Is the Internet Eroding Europe’s Middle Ground?

Public Opinion, Polarisation and New Technologies

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About the authors

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Foreword

Over the past three decades, scholarly and popular discourse has enthused that the internet and new digital technologies would ‘wire the world’, inevitably increasing and improving free and open democratic deliberation, transparency, access to information and participation. Today, as digital media play an increasing role in public debates and politics, there is a growing need to understand how these may be impacting democracy, and whether they are contributing to polarisation within our liberal societies.

Yet there is still limited research on whether and how digital media – and social media in particular – are impacting on the notions of identity and belonging; how they may be used to sway public opinion; or whether they are intensifying existing cleavages in public attitudes. Information is particularly scarce given that these are not only relatively new phenomena but also ones that are changing dynamically and evolving at extremely fast pace. There is thus an urgent need for more research in this field. The societal impacts of emerging technologies and digital techniques need to be studied against the background of economic and cultural insecurity, and of decline in trust in established national institutions such as parliaments, governments and traditional media that we are witnessing today.

For these reasons, the European Political Strategy Centre commissioned a report to investigate whether and how the Internet and new digital technologies are influencing public opinion and polarising our societies. The aim is to distil recent events, identify trends and contribute to new policy insights.

In this report, Tim Dixon, Co-founder of More in Common and Managing Director of Purpose Europe, and Míriam Juan-Torres, Senior Researcher and Research Coordinator at More in Common, present the research that they have been undertaking in a number of EU Member States. They present their findings and insights into how and why new narratives of identity, belonging and ‘othering’ are gaining traction, facilitated by the spread of digital media.

The hope is that these findings can be used to support more effective decision-making at EU level by feeding into the forthcoming ‘Global Trends to 2030’ report that is being prepared by the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS). ESPAS is an inter-institutional collaboration among the officials of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European External Action Service, with the support of the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Investment Bank which monitors global trends and offers strategic foresight to the EU’s decision-makers.

By Ruby Gropas, Leader of the Social Affairs Team European Political Strategy Centre
Executive Summary

- Within Europe, public debate has become increasingly concerned with issues of identity, belonging and threats associated with ‘out-groups’ (such as immigrants and refugees). These issues are the focus of many insurgent populist parties, which are shaping debates in many countries across Europe.
- When asked to identify the most important issue facing Europe, survey respondents in 2017 gave the highest rankings to terrorism and immigration – two issues that provoke public debate on the threat of minority ‘out-groups’ to majority ‘in-groups’.
- Polarisation is reflected in deeper divisions and distrust between opposing groups. There are many indicators of increasing polarisation in European societies (though no agreed measure or major comparative study).
- The issues around which polarisation is taking place are especially related to national identity, culture and inclusion, between people who espouse cosmopolitan values and people who espouse traditional cultural and nationalist values.
- In several ways, social media seem to contribute to the process of polarisation (such as through echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce people’s existing beliefs and reduce their exposure to opposing perspectives). Nevertheless, many of the drivers of polarisation were gathering strength before the use of social networking sites became ubiquitous.
- These drivers of polarisation include increased economic inequality and insecurity, perceptions of increased threats from terrorism and violent crime, rapid cultural and demographic change, a widespread sense of cultural loss and division, and a decline in trust in institutions and other members of society.
- Fringe or extreme perspectives can far more easily enter mainstream debate in the digital era where there are fewer information ‘gatekeepers,’ where trust in traditional media has declined, false information can be spread widely and information can be micro-targeted to specific audiences.
- The algorithms that prioritise certain types of content on social networks foster expressions of moral outrage and have contributed to the more polarised tone of debates. Social norms are being changed by repeated exposure to behaviour and commentary that in other settings would be subject to social sanctions or removal.
- Extreme right actors, largely motivated by cultural narratives, coordinate internationally for resourcing and operational support. Their sources of funding and geo-locatable online traffic reveal cross-border cooperation.
- Extreme right actors carry out targeted online information and disinformation campaigns and psychological operations to promote campaigns and shift the public’s attitudes. Reportedly, they are increasingly developing playbooks to share know-how.
- One of the most useful methodologies to help understand the changing nature of public attitudes involves segmenting national populations concerning their attitudes to issues of identity, belonging and ‘otherness.’ These issues are re-shaping national debates and creating a new spectrum of opinion between the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ values. Segmentation studies find two groups clustered at opposite ends of this scale, with profoundly different values and beliefs.
- Despite the intensity of debates between those who espouse ‘open’ and ‘closed’ values, a large number of people – in some countries, more than half of the population – do not identify with either end of the spectrum. Instead, they hold a mix of open and closed values and belong to the ‘conflicted middle’ groups.
- Conflicted middle groups often feel a sense of tension between competing values and priorities on issues of identity, belonging and otherness. For example, most people in the conflicted middle segments support the principle of providing asylum for refugees, but many are also concerned that it is dangerous and that their government has lost control of their borders.
- More research is needed to understand their interaction with technologies and social networks. The characteristics of these ‘conflicted middle’ groups differ between countries and reflect unique national factors, but segmentation research typically identifies two or three distinctive conflicted middle groups.
- As the open/closed issues spectrum increasingly defines national debate in European countries, the construction of future majorities – whether for elections or referenda – will depend on the extent to which conflicted middle groups lean towards open or closed positions.
1. Introduction

In European countries, issues of identity and belonging – embracing dimensions of national, cultural and political identities, sometimes described as ‘tribalism’ - are playing an ever-greater role in public debate. The slow pace of recovery in the decade since the financial crisis has meant that the public remains anxious about economic issues, while a series of brutal acts of terrorism has also given increased prominence to security threats. But terrorism and economic uncertainty have both become linked to wider debates about national identity and the effects of immigration. Those debates are increasingly prominent in national elections, amidst fatigue with the status quo and a decline in trust in established national institutions such as parliaments, governments and traditional media. These debates are playing out in particular on social media, where non-traditional actors and foreign agents are able to reach large audiences to which they previously had limited access. In many countries these debates are contributing to a growing sense of polarisation. This will be the focus of Section 2 of this paper.

The sociological concept of the in-group - typically based on national, ethnic, ideological or religious identity - helps explain changes in public attitudes that have come as a surprise to many in Europe in recent years. When societies are under threat, a common reaction is to reinforce a binary conception of identity - delineating more sharply the boundaries of an ‘us’ in-group by defining a ‘them’ out-group, which constitutes a threat. Although identity-based debates have a distinctly national character, there is remarkable similarity in the narratives of national ‘in-groups’ facing threat from one or more ‘out-groups’ (typically immigrants, refugees, and Muslims). This process is sometimes referred to as ‘othering’ or ‘otherisation’. These divisive in-group and out-group narratives are emerging at a time of decline for institutions that once brought diverse groups of people into contact with each other, such as trade unions and professional groups, churches, local community organisations and voluntary societies.

These ‘othering’ narratives are advanced by groups once regarded as fringe or extremist, who have been newly empowered to reach much larger audiences by using tools such as Facebook ads and other social media, which are discussed in Section 3. Social media tools allow individuals not only to share others’ content but also to create their own. This allows highly motivated individuals (or coordinated groups), to target specific groups within society, shape othering narratives, normalise those narratives and advance a story of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ that divides societies and can fuel polarisation. In a unique way, social media sites enhance this phenomenon by reproducing social validation feedback loops and exploiting specific vulnerabilities in human psychology (that is, social media algorithms are developed according to the findings of social psychology and behavioural economics to maximise reactions and interaction).

In this changing landscape, groups are targeted in deeply contested national debates shaped by extremist forces. Xenophobic nationalists and Islamic extremists are using social media to advance the most strident or extreme positions and to recruit and radicalise online, with techniques that demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of human psychology, digital technology, and how ideas spread.

National debates on issues of identity and belonging, culture, immigration and refugee policy in European countries increasingly reflect a contest between what has been characterised as ‘open’ versus ‘closed’ values. Attitudinal segmentation studies conducted by More in Common (and in the United Kingdom, Hope not Hate) have concluded that while there are stark differences in views between these two groups in each country, it is inaccurate to imagine a clear divide between the two opposed groups. In fact, a large percentage of the population (and in some cases a majority) generally does not identify with either end of the spectrum. These middle groups – commonly referred to as the ‘conflicted middle’ - are in general less driven by a set of fixed positions on contentious topics, have mixed opinions, and are politically more undecided.

