

What Kind of Depolarization Should We Aim For? Making Communication Transformative

Michael Brüggemann ^a, Christel W. van Eck ^b, Shota Gelovani ^c, Hendrik Meyer ^a, Ashley Muddiman ^d, Louisa Pröschel ^a, and Hartmut Wessler ^c

^aInstitute for Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany; ^bAmsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; ^cInstitute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany; ^dDepartment of Communication Studies, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA

ABSTRACT

Polarization may become a threat to democracy, if it starts to block the capacities for collective problem-solving. This is particularly problematic in the current state of multiple social and ecological crises. Calls for depolarization often lack clarity about what kind of depolarization is normatively desirable. Academic texts often lack transparency about the values that underpin recommendations for better communication. Focusing on discursive polarization – polarization as emerging in communication – we propose Democratic Transformative Communication as a normative framework. It defines desirable communication as that which enables societies to engage in socio-ecological transformations in order to fully realize its foundational democratic values. Today, these values need to be complemented by the principle of sustainability. This lens also reshapes what counts as desirable depolarization: the goal is not to go for luke-warm compromise on the lowest common denominator, but the cultivation of constructive controversies that expand the transformative capacity of public debate. “Moderate” voices merit greater visibility, provided moderation is redefined as openness to diverse viewpoints and willingness to engage antagonists respectfully. Radical ideas deserve attention if they address root causes of democratic or ecological crises. This approach limits verbal aggression: anger may be legitimate when grounded in real injustices but becomes counterproductive when it alienates undecided audiences or primarily provokes backlash. This lens has different implications for different actor group. It also concerns us as researches and first and foremost urges us to not shy away to evaluate communication in its social contexts and be transparent about our own values.

KEYWORDS

Polarization; depolarization;
Transformative
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Polarization has become a pressing concern as it may become “pernicious” (McCoy & Somer, 2019) and paralyze democracy. This is problematic in times that do not call for stasis but for deep transformations to tackle the multiple ecological and social crises. What remains unclear is what kind of depolarization we wish for. Meeting in the middle? Banning anger from public communication? The wealth of studies on polarization do not

CONTACT Michael Brüggemann  michael.brueggemann@uni-hamburg.de  Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Hamburg, Von-Melle-Park 5, Hamburg 20146, Germany

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help much in responding to these questions as they often lack a transparent normative framework to support the assumption that depolarization is desirable. We focus on discursive polarization (i.e., polarization as emerging in communication, Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023) and address this gap by calling for Democratic Transformative Communication. This normative lens defines desirable communication patterns as those that help society tackle socio-ecological transformations and fully realize core democratic values. We argue that today, sustainability needs to complement established Enlightenment values such as freedom, equality and solidarity. Transformative debates can help society transform toward these values. This perspective has implications for identifying desirable patterns of depolarization: efforts should enhance the transformative potential of public debates. Depolarization should not be about seeking lukewarm compromises, but rather about fostering constructive controversies that help society move closer to its ideals. From a transformative perspective, “moderate” voices need to be granted more visibility in the public sphere, *if* the understanding of “moderate” is thoroughly redefined. Indeed, radical ideas need to be debated more *if* they address the roots of today’s giant challenges to ecology and democracy. The moderation that we strive for is a mind-set that remains open to a diversity of viewpoints and grants antagonists their place in common debate. This sets limits to verbal aggression. Angry and aggressive statements might be legitimate if, and only if, they are rooted in real injustices and violations of foundational norms of democratic societies. Yet they do not serve the transformative purpose if they are legitimate but not suited to engage audiences that have not made up their minds. Also, acts of communication are not transformative if they, ultimately, provoke more backlash than mobilization among potential supporters. Acts of communication should – ideally – be suited to even convince someone on the other side of the debate. The addressees of this call are all people and organizations who contribute to the gatekeeping process and to moderating the collective process of public communication: journalists remain key, but also e.g. we as academics, and ultimately, all users of social media may contribute to making public communication more transformative. In the following, we connect to existing normative debates related to (discursive) polarization, introduce Democratic Transformative Communication as a normative framework, and illustrate the practical conclusions one might draw for patterns of desirable depolarization.

