing viewpoints but also for attacking and delegitimizing others.

In addition, the interactional structure of comment sections contributes significantly to the reproduction of polarization. The recursive nature of reply chains observed in this study reflects the dynamics of digital interaction, where discourse evolves through continuous exchanges between users. Rather than facilitating dialogue, these interactions often produce cycles of escalation, in which each response intensifies the tone and reinforces division. This finding is consistent with research on online echo chambers, which demonstrates that digital platforms tend to amplify polarization through repeated exposure to similar viewpoints and antagonistic engagement with opposing perspectives (Cinelli et al., 2021; Fabiana Zollo et al., 2022). The interactive affordances of digital platforms thus play a crucial role in sustaining polarized discourse.

Moreover, the normalization of polarized language identified in the findings highlights the broader socio-cultural implications of digital communication. As antagonistic discourse becomes routine, users may become desensitized to extreme expressions, leading to a shift in what is considered acceptable communication. This process reflects what scholars describe as the institutionalization of polarized discourse within digital environments (Çömlekçi, 2021; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). Over time, such normalization can erode the quality of public discourse and undermine the deliberative function of digital platforms.

Importantly, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that ideological polarization is not only shaped by macro-level factors such as political structures or algorithms but is also actively produced at the micro-discursive level through everyday language practices. While previous research has focused on large-scale patterns of polarization, this study highlights the importance of examining how polarization is enacted in specific communicative contexts, such as comment sections. This micro-level perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of how ideology operates in digital communication.

Finally, the findings underscore the need for critical digital literacy as a response to the challenges posed by polarized discourse. Understanding how language constructs and reinforces ideological divisions is essential for promoting more reflective and responsible communication practices. Without such awareness, digital platforms risk becoming increasingly fragmented spaces where meaningful dialogue is replaced by conflict and exclusion.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ideological polarization in online news comment sections is not merely a reflection of existing social and political divisions but is actively constructed and reproduced through discursive practices embedded in digital communication. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings demonstrate that polarization emerges through the systematic use of binary oppositions, emotionally charged and stigmatizing language, and recursive interactional patterns that reinforce antagonism between groups. These discursive mechanisms function as forms of symbolic power that shape group identities, legitimize ingroup perspectives, and delegitimize opposing viewpoints. Moreover, the interactive and algorithmically mediated nature of digital platforms intensifies these processes by facilitating rapid exchanges and repeated exposure to polarized narratives. This study contributes to the growing body of research on digital discourse by highlighting the importance of micro-level language practices in understanding broader ideological dynamics. The findings also underscore the need for critical digital literacy and more reflective communication practices to mitigate the effects of polarization, while suggesting that future research should further explore the role of platform design and algorithmic systems in shaping discursive polarization in online environments.

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