The conflicted middle groups, which are the focus of Section 4 of the paper, differ in size and characteristics in each European country, reflecting the variety of national, historic and political contexts of each country. This makes a national analysis essential in seeking to understand the unique characteristics of public attitudes, and the extent to which polarisation of opinion is taking place.

Public opinion research also suggests that the open/closed values spectrum is increasingly influencing voting behaviour, while the traditional spectrum of left/right values (historically related to economic issues of income and class) is becoming less predictive of voting behaviour. In particular, this values spectrum often explains shifts in voting behaviour (such as blue-collar voters in ‘closed’ values groups who have shifted from voting for left or centre-left parties to supporting far-right populist groups). People in middle groups also appear to have weaker attachment to specific parties than in the past. These factors are contributing to less predictable election outcomes and a period of political dealignment, as more voters opt for alternatives to traditional parties. Non-traditional parties, either those
newly established or those that have not regularly played a role in government, now have a much greater presence in national parliaments across Europe, in some instances within governing coalitions.

Many of Europe’s insurgent non-traditional parties adopt a populist style of politics, and ‘endorse popular sovereignty and direct democracy at any cost, if necessary over-riding minority rights, elite expertise, constitutional checks-and-balances, conventional practices, and decision-making by elected representatives.’ Populist parties are often also authoritarian, typically favouring a ‘strong leader,’ military build-up, greater control of the media and state institutions. For this reason they are frequently referred to collectively as authoritarian populists, although not all of Europe’s populist parties are authoritarian.

Populist parties have achieved prominence through the adept use of social media and the Internet, in combination with building a profile in traditional broadcast media through their willingness to break norms of national debate. Social media play a crucial role in disseminating their narratives. Even when they are shaping national debates, populists’ narratives focus on how they are silenced or marginalised by mainstream media, and this creates an additional motivation for supporters to share those narratives. Populists have succeeded in engaging and mobilising groups of supporters that have often felt disenfranchised by conventional politics, and authoritarian populists have successfully won support among individuals in the ‘closed’ values segments and among some in conflicted middle groups. More generally, the narratives of populist groups demonstrate an understanding of the concerns of people in conflicted middle groups, which are discussed in Section 5.

The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into public opinion changes in Europe and how they are influenced by social media and new technologies. It aims to shed light into how and why new narratives of identity, belonging and ‘othering’ are gaining traction in European countries and to analyse the key drivers of these trends and how they intersect. This is a short paper of limited scope. It draws heavily on the continuing research programme that More in Common is undertaking, which aims to understand the new landscape of public attitudes in Europe, and to identify steps to support social cohesion in the face of the threat of social fracturing.

The European Union was founded on a commitment to ‘the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.’ For those values to endure, they must have broad public support among Europeans; they cannot only have the support of one side within polarised national debates. A better understanding of this landscape and how it is being influenced by these new technologies can shape more effective responses to emerging threats to those values of human dignity, democracy and respect for human rights, so that those founding values of the European Union can endure for future generations.

2. Polarisation in Europe

2.1. What is polarisation?

Democratic systems establish mechanisms for citizens to participate in collective decision-making for their community or country. Those systems attempt to find ways to resolve differences between citizens peacefully in line with the wishes of the community and the protection of fundamental democratic rights for all. These goals become more difficult when the views and beliefs of citizens become more divided, and when public confidence in democratic processes and institutions that mediate disagreements is weakened. Divided societies are likely to have increased conflict, lower levels of social trust, weaker institutions and a diminished capacity to reconcile conflicting values and competing interests, and to address collective challenges. As polarisation deepens within communities, opposing sides can move from disagreement over issues to distrust of each other’s motives and ultimately to rejecting the legitimacy of the other side’s views or participation in debate and in society. Increasing polarisation is a threat to democracy, and a consistent factor in democratic breakdowns.

Although discussion of polarisation in mature democracies often focuses on the United States, there are growing concerns about polarisation in many European countries. No comprehensive study of polarisation trends in Europe has been conducted in recent years, but perceptions of increased polarisation are being driven by a wide range of factors, from the increased intensity of online debates to narrow margins in many national elections and referenda.

The term polarisation is commonly used to refer to a wide range of concepts including rising levels of inequality and social segregation, the erosion of consensus-based social values, the rise of populist nationalist political groups and more oppositional styles of public debate. For the purpose of this paper, the term polarisation is used to describe increased opposition between opinion groups (reflected in hostility towards each other’s views, beliefs and conduct, and the belief that the interests of different groups cannot be
reconciled). This is distinct from patterns of increased inequality and segregation, which describe increased gaps in demographic indicators such as income and wealth, standards of living, health, and education outcomes. The paper avoids using the term ‘polarisation’ to describe patterns of increased inequality and social segregation, although recognises that these are contributing factors to increasing polarisation.

Academics define and measure polarisation in several ways. One approach is to understand polarisation through what has been described as the ‘identification-alienation framework’. This framework states that ‘polarisation is related to the alienation that individuals and groups feel from one another, but such alienation is fuelled by notions of within-group identity.’ This approach is connected to notions of the in-group and out-group and is closely related to othering dynamics. Another approach is to understand polarisation through the lens of the extent of disagreement within societies. There are several dimensions to disagreement, including dispersion – when opinions are far apart in substance (there is greater variance) and bimodality – where different opinions on an issue cluster into opposing camps.

2.2. Reasons for perceptions of increasing polarisation

The evidence that the populations of European countries are becoming more polarised is mixed. Social media tend to elevate conflict and amplify the most extreme and strident voices, contributing to perceptions that the public is divided into two opposed camps around a wide range of issues, when in fact much of the public may be disengaged. In some circumstances, a major public event or debate may from the top down trigger a series of events that start a cycle of polarisation. The issue can take on a much wider significance as people identify as belonging to one or the other side (such as through the ‘Brexit’er and ‘remainer’ identities resulting from the United Kingdom’s debate around leaving the European Union). The debate over Catalan independence in Spain reflects this process of polarisation, which has led to concerns around the ‘fractura social’ (social fracture) triggered by events following the Catalan regional government’s independence referendum in October 2017 and the Spanish government’s response. As with the United Kingdom’s vote on Brexit, such events can create perceptions that the population is divided into two camps because the circumstances demand that individuals choose sides in a dispute, creating cultural divisions and identity markers that have ripple effects.

Binary choices can therefore generate polarising political processes that in turn create more polarised societies. Extremist actors (and recent events seem to suggest foreign actors as well) can also take advantage of such events to advance their divisive narratives, taking advantage of the access to audiences provided by social media. However, such debates do not necessarily lead to enduring polarisation of societies. Events can pass, and divisions can be healed. Even in the United States, where there is more consistent evidence of polarisation along partisan lines, as recently as 2013 it was argued that, ‘evidence for attitude polarisation—individuals changing their issue positions, ideological convictions, or partisan sentiments to produce less centrist, more sharply opposed aggregate distributions of the most politically relevant attitudes—turns out to be ambiguous.’

Perceptions of increasing polarisation can also be influenced by the conduct of public debates and in particular the level of attention and intensity of engagement they receive on social media. Social media and new technologies can be used to amplify polarising narratives, sometimes as the result of manipulation from outside forces. The phenomenon of foreign interference in domestic political debates is a matter of serious concern for European countries, given the evidence of interference in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain during the past two years. External actors that wish to interfere in national affairs now have readily available means to do so, with limited visibility. Their reach and the tools at their disposal, which can be boosted by the deployment of new technologies and Artificial Intelligence, allow them to shape or contribute divisive narratives that shape their self-defined in-and out-group.