Seeking Common Ground in the Normative Debate About Polarization

It is useful to disaggregate polarization into two main dimensions. The ideological (attitudinal) dimension refers to growing disagreements over issues, facts, and values. The affective dimension describes increasing emotional distance or hostility between groups (Iyengar et al., 2019). Two classic normative approaches to the democratic public sphere lead to different assessments of these dimensions.

The public sphere theory developed by Habermas emphasizes achieving common understanding through deliberation, where all sides justify their claims, have equal opportunity to participate (Wessler, 2018), and engage in democratic listening (Scudder, 2016). Ideological polarization is not inherently problematic for deliberative theory. Differences can be resolved through discourse, e.g. by identifying common ground on values, establishing a common understanding of facts. However, the affective dimension of polarization disrupts this process: when participants do not respect each other as equals, deliberation will

likely fail. Habermas has been criticized for focusing on rational discourse while neglecting emotion (Fraser, 1990). Today, deliberative theorists argue that emotions (Neblo, 2020), especially self-transcendent ones like compassion, can facilitate “constructive engagement” with opposing sides (Wessler, 2020).

Unlike deliberative theory, the agonistic approach to public sphere theory prioritizes free expression of suppressed views over civil and reasoned exchange. This perspective welcomes polarization splits a public into opposing groups thus enabling the formation of counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). Mouffe’s (1999) concept of agonistic pluralism values conflict in democracy – not just as civil disagreement but as social groups engaging in “us vs. them” conflicts. Anger mobilizes more than other emotions (Valentino et al., 2011). Conflicts are unlikely to be resolved through discourse (Mouffe, 1999). From this perspective, both dimensions of polarization are an important part of the democratic process as they mobilize and make disagreement transparent.

Both the deliberative and agonistic traditions acknowledge limits of legitimate conflict: excessive polarization is indeed harmful. For agonistic theorists, this is the case when the “adversary” in a debate is transformed into the “enemy” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755). The idea of belonging to a shared community of communication (Risse, 2010) underpins both views of the public sphere – even while they differ on other points. Extreme polarization can erode this common ground (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Esau et al., 2025).

These traditions are echoed in current debates about polarization. Deliberation, including the justification of claims and democratic listening, has been proposed as a countermeasure to polarization (Dryzek et al., 2019). Finkel et al. (2020) identify affective polarization, or more specifically “sectarianism” (characterized by othering, aversion, and moralization) as the problem. The authors recommend arguing about political ideas rather than arguing about adversaries. They propose correcting false information about outgroups, tweaking algorithms to reduce the spread of hyperpartisan misinformation, and reducing the incentives for politicians to polarize (e.g., reforming U.S. election campaign financing).

In contrast, Kreiss and McGregor (2024) have argued that “polarization might not be bad for democracy – it might, in fact, be a necessary outgrowth of efforts to achieve democracy” (p. 558). Struggles for power may ultimately lead to polarization, and they may involve portraying the opposing side as morally wrong and illegitimate. Polarization researchers are criticized for creating a false equivalence between, for example, white supremacists and the Black Lives Matter movement: “not all extremism, incivility, and/or toxicity is created equal” (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024, p. 564). Evaluating the context of a given debate is necessary to avoid conflating what Jackson and Kreiss (2023) distinguish as “defensive” and “emancipatory” publics. The first type of public defends privileges rooted in illegitimate inequalities. Emancipatory publics, by contrast, fight for foundational values of democratic societies such as equality and justice. Polarizing discourses emanating from real grievances may serve democracy rather than hurt it. This line of argument is rooted in an agonistic perspective.

