

Viewpoint Diversity Exposure

Lara Kobilke, LMU Munich, lara.kobilke@ifkw.lmu.de

Viewpoint Diversity Exposure (VDE) captures the range of opinions individuals encounter through media and interpersonal communication, crucial for informed discourse and democratic engagement. It encompasses diversity in sources, content, and personal exposure, representing media consumption patterns. The importance of VDE lies in its influence on political attitudes and the sustenance of democracy, a concept widely recognized in the fields of communication, political, and computational sciences. The perceived prevalence of filter bubbles and echo chambers has sparked debate over VDE's role and its critical capacity to mitigate societal polarization, tackling the challenges posed by fragmented modern media landscapes.

Viewpoint Diversity Exposure; Viewpoint Balance; Media Diversity; Pluralism; Public Discourse; Political Polarization

Viewpoint diversity exposure (VDE) refers to the variety or balance of opinions that individuals encounter via media and interpersonal communication. It reflects both the diversity of content within the media landscape (supply-side) and individual communication habits (exposure-side). This entry critically examines the importance of VDE in democratic theories, its definition, measurement, antecedents, as well as concerns regarding polarization due to a presumed lack of VDE within digital media ecosystems.

Democratic relevance and prevalence of VDE

Exploring how diverse viewpoints influence democracy is a key focus in various disciplines, including communication science, political science, and computational science (Loeberbach et al., 2020). This emphasis is largely due to the media's role in shaping political attitudes (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020) and its potential to enhance democracy by fostering an informed public discourse (McQuail, 1992).

Diversity stands as a crucial pillar in democratic theories, though its interpretation varies across different schools of thought. Liberal democratic theory views diversity as freedom of speech within a marketplace of ideas (*Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616, 10.11.1919), legitimizing political decisions through the competition of viewpoints (Zerback, 2013, pp. 19–21). Meanwhile, the pluralist democratic theory interprets it as interest diversity represented by interest groups and parties, with the state acting as a guard against monopolies and a protector for the underrepresented (Zerback, 2013, p. 22). Deliberative democratic theory sees it as opinion diversity, emphasizing the need for open discourse in consensus building, and continuous refinement towards stronger rationales (Zerback, 2013, pp. 25–26). Despite the democratic significance of diversity, its prevalence has sparked growing concerns due to potential filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bakshy et al., 2015) which could lead to polarization. However, claims of their widespread influence have been met with skepticism due to limited empirical evidence (Bruns, 2019), coupled with the rising recognition of multiple sources contributing to viewpoint diversity (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022).

Definition of VDE

Despite extensive research, media diversity still lacks a universally accepted definition. It is characterized as a “mega-concept” (McLeod & Pan, 2005) that encompasses several related concepts. At its core, media diversity represents the variety of frames, actors, and viewpoints

present within media organizations and across the broader media landscape. According to Napoli (2011), it can be further subdivided into three components: source diversity, content diversity, and exposure diversity.

Source diversity refers to the variety of content creators, taking into account diverse media ownership (Mutz & Martin, 2001), the variety within organizational / economic models (Ihlebaek et al., 2022), and the diversity among employees in media firms (Bourgault, 2021). Meanwhile, content diversity is concerned with the character of the content produced, factoring in elements like genre, ideas, and demographic representation. Content diversity can be further dissected into finer dimensions including frame (Huang, 2010), actor/source (Masini & van Aelst, 2017), tone/slant (Hayes & Guardino, 2010), and viewpoint/argument diversity (Masini & van Aelst, 2017). Although an association between source and content diversity is often assumed, it is worth noting that solid empirical evidence supporting this link is still lacking (Napoli, 2011).

Lastly, exposure diversity highlights the type and diversity of content consumed (Loecherbach et al., 2020; van der Wurff, 2011). Traditionally, diversity research centered around the supply side. However, with the rise of digital media resulting in fragmented information diets, the focus has shifted towards exposure. This shift also acknowledges the often overlooked role of interpersonal communication in contributing to content diversity (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022).

Antecedents of VDE

Comprehending VDE requires examining the interaction between sociodemographics, personality traits, media use, communication habits, political attitudes, and the broader media landscape (van der Wurff, 2011).

First, sociodemographic factors typically linked to higher socioeconomic status, such as gender, education, and ethnicity, affect VDE, sometimes contradictorily. Gender influences exposure indirectly through attitude differences (Rosenbaum et al., 1974), while higher income, education, and white ethnicity can either reduce exposure to diverse views through increased control over one's social circles (Mutz, 2006, pp. 30–31), or enhance audience frame diversity through knowledge (Huang, 2010). This control can manifest through residing in more exclusive neighborhoods, frequenting elite sports clubs, or living within gated communities, which may limit interactions to a more homogenous group of people. This disparity can be moderated by exposure to diverse media outlets, benefiting those with

less education (van der Wurff, 2011). However, less educated individuals also show lesser interest in diverse media recommendations (Bodó et al., 2019).