Political outcomes, as reflected in referendums or elections, are only one part of a larger picture of social and political beliefs and behaviour, and it is important to examine attitudinal shifts alongside changes in voting behaviour. Evidence from attitudinal segmentation studies conducted by More in Common and Hope Not Hate reveals a more complex picture than a narrative of populations becoming divided between two opposing camps. There is certainly evidence of a growing cleavage within populations on issues of culture, identity and belonging. For example, the proportion of people at either the open or closed end of the values spectrum grew from 48 percent to 61 percent between 2011 and 2017, according to Hope Not Hate’s research. However, in each country where attitudinal segmentation has been undertaken, a large number of people have also been identified as not belonging to either of these opposing sides (even if, in the case of the UK research, those middle segments have fallen from 52 to 39 percent of the population during that six year period). There is evidence for growing polarisation, but many people also remain in middle segments of the population.
3. Social Media and Public Opinion Trends

3.1. The transformation of information creation and dissemination

More than half of the world now uses the Internet. In Europe, in 2017, there were 637 million Internet users and 412 million social media users. Social networking sites have changed the way that people interact with each other and with information in such profound ways that any discussion of those impacts is necessarily superficial and unsatisfying. The goal of this section is to focus much more narrowly on insights into how social media may be influencing trends in polarisation and public opinion. Social networking sites not only disseminate information, but also play an important role in shaping individuals’ personal identity, or sense of their ‘personal brand,’ and their relationship to others and to the wider world.

Nowadays, public issues and debates are often mediated through individuals’ online personas and their interactions with friends and networks. Peer to peer interactions have become central to the way in which information is shared and spread, in contrast to the top-down broadcast model of traditional media that dominated much of the 20th century, under which information was selected for circulation by a small number of recognised sources.

Social networking sites are changing the structure of interpersonal communications in modern societies. This is facilitating both connection (for example, among geographically dispersed people with common interests) and division (which is the focus of this paper), as well as changing the nature of communication (for example, facilitating increased regularity and a shift from word-based to image-based communications).

One consequence of these changes is that personal identity can become more central to issue debates. Another is that deviation from group norms may become less common. This is because, in an increasingly tribalised social media context, with greater homogeneity among individuals’ networks, those who express sympathy for the views of opposing groups may experience social sanctions from their own group. Those individuals can experience the social sanction of criticism from their own group through negative feedback on social networking sites, which is often expressed in much stronger terms than might happen in a face to face encounter. Others within that social network can witness this process and learn not to deviate from group norms, especially on issues of identity and belonging, which can be highly charged. The sensitive nature of these issues is confirmed by research conducted by the Tent Foundation, which showed high levels of concern about how others may perceive what individuals might say about the refugee crisis.

Individuals might be less likely to deviate from what their peers publish and share, but at the same time, social media also allow for greater expressions of hate and verbal violence towards others. Weaker social constraints allow hate speech, trolling and threats of violence to become commonplace in online communications as people can protect themselves behind anonymous profiles and unverified identities.
promote truth and democracy. Berners-Lee has warned that ‘the system is failing’ and no more generally in late 2017, the inventor of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee, has specifically highlighted the way that the dissemination of information is being influenced by the algorithms developed by social media companies such as Google and Facebook, whose goal is to drive traffic and advertising revenue and therefore maximise profit. As a result, the Internet has not had the opportunity to realise the potential that he envisioned for it as an open platform to enhance deliberative processes and strengthened democratic participation. Some of these hopes have been realised, but more generally there has been a remarkable shift from optimism to pessimism about the effects of social media, associated with analysis of online hate speech, echo chambers, filter bubbles, ‘fake news’ and deepening polarisation. Commenting on these issues more generally in late 2017, the inventor of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee, warned that ‘the system is failing’ and no longer promoting truth and democracy. Berners-Lee has specifically highlighted the way that the dissemination of information is being influenced by the algorithms developed by social media companies such as Google and Facebook, whose goal is to drive traffic and advertising revenue and therefore maximise profit. As a result, the Internet has not had the opportunity to realise the potential that he envisioned for it as an open platform to promote truth and democracy.

### 3.2. Does social media intensify polarisation?

Social media may increase polarisation because of the emergence of ‘echo chambers’, the metaphorical description of defined systems within which an individual’s ideas or beliefs are reinforced and amplified by others who share similar views. Information is mediated through ‘filter bubbles’, derived from a combination of active selection of information sources by individuals, and algorithms on social networking sites that populate their news and information feeds with information tailored to match their interests and beliefs. The consequence is that individuals are exposed to a smaller variety of perspectives and become less comfortable with different ideas and more entrenched in their own views.

Academic research into the effects of social media on identity, polarisation and participation in social and political issues more generally is at an early stage, which is unsurprising given that social networks have only achieved their ubiquitous presence within the past decade.

As such, the extent to which social media use influences offline behaviour is not clear from available evidence and the question of whether it actually causes polarisation is contested among experts. For example, a 2017 study in the United States found that there has in fact been greater polarisation among demographic groups least likely to use the Internet and social media (with greater polarisation among those older than 75 than for those aged 18-39). It could be that views become more polarised when people have a homogeneous network of friends, but it could also be the case that already-polarised people are more likely to self-select into homogeneous networks.

A statistically-significant relationship between social media use and participation in social and political life has only been found in around half of the 36 studies published on the issue, raising questions over whether effects are indeed transformative. However, more than 4 in 5 coefficients are found to be positive across the same studies. Additionally, an analysis of the metadata also suggests that social media use has a limited impact on individuals’ participation in election campaigns. There is also some evidence that social media intensify polarisation among those who are more interested in news and politics (even though the extent to which differences in attitudes and beliefs are formed initially, and what role plays in shaping those views, is less clear). One study found that entertainment preferences ‘may not translate into mass effects beyond those highly interested in politics.

The evidence to date mainly suggests that many of the processes occurring online are a continuation of trends already established in the physical world. Individuals tend to absorb information that confirms their existing beliefs, and to interact with peers that are similar to them.

These behavioural patterns exist independently of social networking sites; in fact, much online news consumption mimics that of offline reading. This is especially true in countries such as the United States, where the most research has been conducted, and where cable news networks with obvious partisan affiliations preceded social networking sites by many years.

Nevertheless, even if social media mostly reinforce trends that are established offline, it is independently significant because its scale, speed and low cost make it a force magnifier for those trends. Large audiences...
are accessible with an immediacy that has no historic precedent. Deloitte’s annual Global Mobile Consumer Survey has found for example that Belgians check their phones an average 34 times per day, 48 percent of Irish smartphone users check their phone in the middle of the night, and British teenagers view their phones an average 90 times per day.25

Individuals whose views are already established become more polarised as a result of large-scale and selective exposure, while subjects identified as being below the median in terms of their established views (based on evidence from their search behaviour) do not become more polarised.26 In that sense, increased exposure to one-sided newsfeeds that occurs through social media may have its greatest effect on the smaller activist segment of the population. This is significant, since such segments can have a disproportionate political influence,27 especially given the ways in which intensely committed individuals are able to reach much wider audiences online than was the case in a pre-digital age. Of course, caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from this earlier research, given more recent claims around the role of micro-targeting of falsified news reports to specific groups in the US election in 2016.28

Although further research is needed, the available evidence suggests that social media are deepening polarisation among those at the polarities of the spectrum, rather than at the centre, as they become more entrenched in their views, less exposed to different perspectives and in many instances, more exposed to extreme content. More research is needed to understand the specific ways in which social media reinforce in-group and out-group identities, in particular examining the ways in which extremist groups and foreign actors use digital media to advance ‘othering’ narratives and how constant exposure to those narratives through social media feeds influences public perceptions of out-groups.

3.3. Social media and the mainstreaming of extreme positions

Social media platforms incentivise types of behaviour that can facilitate processes of polarisation. These sites have made it easier for fringe positions to be mainstreamed, for false information to spread, and to undermine the credibility of traditional media. The ability to create and spread inaccurate news stories, access platforms that reach a wide audience, and micro-target, is complemented by the potential that Artificial Intelligence offers.

In the past, before the social media era, individuals who held extremist views did not usually have access to mainstream distribution channels. Now, social media allow for messages and messengers to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as news editors. Previously, information was created and curated by professionals. Newspapers and other media usually conformed – to a greater or lesser degree – to certain standards because it was believed that otherwise they would incur reputational costs (for example, if it was discovered that they fabricated news, they would lose readers). Now, the digital architecture and business models of social networking sites have made the sharing of unedited content possible, resulting in a higher volume of misinformation and disinformation that can be optimised for sharing and distribution. Not only can people without professional training create and spread information, but the mainstream media have less of an incentive to report accurately as, it turns out, people prefer to consume information that is aligned with their beliefs and reputational costs are rather low.