From the deliberative perspective, the more problematic dimension of polarization is affective polarization and a focus on issues and values is more productive than attacking outgroups. In light of this, *seeking common ground* should not automatically be equated with aiming for a centrist or depolarized “middle.” From the agonistic perspective we can

learn that instead of broadly calling for depolarization, researchers need to look at contexts of polarizing statements and evaluate whether an emancipatory cause may justify polarizing acts of communication. For researchers, this means that we need to engage with value judgments and be transparent about our own values.

Democratic Transformative Communication

So let us be transparent about our values: we start from the notion that democracy is an ideal still to be fully realized and, in the face of ongoing backlash, to be constantly defended. Our approach takes a process perspective and is progressive in the sense that we call for societal transformation toward the ideals of democracy. Today, the foundational values of democracy as articulated already in the French Revolution (*liberté, égalité, and fraternité*) need to be complemented by an additional principle, if they are to be applied globally and also to future generations: *soutenabilité*. Sustainability following the Brundland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) is commonly defined as the need to live in a way that caters to the needs of future generations and across the globe. Sustainability as a goal calls for a “great transformation” of society comparable to the Neolithic or the Industrial Revolution (WBGU 2011).

Debates can drive democratic and ecological transformations, and they can fuel backlash. Democratic transformative communication can be defined as patterns of communication that enable societies to have a better quality of life: harnessing basic democratic values such as individual freedoms, equality and justice as well as sustainability. Consequently, any proposed measure of depolarization needs to be judged based on a fundamental question: Does it help or hinder democratic societies in living up to their foundational values?

Achieving transformations requires communication, which, in a pluralistic society, inevitably involves different values and perspectives on how those values should be translated into practice. Legitimate controversy will evolve from the following attempt to arrive at concrete recommendations. *Hic sunt dracones*: here are the dragons, as they used to write on maps, where the uncharted and thus dangerous territories begin. This text is a call to open debate rather than to provide a definitive answer to what exactly comprises democratic transformative communication.

Applying the Framework to today’s Discursively Polarized World

A simplistic approach to depolarization might suggest that the solution lies in finding a middle ground between extreme positions – by diminishing the influence of fringe views and amplifying “moderate” voices. However, from the perspective of transformative communication, this approach only makes sense if we redefine “fringe” and “moderate.” In our framework, depolarization is not merely about shifting the focus toward more widely “acceptable” or “moderate” viewpoints. Instead, the question is, which viewpoints address the need for democratic and sustainable transformations best? This may involve ideas that are, currently, not viewed as acceptable or moderate. On the contrary, productive ideas may unsettle publics accustomed to communication that emphasizes maintaining the status quo, thereby overlooking that current ways of life are neither fully democratic nor sustainable.

What is (un)desirable on the ideological dimension of polarization? In assessing the ideological dimension of polarization, the key question is not whether positions are

“extreme” but whether they are grounded in facts and contribute to democratic and sustainable transformation. Claims which openly deny established facts should not be granted much space in public debates. The search for facts cannot be guided by an idea of depolarization searches for the truth in the center of “extreme” claims. When one side claims that climate change exists as a dangerous threat to eco-systems and the well-being of people around the globe and the other side claims that climate change is harmless, truth does not reside in the middle. The same is true for adequate political reactions to, for example, the ongoing mass extinction of species. Tiny steps may not be sufficient to deal with the scale and urgency of the problem.

Radical ideas should be welcomed to public debates if they go – in the original sense of the word “radical” – to the roots of a problem. Public debates should focus on these kinds of radical ideas that may overcome entrenched divides. These ideas should not be tuned down simply because they seem fringe to a society dominated by voices of the status quo who propagate incremental steps at best.

What is (un)desirable on the affective dimension of discursive polarization? In considering the affective dimension of polarization, the key question is when emotional intensity becomes democratically harmful and when it can bring about Democratic Transformative Communication. Following from theories of the public sphere, the affective dimension is the more problematic part of polarization. Yet Transformative Communication as a normative framework calls for mobilization to drive change. Thus, we argue that emotional statements may serve democracy when they are grounded in the foundational values of freedom, equality, justice, and sustainability, even if such practices exacerbate affective polarization, e.g. when calling out groups that obstruct climate protection.

