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A Loss for Words

What is causing America's cultural polarization?

By Arthur E. Farnsley II

In the first two years of our research, we always asked pastors what they believed was driving today's cultural and political polarization? We heard a wide variety of answers. Sometimes we got the kinds of answers we were originally expecting: Racism, gender identity, immigration, economic inequality, abortion, and so on.

Because we sent our questions to pastors in advance, many of them put serious reflection into their answers and pushed us in directions we were not expecting. For many pastors, the underlying problem is not centered around a specific social issue like racism or gender identity. For them, ***the problem is more about our inability to discuss rationally or disagree amicably***. Racism, gender identity, immigration, economic inequality, and other issues are serious and important, but the real cause of the division is in our lack of the shared vocabulary or experience needed to work through these problems. At bottom, the specific issues are less important than our lack of tools to deal with them.

This prompts two follow-up questions from us: What is the root of this communication problem and what can be done to address it? And here the conversation gets a little more complicated.

To answer the question, "What is the root of this problem?", often a pastor will say that social media is driving us into echo chambers or making it easier to criticize others anonymously, or at least not face-to-face, and this turns up the volume on disagreements. When asked what they would do about polarization in their congregations if they had one magic wish, pastors say, "Get my members off cable news and social media."

This makes sense—this complaint comes up frequently—but it's worth considering that talk radio and cable news were already fomenting division prior to the advent of social media. Is current cable news and its connection to social media just a continuation or has there been a major change?

There are two ways in which social media might be qualitatively different than older cable news or talk radio. First, you do not have to find polarizing content on social media, it finds you. Algorithms estimate what might stimulate you and then deliver the content others have paid for you to see. Second, and perhaps most importantly, individuals engage one another on social media. Sometimes they discuss amicably, but they also argue, bait, bully, and criticize. The feedback is immediate and personal. Television and even talk radio have never been quite so immediate and nowhere near as personal.

Technology made this personal level of engagement possible, but is it the cause, or the effect, of a steady decline in other kinds of face-to-face communication? Fewer people attend worship, especially in-person worship, than even two decades ago. Fewer shop at the mall or at other stores where people hang out. Fewer join clubs, leagues, or fraternal groups. Fewer go to work in person (though many more go in person in 2025 than did in 2020). Clearly this is a continuum—some people can and do stay home more than others. But our face-to-face actions, our experiences of community, have changed over the past few decades.

It is now cliché to say "the pandemic did not cause this change, it accelerated it," but that also seems be at work here. Something happened to move us away from face-to-face communication and toward electronic communication, but it is difficult to say exactly how or why this happened as it did. Americans have watched television for decades. The internet provides content in a more customized way than any other medium could, but in some ways, it is still "television," just television tailored specifically to you.

By itself, lack of in-person connection would not necessarily cause political or cultural division, but there are many

reasons why it might contribute to the problem. For one, we enhance our confirmation bias when we consistently take in things that agree with our views and avoid or discount things that don't.

For another, if we don't have sustained, continuing, relationships with the people we encounter, there is less reason to constantly negotiate and enhance our ability to communicate. We learn to finesse our communication with people we depend on regularly. If you don't like your co-workers, you try to learn to accept them. We learn how to trust others and learn whom we can trust. We do not always get it right, but this process is how we survive socially.

For a third, marketers of all kinds have the skills and the tools to target our biases and exploit them for their own gain. Advertising people have been doing this for years—appealing to the "lizard" part of our brain to prompt us to want, and then to buy, certain things because of how they make us feel. Today, people with political and religious interests can do the same. Ask yourself: Why do politicians run negative ads about their opponents even when voters consistently report they do not want these ads? Because the ads work. Social media does not cause this, but it lets the sellers of ideas target their audiences and approach them accordingly, just as it does for the sellers of goods and services.

All of these factors push us away from a common moral language or a shared version of events that would allow us to debate and discuss reasonably. Older people sometimes lament a time when everyone got their news from Walter Cronkite. If Americans are getting not only different opinions, but different facts cast in different vocabulary, this surely makes constructive civil discourse harder.

The flip side of this, of course, is that so many more voices are now heard. It is easy to forget that Walter Cronkite spoke for a kind of median, middle class, white person with a particular set of interests. Adding a multitude of voices to the conversation, experiencing pluralism, was always going to add new levels of complexity to communication.

The question, "What can be done to address the problem?" is even tougher and pastors recognize this difficulty. They have opinions about faith resources to deal with the problem. They believe teaching certain values and qualities of character might help. But it is no clearer to them than to anyone else how to actually accomplish these things.

I recently spoke with the CEO of a large denominational publishing house. They want to publish books or audio/visual products that are valuable to their pastors and congregations. But when they ask those pastors what they need, the answer is "we don't know."

Something fundamental, foundational, has changed in the way Americans communicate. This is surely tied to the way they form and nurture communities. Because religious congregations are usually intimate communities of shared values, common rituals, and mutual support, changes in communication and community-building have an acute effect on their missions.

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