An analysis of the culture of online gaming communities in 2016 concluded that the online environment has provided an ideal place in which fringe ideas and movements can grow more rapidly, and influence and reach much larger audiences.29 Greater connectivity means that ‘these ideologues may use their new connections into the homes of core party constituencies to mobilise the fringes, raise money, and make compromise more difficult.’30

The connectivity of the digital era also allows for an international contagion effect that takes content and narratives beyond national borders. The spread of information across borders also reflects the increasingly internationally coordinated efforts of extreme right groups, reflected in geo-locatable activity on Twitter, the development of a more cohesive ideology and efforts to share know-how and build active coalitions.31 It is also evidenced in the resourcing for pan-European Identitarian movements, both from European countries and from US groups. The Defend Europe campaign, launched in May 2017 by leading members of Generation Identitaire, a French youth group, demonstrated the increasingly sophisticated capacity of extreme right groups to coordinate their efforts, shape media coverage and engage large audiences online with divisive narratives around identity, belonging and the threat of out-groups such as refugees.32

The effectiveness of extreme right efforts to frame online debates reflects the growing coordination among these groups, the topic of a recent study undertaken by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.33 The report notes that these groups have adapted their messages to reach out to wider audiences (in ways that would resonate with conflicted middle groups, although this was not the focus of the report). They have also penetrated mainstream debates by strategically reframing their
fringe narratives in less offensive terms, such as criticism of elites and multiculturalism, or advocacy for freedom of speech.

Far-right extremists have developed playbooks (reportedly, based on military guides such as leaked NATO’s strategic communications) that inform their online tactics. These include online information and disinformation campaigns and psychological operations to promote campaigns and shift public attitudes. Their aim is to bring about attitude and behavioural change, particularly among younger generations such as digital natives born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (sometimes known as Generation Z).34

This adept use of social media was reflected in elections in 2017 in Germany, the Netherlands and France, where extreme right groups organised extensive trolling, fake accounts and social media bots to spread memes, disinformation, and engage in psychological operations. The focus of their efforts on the polarising issues of identity and immigration is reflected in the official instructions for memetic warfare for extreme right German group Reconquista Germania, which calls to ‘act according to the principle of the smallest common denominator’ by concentrating on the topics of mass migration, Islamisation, identity, freedom and tradition. In the German elections, extreme right activists were successful in manipulating Twitter’s algorithms into prioritising their hashtags.35

The effectiveness of these efforts to frame debates and reach supporters has been reflected in More in Common’s qualitative research. In focus groups carried out in June and September 2017, voters who leaned towards far-right candidates in France and Germany framed their cultural concerns in the following terms:

‘I wish France would become French again’
‘I took out my son from school because there were no German children left in the school. Now we live in a German area with German children’
‘The whole country is becoming like Neukölln, there are no white people in some parts of the city’
‘We have lost control because of the refugees’
‘I was proud of Germany but not anymore. There are too many foreigners here now. This is not Germany I knew growing up. Things were simple then’

Qualitative research has also confirmed the extent to which attitudes towards immigration, refugees, and Islam are connected to broader perceptions of identity and a state’s place in the world, confidence or anxiety about the future, and otherness. Immigration and refugee issues are generally the highest-level concerns among closed values groups, but there are significant degrees of variation within each country on how the population engages with these topics. Focus groups conducted in 2017 in the Berlin area with voters who identified with the values of closed segments also revealed high levels of anxiety about technology both in relation to work and to personal life. These segments frequently referred to technology (social media and the mobile phone in particular) as ‘changing too fast’. Technology seems to represent for them the larger forces of globalisation, regarding it as something invasive, foreign and from which they want to be protected. This is an area for further investigation in research among people in the more closed segments.

3.4. Algorithms and the business models of social media

The technical back-end operations of social networking sites also play an important role in influencing the behaviour of users.36 The specific structures of social media platforms, compared to other media technologies, allow for content to go viral, regardless of its accuracy.37 The format in which information is consumed in social media (e.g. high volume, the focus on imagery and headlines) can also make it harder to ascertain an article’s veracity.38 Using bots and other types of Artificial Intelligence, it is possible to disseminate this content across the Web with very little human and capital investment. Facebook ads also allow for micro-targeting of populations with specific identity profiles at low cost, with minimal requirements and verification processes. This is a dimension of how social networks operate that has major implications for how individuals’ identities may be manipulated based on detailed understanding of their personalities and interests. Public understanding of these processes is limited, but is evolving quickly chiefly as a result of reports and investigations around the United States’ 2016 election.39

The business models of social media sites – which are designed to maximise user engagement – have led to intensive research into the psychology of Internet users. Algorithms are developed to prioritise different forms of ‘reactions’ in addition to the standard ‘like’ and ‘retweet’ functions, moving towards emotion-centred engagement.40 Cognitively, outrage generates more engagement than simply liking content, and this is likely to lead to algorithms prioritising content that generates strong emotional responses. The algorithms automatically identify the content that generates more reactions and then elevate that content and prioritise the creation of similar content. This is clearly a different model for content selection than has traditionally been used in other forms of media (although it has precedents in the approach of sensationalist tabloid newspapers). The emotion of outrage tends to deepen polarisation by establishing the moral strength of an in-group and the incursion of an out-group. For this reason, ‘there is
a serious risk that moral outrage in the digital age will deepen social divides.\footnote{41} Algorithmic reinforcement, which is focused on fostering expressions of moral outrage, is therefore likely to increase social polarisation. Repeated individual exposure to similar content can also change social norms especially around behaviour or commentary that might be socially sanctioned. People may become desensitised to content that they may never or only rarely be exposed to in an offline environment. Constant exposure to outrageous events that would usually have elicited an adverse response can make people less likely to react over time, a phenomenon described as outrage fatigue\footnote{42} and which accounts for how seemingly outrageous occurrences can be normalised.

A new strand of research suggests that through mass collection of data (big data) and ‘nudging’, the exploitation of psychological processes to condition people, it might be possible to utilise social media to influence people’s actions, not only their beliefs, sense of identity and belonging.\footnote{43} This ‘big nudging’ may be possible when individuals’ information streams are highly personalised, based on large volumes of personal information, and those insights are used to influence their behaviour. This information could be ‘exploited to manipulate us to make choices that we would otherwise not make, to buy some overpriced products or those that we do not need, or perhaps to give our vote to a certain political party.’\footnote{44} The potential use of such techniques to exploit vulnerabilities in human psychology and intensify polarisation in European societies, constitutes a serious threat to social cohesion in the medium term.

The design and business models of social media sites can have social costs with society-wide reverberations. These are consequences that might be unintended but pose a serious danger to liberal democracies. This calls for tech companies to consider the social impact and ethical implications of their products, particularly, how they feed polarising trends and how they can be used by rogue actors trying to disrupt democracies. Additionally, and on a more positive note, one of the reasons why a better understanding of social media’s effects on polarisation is needed is to help identify ways to reduce those polarising impacts and build on the potential for establishing greater connection, especially across lines of difference. In assessing the impact of social media on polarisation, it is important not to overlook the way in which new technologies enable connectedness, both among people with established relationships and among those who may never have been connected in the absence of those social networks.

### 4. Public Opinion in Europe

#### 4.1. Differentiated attitudinal segments

The existence of divisive debates does not mean that the public is divided into two camps (at least, not yet). Instead, the evidence suggests that often there are different opinion groups with varying degrees of concern and engagement with specific issues. The studies conducted by More in Common and Purpose Europe (in collaboration with Ipsos MORI and IFOP), and evidence collected more generally from public opinion research studies in recent years, suggest that a large proportion, if not a majority, of people in European countries have mixed views and do not adopt unambiguous, highly ideological or extreme positions. In Germany and France, for example, More in Common identified that more than half of the population belong in the middle segments with regards to recent debates around identity, immigration and refugees. A slightly larger number of people in the Netherlands held views that consistently correlate with the ‘open’ or ‘closed’ ends of the spectrum, leaving a smaller percentage in the middle groups.