One example of acts provoking strong affective responses is civil disobedience, such as climate protesters gluing themselves to streets. Within our framework, such acts are considered legitimate given the scale of the climate crisis, which jeopardizes all foundational democratic values. However, considering the goals of Transformative Communication, this and other legitimate forms of communication may not always be strategically helpful to enable desired social changes in all contexts. For example, rather than mobilizing the public for climate protection, right-wing populist journalists and politicians took advantage of the tactics of recent climate protests in Germany to sway public opinion against climate activists (Meyer et al., 2025). In this context, affectively polarized discourse mobilized defensive publics, forging a broad backlash against all types of engagement for climate protection.

Extreme communicative acts that foster affective polarization may be legitimate up to an extent. Yet the question from the perspective of Democratic Transformative Communication is whether acts of communication practically help society evolve: are they likely to mobilize people for the legitimate cause *and* convince undecided people or will they mainly stir affective backlash and ultimately backfire? While there is no definitive way of telling whether a provocative action or an emotional statement will trigger more backlash than mobilization, research may actually help in assessing this risk and could assist emancipatory movements to adjust their communications. We therefore acknowledge the arguments raised by Kreiss and McGregor (2024) about the legitimacy of acts of polarization and the need to evaluate the aims and contexts of protest actions. But in the end come back to the conclusion that affective discursive polarization is, in many circumstances, unlikely to advance societal progress as it can open a window of opportunity for reactionary backlash.

As a countermeasure to affective polarization, communication may appeal to shared identities and values (Iyengar et al., 2019) and evoke affective responses, such as hope, that foster engagement (van Eck & van der Meer, 2025). Threats to core values may evoke affective responses that should not be repressed. Yet even an expression of anger may be complemented by an appeal to self-transcendent emotions, e.g. compassion for victims of climate degradation or admiration for the courage of activists. This may help to mitigate negative effects of affective polarization.

We argue for redefining “the middle ground” as the place for constructive engagement, where a plurality of ideas and participants are listened to in a community of communication that accepts disagreement among its members. Moderate voices are redefined as those who may have strong and radical opinions but listen to dissenting voices. The virtues of democratic civility and listening (Scudder, 2016) – rather than culturally defined politeness (Keith & Danisch, 2020) – are vital for this redefined middle ground to thrive.

This understanding of transformative debates can be translated into concrete communication norms for professional practice that diverge for different actor groups. Journalists may seek to provide voice to different types of speakers than they currently do. As scholars of political communication, we may engage in “Transformative Communication Scholarship” (Brüggemann et al., 2023). We can contribute in a multitude of ways to Democratic Transformative Communication and help society have debates about socio-ecological transformations that remain open, free, critical, and constructive.

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Notes on contributors

Michael Brüggemann is a professor of Communication, Climate, and Science Communication at the Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Hamburg. His research focuses on political, climate, and science communication and its effects on society.

Christel W. van Eck is an assistant professor at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on climate change communication, science communication, and polarization.

Shota Gelovani is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the University of Mannheim. His research interest is the role of the Internet and social media in political processes from a comparative perspective.

Hendrik Meyer is a researcher at the Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Hamburg. His research focuses on content and network analyses of political media discourses.

Ashley Muddiman is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Kansas. She researches political media effects, focusing specifically on topics such as political incivility, social media and politics, and digital journalism.

Louisa Pröschel is a researcher at the Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Hamburg. Her research focuses on polarized political media discourses.

Hartmut Wessler is a professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim and a principal investigator at the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research. A recurring theme of his research relates to the possibilities of assessing the quality of mediated contestation against diverging normative models of democracy.

ORCID

Michael Brüggemann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7994-3914>

Christel W. van Eck  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9078-4985>

Shota Gelovani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4014-890X>

Hendrik Meyer  <http://orcid.org/0009-0002-7741-0537>

Ashley Muddiman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7735-8113>

Louisa Pröschel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6913-4205>

Hartmut Wessler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4216-5471>

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