Second, Valli and Nai (2023) demonstrate that personality traits play a crucial role in determining individuals' receptiveness to counter-attitudinal information, thereby influencing their likelihood of VDE. Specifically, individuals with high levels of agreeableness tend to avoid dissonant political content, indicating a preference for maintaining harmony over engaging with challenging viewpoints (see also Mutz, 2006, on conflict avoidance). On the other hand, those who exhibit high levels of extraversion are more inclined to reinforce their preexisting views in response to dissonant information, rather than directly avoiding it.

Third, media use habits and interpersonal communication correlate with VDE, suggesting that more frequent media use (van der Wurff, 2011) and more frequent interpersonal communication increases VDE, at least incidentally (Barnidge, 2017). Furthermore, use of media outlets with high internal diversity (Castro et al., 2018) and those promoting political knowledge (van der Wurff, 2011) like public-service broadcasting and quality newspapers can facilitate VDE.

Fourth, motivations, especially those driven by accuracy, play a significant role in VDE. However, studies exploring the influence of political interest and knowledge have yielded mixed results. While some find that those with keen interest and knowledge tend to avoid echo chambers (van der Wurff, 2011), Mutz (2006) presents evidence of a negative correlation between knowledge, interest, and exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints (p. 32). Next, political ideology emerges as a fundamental and consistent predictor, influencing the range of viewpoints encountered across varying media use habits (Stroud, 2011, p. 61). It is well-established that conservatives and liberals tend to gravitate towards distinct news sources, which significantly shapes the diversity of viewpoints they encounter (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). The intensity of their political identity could explain this selective exposure. Thus, despite most citizens being exposed to diverse political viewpoints (Bruns, 2019), concerns persist that individuals with extreme political attitudes may still find themselves within homogeneous opinion environments (Zerback & Kobilke, 2022).

Finally, the structure of the media landscape can significantly shape the diversity of viewpoints represented. When it comes to media ownership, many communities are served by a single local newspaper that may mirror the dominant partisan viewpoint (Stroud, 2011). Concerning organizational diversity, Ihlebæk et al. (2022) argue that the creation of alternative media is frequently propelled by criticism of perceived mainstream narratives, thereby introducing new viewpoints into public dialogue. Public-service broadcasting, given

its mandate to provide diverse news, further bolsters viewpoint diversity. This has been evidenced by Castro et al. (2018), who, in their study of 27 EU countries, highlighted how public-service broadcasting can serve as a bridge to cross-cutting exposure. Finally, diversity among employees within media organizations is critical. Newsrooms rich in cultural, religious, and gender diversity are better equipped to reflect society accurately, resulting in a wider range of viewpoints (Bourgault, 2021).

Measurement of VDE

The adoption of robust analytical frameworks and methodologies is fundamental for the development of the field of media diversity (Loecherbach et al., 2020). VDE has been recognized as a multi-dimensional measure: one dimension pertains to the variety of viewpoints (how many different viewpoints are represented), another focuses on balanced distribution (the evenness of their dispersion), and the last dimension refers to disparity (the ideological distance between two viewpoints on an extremity spectrum) (Loecherbach et al., 2020). Common measures such as Shannon's entropy or the Simpson's D / Herfindahl-Hirschman Index encapsulate these dimensions and can be applied through content-analytical methods, survey research, or network analysis to examine VDE.

Content-analytical methods aim to quantify shifts in viewpoint diversity across time, regions, platforms, and news production levels. A practical example comes from Zerback et al. (2020), who cataloged differing viewpoints on immigration before and after the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck.

Next, survey research is designed to assess individuals' perceptions of viewpoint diversity within their communication environments. This approach encapsulates both online and offline interpersonal interactions and media exposure. An illustration of this method comes from Zerback and Kobilke (2022), who used name generators to allow participants to evaluate repeatedly the viewpoints on immigration expressed by up to nine of their contacts over a one-month period.

Network analysis methods assess opportunities for VDE by examining the structures of communication networks, focusing on the density of connections and the heterogeneity of nodes. Bakshy et al. (2015) showcase an application by comparing ideological diversity across all Facebook news, individual friend networks, and individuals' algorithmically curated News Feeds. They found that diverse content exposure largely depends on a user's friend network and the variety of information shared within it.

Conclusion

VDE plays a crucial role in facilitating informed decision-making within democratic societies. The rise of digital media ecosystems, coupled with growing concerns over filter bubbles and echo chambers, have reignited debates surrounding the prevalence and impact of VDE. Today, we recognize numerous factors that can influence VDE, including sociodemographics, media use and communication habits, political attitudes, motivations, and even the structure of the media landscape itself. However, empirical studies have yielded conflicting results regarding these drivers, underscoring the need for more comprehensive research. The effectiveness of such research, though, is contingent on the application of robust frameworks and accurate measurement techniques—an endeavor complicated by the multi-dimensional nature of the concept.

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