There are significant differences among population segments in the ways in which they look at economic and cultural issues and the way in which they react to the challenges posed by globalisation, migration and cultural change. These distinct elements of the middle segments are significant because they are more likely to influence their votes, and people in middle segments are more likely to change their vote than those in the open or closed groups. Shifts in this population can greatly determine the overall balance of public opinion in elections and referenda. As more people (including in middle segments) retreat to ‘group-based’ identities, their anxieties can be exploited, an ability that is enhanced by the technologies underpinning social media sites and the techniques developed by extremists (see section 3).

A consistent pattern is emerging from More in Common’s national segmentation studies conducted in 2016 and 2017 in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and now underway in the United States and Greece. There is a more ‘open’ segment (dark grey in the graphs) that is composed of individuals who, for the most part, are more positive about change. They have often benefited from globalisation and in general have a more positive outlook on life, both in terms of economics and society, and are more supportive of globalisation and immigration. They tend to have significant influence in cultural institutions, such as media, the arts, entertainment, education, public service and civil society. The most open segment usually makes up 25 to 35 percent of the population.
At the other end there is a more ‘closed’ segment (light grey) that is more resistant to change and values tradition and continuity more highly. This segment believes that globalisation is detrimental to their interests, that economic prospects are grim and national identity is being eroded. People in this group perceive threats more acutely and are strongly opposed to intakes of refugees and high levels of immigration. This group is usually prominent in the media and has been adept at capturing the narrative on refugees and immigration in Europe. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of the population belongs to this group. Authoritarian populists are part of this group, even if that does not necessarily mean that all the members of this group all share an authoritarian disposition.  

Example of attitudinal segmentation

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Islam? ‘Most Muslims hold similar values to me personally.’ The percentages of each identified segment group that agree with the statement are illustrated in the graphs below.

- France
- Germany
- Netherlands

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Example of attitudinal segmentation

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Islam? ‘Most Muslims hold similar values to me personally.’ The percentages of each identified segment group that agree with the statement are illustrated in the graphs below.
Typically, around half of the population do not belong to either the open or closed segments; they hold a mix of attitudes that situate them in the ‘conflicted middle.’ The members of conflicted middle groups, for example, might support the principle of asylum but at the same time believe that accepting refugees is dangerous (as shown for the Netherlands in figures 5 and 6).

4.2. The conflicted middle in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom

Understanding the attitudes and beliefs of conflicted middle groups is of utmost importance in understanding shifts in identity and the increased appeal of alternative narratives. Members of conflicted middle groups typically have much greater concern over the disappearance of their national identity than those in open groups, seen for example in figure 7 These specific concerns, often shaped by the experience of rapid change and economic and cultural insecurity, are exploited by the language and strategies of authoritarian populists.

The segmentation research typically identifies a number of middle groups with distinctive values and concerns, and these groups also differ from country to country. Typically, the middle groups are less ideological and do not hold the unambiguous views of the more open and more closed segments. They often have lower levels of engagement and experience internal conflicts on issues of identity, between the more open and more closed value sets. Some also lean towards more open or closed perspectives, although they do not hold the unambiguous or strongly held views of the open and closed groups.

So far, this form of segmentation has been conducted in four of Europe’s larger countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom), each of which have recently experienced extensive and to some extent divisive debates about issues of national identity and immigration (studies of Italy, Greece and the United States are due for release in the first half of 2018). In Germany and France it is possible to identify three middle segments. In the Netherlands, two middle segments emerged. Two middle segments have been identified (using slightly different methodology) in the United Kingdom.

![Figure 5: People must be able to flee in order to escape from a war zone or persecution, even if that means that those people come to the Netherlands (% agree)](source)

![Figure 6: Allowing refugees to come into the Netherlands is too dangerous because of the risk of terrorists being hidden among them’ (% agree)](source)

![Figure 7: Germany’s identity is disappearing. The percentages of each identified segment group that agree with the statement are illustrated above](source)

![Figure 8: Identifying the conflicted middle in Germany](source)
The German population is composed of five segments, three within the conflicted middle:

- **Economic Pragmatists** feel pride in German identity and have a positive outlook. They prioritise economic concerns in their thinking, and they support immigration. In this respect they are an unusual segment since in other countries the segments most concerned about economic issues tend to be more opposed to immigration. They see the need for skilled younger workers in Germany. They do not think Germany is obliged to take in refugees, although it has the economic capacity to do so. Many in this group worry about the compatibility of Islam and German culture and, connected to this, do not think that refugees should be able to stay in Germany permanently.

- **Humanitarian Sceptics** believe that Germany has a moral obligation to help refugees, especially due to its history and the responsibility of European countries in causing the wars in the Middle East. Members of this group are culturally concerned and hold mixed views of immigrants and refugees. Whilst they are sceptical that refugees will integrate well into German society, and whilst they do not personally relate to Muslims, they do not hold hostile views towards Islam. They do not typically identify with a certain political ideology.

- **Moderate Opponents** believe that migrant flows are a security risk, and support the closure of Germany’s borders. In their view, most refugees are actually economic immigrants seeking to exploit the welfare system. They do not perceive themselves or Germany to have an obligation to help refugees. Members of this group do not often encounter people with immigrant backgrounds. They are fearful that German identity is disappearing and hold very negative views towards Islam.

- **The Economically Insecure** hold particularly pessimistic views across a range of topics. They believe that France must protect itself from both the rest of the world and globalisation. Whilst group members perceive their personal economic circumstances to have recently improved or stayed the same, they expect France’s economy to deteriorate over the next five years. For many, immigrants make it harder for French people to find work. The Economically Insecure expect refugees to return once the situations in their own countries improve.

- **The Left Behind** feel that they cannot keep up with the pace of change in France. This group has the highest proportion of middle aged people of any segment in France. Many think that their personal circumstances have worsened over the last year. They share a strong sense that French identity is disappearing. They also view immigrants and refugees with suspicion and often perceive them to be violent, frequently questioning their motives. They do, however, fear a rise in racism and discrimination in France (unlike those in the closed group).

**Figure 9: Identifying the conflicted middle in France**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanitarian</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Insecure</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Behind</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identitarian nationalists</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: More in Common, 2017

Similarly, in France five segments have been identified, three within the conflicted middle:

- **Humanitarians** are more positive towards immigration, viewing the impact it has on France’s culture and economy positively. They hold greater concerns about the issues of education and the French environment. They worry that it is becoming more difficult for people like them to succeed, and do not consider themselves, or their region, to be benefiting from economic growth. The humanitarian segment has the highest proportion of people over 65-year-olds of any segment.

- **The Economically Insecure** hold particularly pessimistic views across a range of topics. They believe that France must protect itself from both the rest of the world and globalisation. Whilst group members perceive their personal economic circumstances to have recently improved or stayed the same, they expect France’s economy to deteriorate over the next five years. For many, immigrants make it harder for French people to find work. The Economically Insecure expect refugees to return once the situations in their own countries improve.

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**Figure 10: Identifying the conflicted middle in the Netherlands**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged but Conflicted</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned Opponents</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: More in Common, 2018

Four segments were identified in the Netherlands, two within the conflicted middle:

- **The Engaged But Conflicted** feel a sense of duty to help war refugees but are less inclined to help who they perceive to be economic refugees. Many treat refugees with suspicion and often assume that they are motivated by economic interests. Members of this group believe that immigration makes the country more vivid and interesting, but also that it makes Dutch society more divided. In their opinion, immigrants are given priority access to welfare facilities and make it harder for Dutch people to find work. The Engaged But Conflicted are proud of their Dutch identity but many fear it is disappearing.

- **The Disengaged** hold consistently neutral views on a variety of topics. Although many feel pressured to think a certain way about immigration and refugees, often they remain neutral, perhaps due to apathy. They withdraw from debates and do not take interest in politics. Whilst many members of this group are moderately proud of their Dutch identity, some, believe it is slowly disappearing. In the eyes of the Disengaged, the economy is neither doing well nor badly. Group members often hold neutral views towards Islam.
In the UK, six segments were identified: two of which are on the closed end of the spectrum, two on the open end, and two within the conflicted middle:

- The **Culturally Concerned** are worried about the cultural impact that the inflow of immigrants and refugees will have on the UK. They feel a sense of responsibility to help refugees who are fleeing from war but believe that many are taking advantage of the system. They worry that Britain is changing too fast and they believe British culture is slowly disappearing.

- **Identity Ambivalents** feel that their British identity is under threat. Immigration is a top concern for this group and many are concerned that the recent influx will make it harder for British people to find jobs. Many distance themselves from the news because it makes them feel anxious.

Qualitative research with individuals in the middle groups in different countries highlights a widespread sense of frustration that existing institutions and processes are not addressing their concerns and anxieties. Many also feel a lack of agency or participation in the decisions that shape their lives, the echoed finding of quantitative research: for example, 50 percent of respondents in the Netherlands disagreed that they have a say in politics and society (see figure 12). This makes them more responsive to narratives that affirm their anxieties and promise greater control over their lives. This appeal is often framed within the context of threats from an ‘out-group’ that must be resisted. Social media have become a tool that facilitates that process (as is discussed in section 3) and this sentiment is fuelled by the narratives being expressed by those in the closest segments.

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Across Europe, issues of national identity, immigration, the refugee crisis and the role of Muslims in increasing diverse societies, form a major part of public debates. Eurobarometer’s research in 2017 suggests that on average, 38 percent of EU citizens viewed immigration as the most important issue facing Europe, second only to terrorism (44 percent). The countries with highest concerns included Estonia (62 percent), Hungary (60 percent), and Denmark (56 percent), where immigration was the highest priority concern; in the Czech Republic (54 percent), Poland (53 percent), and Malta (52 percent), it was the second most important issue. In fact, immigration was the second most important issue in 20 Member States, and Portugal is the only country in which immigration was not among the top three concerns.

These issues have been given prominence due in part to large movements of immigrants, the rise of populist parties, acts of terrorism or government-led communications campaigns (as in Hungary). They are also conducive to debates on social networking sites, because of the role of imagery, opinion, stories and anecdotes in these debates. The conduct of these debates tends to reflect many of the elements of in-group and out-group identity debates (or othering) already discussed in this paper. These debates take different shapes in different countries. For example, in the United Kingdom the immigration debate has been deeply intertwined with a debate about membership of the European Union, while in Germany it has concerned the integration of recent refugees and in France, the place of Muslims in French society. However, common to these debates is that they reflect competing perspectives on each country’s national identity, and reflect deeper concerns about a loss of cultural identity and sense of belonging for many people who do not identify with cosmopolitan values.

These issues are often the main focus of populist political parties, who are often characterised as ‘anti-immigration’ and for whom this position appears to constitute their central appeal to voters. In general, there is mixed evidence on the interaction of economic and cultural issues that shape political identity and voting behaviour. When analysts create models of voting behaviour that measure the extent to which
citizens engage on economic policy issues versus cultural issues (their conceptions of governance and the universality of citizenship), they typically find that economic issues are a higher priority for voters.\(^{50}\)

However, it is possible that immigration has recently become a more prominent concern, in part because of public perceptions that political actors have not been providing genuine alternatives on economic policy (see figure 13). There is evidence to suggest that the greater the convergence of mainstream parties in Europe on economic policy, the more likely it is that voting behaviour will express value preferences on the other issue spectrum and therefore be shaped by policy differences on immigration, or that people will use their vote to register a protest (an outcome that is twice as likely).

Cultural concerns over immigration also appear to be significantly more important than economic concerns in influencing ideological shifts and changes in voting behaviour.\(^{51}\) These concerns are stronger for countries with more religiously homogeneous populations and collectivist cultures.\(^{52}\)

Economic insecurities may also generate increased concern about immigration and threats to cultural identity. When individuals perceive increased threats (such as to their economic interests, social status or physical security) they can react by looking for enhanced group distinctiveness, often reverting to a narrower definition of who is a member of the ‘in-group’.\(^{53}\) In-group identities are often established by distinguishing the in-group from the out-group through the process sometimes of ‘othering.’ Othering is based on the belief that an identified out-group poses a threat to one’s in-group. Immigrants, refugees and Muslims are most frequently identified as the ‘other’ in the narratives of exclusionary nationalism in European countries,\(^{54}\) and these narratives are just as likely to make claims about those out-groups receiving special economic privileges at the expense of the community (such as free housing or welfare benefits) as to associate them with violent crime or the threat of terrorism. The narratives of insurgent nationalist, Identitarian and extremist groups in many European countries, confirm what experimental psychologists have described as the reinforcement of ‘group-based’ identity.

Group-based identity narratives are often reinforced on social media by stories about the behaviour of people in out-groups, such as their lack of respect for community norms, taking advantage of the generosity of the in-group community, their efforts to change longstanding cultural symbols and observances so as to undermine the identity of the in-group and their increasing size and power. The human-interest element of these stories gives them virality on social media and even when they are inaccurate or distorted, they can receive wide circulation.\(^{55}\) These narratives typically prompt calls for stronger control of borders, the re-assertion of cultural symbols that strengthen particular forms of national identity, calls for public recognition or remembrance of historic events that reinforce a more exclusionary form of identity (such as Confederate statues in the United States) and restrictions on expressions of identity that do not conform to the dominant national identity (such as the burqa or niqab). These narratives are frequently used to polarise debates by forcing a choice between respect for national identity and openness to outside cultural influences.

Public opinion research confirms that these identity-based narratives resonate for many people in the conflicted middle groups, especially around the implications of the intake of refugees and migrants. The groups at the ‘closed’ end of the values spectrum in More in Common’s 2016, 2017, and 2018 research consistently show the highest levels of distrust of out-groups and the weakest levels of personal identification with people in those out-groups. Many of the concerns about the integration of migrants, refugees and Muslims are also shared by conflicted middle groups.

More generally, a survey of over 9,000 participants across nine European countries published by the Tent Foundation in 2017 found that the most common concern about refugees held by people in host countries is that the newcomers will not adhere to local laws and customs. On average across the global survey of 12 countries, 59 percent of people shared this concern,
with the highest levels of concern recorded in Hungary (83 percent), Germany (74 percent), and France (66 percent). A substantial minority (4 in 10 across the whole sample group) expressed concerns that refugees may not share their community’s values on gender equality, highlighting some of the complexities of increased diversity.

5.2. The underlying drivers for the identity concerns of conflicted middle groups

Understanding the larger context of public attitudes helps explain the appeal of exclusionary identity narratives in many European countries. Despite indicators of improving economic prospects in many parts of Europe, the general public mood is one of anxiety, distrust and in many countries, anger. Far-reaching economic changes are raising anxieties about future jobs and industries that will sustain local communities. Many people feel disoriented by cultural change and feel that their country as they know it is disappearing. Physical insecurity generated by the pervasive threat of terrorist attacks is intensifying a climate of fear, suspicion, agitation, and is enhancing individual in-group attachments. Low levels of trust in institutions combined with such heightened insecurities and perceived threats are leading many to believe that radical steps may be needed to protect all that is at risk.

This atmosphere of heightened anxiety among conflicted middle groups creates opportunities for extremists to advance divisive narratives. Far-right extremists target communication campaigns that attempt to exploit the anxieties of people who are feeling a sense of cultural loss and displacement. Extreme rhetoric is often toned down, to make more appealing to groups described by online extremist groups as ‘the normies.’ This makes it possible to broaden the appeal of extremist groups to more mainstream audiences. The most comprehensive study to date of far-right movements Europe and the United States identified three nexus of connection between all far-right movements: migration, cultural displacement, and terrorism. At the centre of their tactics are online efforts to reach mainstream audiences (the conflicted middle), by intensifying anxieties about these three concerns.

5.2.1. Economic insecurities

Technology, automation, and to a lesser extent, globalisation have contributed to increased divergence within labour markets in European countries, as middle skilled jobs have been replaced by both low and high skill jobs, seen in figure 14. The growth of temporary and part-time work is associated with a loss of security in employment (figure 15). These trends are predicted to accelerate as automation and Artificial Intelligence are set to displace millions of jobs with far-reaching ramifications for social systems.

These changes in labour markets are destabilising for communities not just because of their impacts on incomes, but also because work plays an important role in individuals’ identity and sense of social status. High levels of economic insecurity are being recorded in countries that have some of the highest levels of per capita income in the world, reflecting the way in which economic change is a threat to status and security (a concern that many express for their children as much as themselves). These concerns are directly relevant to public attitudes towards immigration since without a nuanced understanding of how labour markets function, many wonder why migrants are moving into their country or community when it is not even clear what jobs will be available to their own children in the future.

Further, a long-term trend of declining social mobility is reducing people’s sense of satisfaction with their lives and increasing their concerns about inequality of opportunities within their societies. Individuals’ sense of life satisfaction is frequently influenced by the fortunes of their social reference group, as people judge their circumstances relative to those of others. In a period where standards of living are no longer improving, or are in decline, individuals can feel relatively economically deprived. 8 of the 15 countries around the world with

![Figure 14: Declines of routine-based middle-skill jobs are a source of concern for many](source)

![Figure 15: Except in Northern Europe, temporary employment rose between 2006 and 2015](source)
highest youth unemployment, and 7 of the 14 countries with the world’s highest levels of pessimism are located in Southern Europe.64 This context could help to lay the groundwork for divisive ‘othering’ narratives where the success of others is explained in terms of perceived group special privileges.

5.2.2. Anxiety about cultural change

A common feature of anti-immigration narratives concerns the way in which levels of immigration are altering the composition of populations in the context of declining birth rates of domestic populations. In France, for example, the concept of ‘Le grand remplacement’ (the replacement of the native population with migrants) has helped to frame these debates.65 The release of public data on immigration and changing population compositions often provokes strong engagement on social media, as reports spotlight major changes. Accounts of demographic change are often framed by arguments accentuating a loss of control over national borders.

The combination of demographic change and shifts in cultural values is increasing people’s perception of difference in their societies. Changes are exacerbated by generational differences in many countries. Longer life expectancy means that there are multiple levels of generational gaps between adults. Many older people feel left behind by the scale and pace of cultural change, and rue the loss of past certainties. Younger generations can also be influenced by these narratives of cultural loss. Extreme right groups will likely target these youths to mobilise them in their favour.

Increased heterogeneity within societies may reduce social trust and a sense of social solidarity, because fewer people feel a sense of connection with and responsibility for each other.66 These cultural insecurities can easily be channelled into ‘othering’ sentiments as individuals become vulnerable to the appeal of polarising narratives, claiming that national cultures are under existential threat.

In addition to these changes in the structure of populations, many European societies are experiencing increasing social segregation – both online and in local communities. Studies conducted across Northern Ireland show that when societies do not segregate, trust and shared responsibility can remain high.67 Equally, when segregation takes place diverse communities can become more polarised. Social segregation increases as people move into areas that match their own identity and interests. This process of social sorting can result in reduced interaction between different groups in society.68 With fewer meaningful encounters with people dissimilar to oneself (or with the perceived ‘out-group’), the social bonds that form the bedrock of a healthy society can be weakened and anxiety about cultural displacement can increase. The way in which social engagement is increasingly mediated by social networking sites rather than local communities or other contexts can both entrench this isolation and heighten levels of anxiety.

5.2.3. Fear of crime and terrorism

Against the backdrop of heightened cultural insecurities, a series of terrorist attacks in several European countries have shaped a climate of fear directly connected to anxieties about out-groups. Online, ‘othering’ narratives advanced by far-right groups aim to intensify the public’s sense of physical threat, be it terrorism, crime or violence, by linking the threat of attacks to specific groups who are portrayed as the ‘other.’ Even countries that have not experienced terrorism on their own soil in recent years have recorded high levels of concern about the terrorist threat – indeed, the highest levels of concern about terrorism have been recorded in Hungary.

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**Figure 16:** ‘There are so many foreigners living here, it doesn’t feel like home any more’ – % agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>S Europe</th>
<th>W Balkans</th>
<th>W Europe</th>
<th>C Europe</th>
<th>N Europe</th>
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**Figure 17:** Percentage concerned that ‘refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in my country’ and impact of terrorism in that country. The countries with highest level of concern actually have low to no potential incidence of terrorism

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and Poland, seen in figure 17. These two countries have not experienced acts of terror, but in both countries government representatives and media outlets including social media have linked their opposition to refugee intakes to the threat of terrorism.

Terrorist attacks tend to intensify individuals’ identification with their in-group, while sharpening hostile views towards perceived out-groups. It is difficult for governments to reduce these anxieties, since the measures typically discussed in the aftermath of terrorist attacks – such as measures to strengthen border controls and reduce the intake of migrants and refugees – require some level of trust in governments. The population segments with higher levels of anxiety tend to have lower levels of trust in the capacity of institutions to address these threats, as in many countries governments are perceived to be weak, indecisive and unable to maintain control. This is an ideal context for tribal identity-based populist appeals that challenge democratic norms. For example, in Italy, 57 percent of the entire population agree with the statement ‘To fix Italy, we need a strong leader willing to break the rules.’

5.2.4. Declining trust in institutions and democracy

Levels of public trust in institutions are low (notwithstanding an improvement between 2015 and 2017, seen in figure 18), and external threat perception is high. In an environment of heightened insecurities and lower trust in collective institutions, individuals are more likely to withdraw into narrower in-groups, and become more open to radical action to protect their group against perceived threats.

High levels of anger towards elites correlate with the lowest levels of individual trust in government, while trust in the media also remains low. This suggests that many are open and ready to listen to different narratives from a variety of alternative sources, highlighting the important role that social media channels play as sources of opinion and information.

For many, democracy is considered ineffective in addressing the threats outlined above. As a result, they identify less strongly with their country’s democracy and its established institutions, and are again more likely to identify with a narrower in-group that they believe will protect and defend their interests. In prioritising the protection of their own interests, survey respondents often show a willingness to sacrifice some democratic and humanitarian values and compromise individual rights, favouring strong leaders willing to break the rules. Threat perception and the belief that the system has failed in this way correlate strongly. Breaking this mutually reinforcing cycle of fear and distrust, seen in figure 20, is difficult in societies that are becoming increasingly polarised.
6. Future Scenarios

This paper has reviewed a series of technological, social, political and economic trends, many of which have emerged in a very short period of time with large-scale disruptive effects and many of which are likely to continue. While it is difficult to anticipate the scale and pace of future changes, there is value in extrapolating current trends as a way to reflect on their significance. This paper therefore concludes with a brief reflection on how developments in technology and trends in public attitudes towards identity and ‘otherness’ might shape the next decade and beyond.

The scenarios below are intended to reflect two contrasting pathways for technology and society. They are not intended as predictions. Futurology (or future studies) has a poor record in anticipating the combined effect of technological developments and changes in economies, patterns of work, social attitudes, lifestyles, political systems and the other elements of human civilisation. It is of course difficult to anticipate the relative impact and speed of different forces of change, especially as change is non-linear, and some types of change can have profound system-wide effects that overshadow other factors (such as changes to climate systems or large-scale geopolitical developments).

Future #1 – Fragmented societies, declining democracies

If recent trends towards social fracturing continue, the centrifugal forces of fragmentation will overwhelm the centripetal forces that hold diverse societies together. The labour markets of European countries will be severely disrupted by Artificial Intelligence and robotics, with effects on employees across all industries but the most negative impacts on those with mid-level skills who are less able to retrain for jobs in growing sectors perhaps because of age, location outside of growth areas or other personal circumstances. They will contribute to a growing number of disaffected people in European societies who will attribute responsibility for the loss of jobs and opportunities to globalisation and immigration, and as a result will be increasingly resentful of both immigrants and those who are prospering from continuing economic change.

This group will be large enough to cause major political disruptions. Authoritarian populists will continue to refine their narratives and their mobilisation tactics. Far-right extremists will strengthen their ability to cooperate across Europe and refine their tactics and strategies. Larger numbers of young males will be recruited and radicalised online, resulting in more frequent violent attacks and acts of terrorism targeting minorities and groups that challenge extremist organisations. This will intensify the atmosphere of fear resulting from terrorist attacks inspired by extreme Islamist groups. The European extreme-right and the American alt-right will intensify their collaboration.

Artificial Intelligence will be employed to micro-target those who are disaffected and susceptible to extreme-right recruitment. Algorithms based on exploiting psychological vulnerabilities will have diminished people’s ability to be outraged, dismantled social sanctioning as a mechanism of regulating undesirable behaviours, and actions that were previously deemed unacceptable will be seen as part of the new normal. Extreme-right groups will conduct increasingly frequent misinformation campaigns to undermine confidence in traditional media, elected representatives and government agencies. Other institutions of liberal democracy will also come under attack including the judiciary and ultimately, the rule of law and democratic systems.

In response to increased perception of threats, support will shift to radical voices of the far left and far right. Many in conflicted middle groups will become supporters of those populist forces. Identity-based narratives that offer a sense of pride and power to people in those groups – typically, on the basis...
of exclusionary ethnic or national identities – will take hold and inspire further disruptions in election outcomes and deepening polarisation. Increased violence and instability will in turn deepen a sense of social crisis, weakening the capacity of governments to address structural economic and social problems, causing democratic reversals in multiple countries and jeopardising the role and future of the European Union.

**Future #2 – Socially responsible technologies, empowered and united citizens**

If however centripetal forces are strengthened, the trajectory of events can change. The seriousness of the threat of social fracturing and extremist attacks on democracy can spur a collective determination to overcome this threat. Policy initiatives will become focused on the revitalisation of local economies in cities, towns and regions undergoing economic transitions. Governments will also re-focus a wide range of economic and social policies with the goal of fostering community and meaningful connection across lines of difference. Public attitudes towards governments will begin to shift and trust levels will improve, in response to a perception that decision-makers are acting less in their own interests, and more in the interests of the whole community.

Although terrorist attacks will continue, communities will respond to those attacks by coming together, refusing to scapegoat targeted minorities and showing a collective determination to overcome the threat of division. Extreme-right and Islamist terrorists will begin to doubt their ability to divide European societies, because of those societies’ refusal to scapegoat one section of the community. The terrorist threat will begin to subside as sustained efforts to counter violent extremism and strengthen connections in local communications. In the face of the growing threat of climate change impacts, communities will rally together and become more unified.

In response to increasing pressure from the public – investors and governments – social media companies will make large scale investments in changing their business models to support connection across lines of difference and overcoming othering narratives. They will also develop creative, large-scale collaborations that encourage collaboration in local communities across lines of difference to address collective challenges and pursue collective interests. Social media will play a powerful role in overcoming othering narratives and promoting social cohesion and resilience.

Anxieties about cultural and demographic change will be reduced as unifying narratives help to overcome divisive ‘othering’ narratives. Initiatives will be taken to overcome isolation and social segregation at a local level, and a much larger number of individuals will establish connections and friendships with people who are different from them, inoculating them against divisive othering narratives. The thirst for a sense of identity amidst uncertain times will be quenched through more inclusive national narratives that also embrace patriotism, community pride and the celebration of what communities and nations have in common.

**7. Conclusions**

In many European countries, vigorous debates about national identity issues – including those concerning immigrants, refugees, cultural values, national traditions, and the control of borders – are increasingly prominent. Social media have played an important role in the elevation of these debates, and extreme right groups have become adept at using social media to elevate them, insert their narratives into the mainstream and reach target audiences who are most susceptible to their narratives. However, these debates reflect deeper anxieties shared by many people in European countries concerning economic insecurity, cultural and demographic change, security threats and a weakening of trust in institutions and other members of society.

Public debates and attitudes on identity issues are often framed by the most strident or extreme positions among opposing sides; this can distort public perceptions of the true state of community attitudes. This is where population segmentation studies can be valuable. These studies provide deep insights into the debates on identity and otherness that are disrupting the political and social environment of many countries, and the way in which many people perceive growing threats to their country, their values and their livelihoods.

Attitudinal segmentation studies demonstrate that significant proportions of the population of European countries identify strongly with more cosmopolitan open values (typically around 25–35 percent) or with more nationalist closed values (typically 15–20 percent), but that as much as half of the population holds mixed and often conflicting views that are a combination of open and closed perspectives. The concerns of the conflicted middle groups are driven by deep-seated anxieties and should not be dismissed as ignorance or prejudice. To the extent that people in conflicted middle groups feel that their concerns are not recognised or regarded as legitimate, they may become more open to extreme right narratives.
Much more research is needed to understand the issues discussed in this paper – including mapping the attitude segments in countries beyond those in which this research has been conducted; measuring how the attitudes of people in those segments change over time; understanding how social media are influencing individuals especially in conflicted middle groups, and identifying how to most effectively address growing polarisation between population segments.

Social networks have vast potential to create stronger connections, but the unintended collateral damages of business models and algorithms that have been developed without regard to their social impact are inadvertently empowering extremists and reinforcing social fractures. Despite the recent focus of attention on the role of social media in deepening polarisation, there is limited information about how social networking sites’ algorithms function, and it is difficult to know in what ways extremist groups are targeting individuals in order to influence their values or recruit support. Analysis of the data collected by social networking sites (even in an aggregated and anonymised manner) could help create a more informed and forward-looking discussion on how to evolve platforms that pose less risks in terms of polarisation, distribution of inaccurate information and the reinforcement of hostile ‘out-group’ narratives.

At a policy level, there is scope for innovation by the institutions of the European Union. At the broader level, if one of the major challenges for governments in the next decade and beyond is countering the forces of division and polarisation, then policymakers need to develop a new lens that can be applied across policy issues as diverse as education, housing, employment, transport and other policy areas. This is the lens of social connection and cohesion. We can no longer simply assume that societies will remain inclusive and united in the face of the pressures that are bearing down upon them. Policies need to more actively work in favour of strengthening social bonds, especially across lines of difference.

At a more specific level, European governments have in recent years demonstrated a willingness to lead on measures to address issues arising from new technologies, such as data protection and antitrust. There is similarly a potential leadership role in addressing ways in which social media are contributing to polarisation and disseminating divisive ‘othering’ narratives from extreme right groups. This might start with bringing together key actors – tech companies, policy makers, civil society and others – to identify ways to address these issues, building on the more limited agenda around hate speech and offensive content that has been the focus of several recent initiatives. More generally, it involves measures to ensure that tech companies consider the social impact of their technologies in their design, and that citizens, especially younger users, are better equipped to navigate social networks and new technologies and resist efforts to manipulate them.

As the open/closed issues spectrum increasingly defines national debate in European countries, the construction of future majorities – whether for elections or referenda – will depend on the extent to which conflicted middle groups lean towards open or closed positions. More broadly, the extent to which democracies endure and societies remain cohesive will depend on European countries’ capacity to navigate widening social fractures, growing threats from extremist groups and deepening polarisation of attitudes around profound issues of identity and belonging.
13. The 2011 *Fear and Hope* attitudinal segmentation report was published by Searchlight Educational Trust. The attitudinal survey has been conducted in 2011, 2016 and 2017.
15. See Tent Foundation (2017), *Tent Tracker: Year 2 Global Report*, downloaded January 24 2017 at: https://www.tent.org/resources/tent-tracker-public-perceptions-refugee-crisis-2017/ (p.7). Across the 12 countries in the Tent Tracker survey, 63 percent agreed that: ‘People do not express their true opinions about the refugee crisis for fear of being judged’, with the highest levels of agreement in France (74 percent), Sweden (73 percent) and the UK (72 percent). 59 percent overall agreed that they felt ‘pressure to think and speak a certain way about refugees’, with the highest numbers in Germany (76 percent), France (71 percent) and the UK (69 percent). Of course these responses are not limited to criticism from within individuals’ social groups.
17. See for example https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/12/09/inside-the-social-media-echo-chamber/
33. Davey, Jacob, and Ebner, Julia, (2017). ISD.


For more on nudging, see research by authors Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein.


Powell, John, (2017). 'Us vs them: the sinister techniques of ‘Othering’ – and how to avoid them.' The Guardian Online. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/08/us-vs-them-the-sinister-techniques-of-othering-and-how-to-avoid-them

For example, see http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/13/russian-bot-behind-false-claim-muslim-woman-ignored-victims/


In the countries were More in Common has conducted research, significant percentages of the population describe their country as ‘angry.’ This sentiment is also captured in other public opinion polls from around the world.

Normie is the term usually employed to label someone who is deemed as mainstream and conformist by those who perceive themselves as nonconformists.


Newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us
