# From Division to Dialogue: Navigating Stigmatization, Polarization, and Understanding in Contentious Politics

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## Abstract

Modern society seems caught in a relentless cycle of division, where narratives of irreconcilable conflict dominate political discourse, portraying opposing groups not as contributors to a shared democratic project but as existential threats to one another. Stigmatization, as described by Erving Goffman, reduces individuals from "whole and usual persons" to "tainted" or "discounted" individuals, delegitimizing their voices in public discourse by framing disagreements as moral conflicts and marginalizing dissenting perspectives. Similarly, polarization, as Ezra Klein explains, hardens ideological and partisan identities, fostering group loyalty, mutual hostility, and an entrenched "us versus them" mentality. Contentious topics become not just difficult to discuss but nearly impossible, as compromise is dismissed and common ground obscured—outlining society's broader failure to embrace collective understanding. The proliferation of information—whether misinformation or disinformation—distorts perceptions, reinforces polarized narratives, and simplifies complex issues towards binary solutions. This dynamic perpetuates stigmatization, deepens societal divides, and hinders constructive engagement within contentious political issues. This paper will argue that media sensationalism—driven by disinformation, misinformation, algorithms, and echo chambers reinforced through confirmation bias and our own unknowing prejudices—exacerbates stigmatization and polarization, deepening existing divides. However, this paper will challenge the narrative that marginalized and dissenting groups are as widely despised as media portrayals suggest, towards demonstrating that societal divisions are often less severe in reality. I propose a solution rooted in Gadamerian hermeneutics, emphasizing the fusion of horizons and the recognition of individual lived experiences as a foundation for fostering direct communication, rebuilding public discourse, and promoting understanding.

## Introduction

Modern society seems caught in a relentless cycle of division where narratives of irreconcilable conflict dominate political discourse, portraying opposing groups not as contributors to a shared democratic project, but as existential threats to one another. Headlines amplify fractures while social media algorithms reward outrage and sensationalism, further distorting public dialogue and eroding democratic engagement—processes of stigmatization and polarization work in tandem to exacerbate these divides. Stigmatization, as described by Goffman, reduces individuals from "whole and usual persons" to "tainted" or "discounted"[1] individuals, delegitimizing their voices in public discourse by framing disagreements as moral conflicts and

[1] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 3.

Vol. 10(1) | DOI: https://doi.org/10.31542/cb2jwn39
*MacEwan University Student eJournal* | © 2026 under CC BY-NC | ISSN 2369-5617

marginalizing dissenting perspectives.[2] Similarly, polarization, as Klein explains, hardens ideological and partisan identities, fostering group loyalty, mutual hostility, and an entrenched "us versus them"[3] mentality. Together, these forces transform public spaces into battlegrounds of identity, where contentious topics become not just difficult, but nearly impossible to discuss, because compromise is dismissed and common ground is obscured.

These challenges are only then exacerbated by media sensationalism and the rise of social media algorithms: emotionally charged content is equated to sensationalist reporting, reducing complex issues to simplistic, divisive narratives. Digital platforms amplify polarizing content to drive engagement, reinforcing echo chambers and alienating moderate voices. This creates a feedback loop of outrage and hostility that distorts perceptions of irreconcilable division, suppressing shared values and stifling nuanced discussion. In turn, this weakens democratic resilience and erodes civil discourse into antagonism and mistrust.

Despite these challenges, resistance to these forces persists. Marginalized groups have historically maintained their agency through various counternarratives and activisms, challenging stigmatization and reclaiming spaces for dialogue. Social movements have achieved significant progress, such as redefining stigmatized identities by reclaiming formerly pejorative terms like "queer" or resisting HIV/AIDS-related stigma. Such efforts demonstrate the power of agency and the ability to push for meaningful change. However, these successes exist alongside deeply entrenched societal polarization where longstanding stigma continue to influence perception. For instance, even today, terms like "queer" are often avoided in moderate discourse, questions about the gay community may go unasked, and lingering fears of those living with HIV/AIDS persist—remnants of polarized narratives that once defined these issues. While these movements have shifted norms within certain circles, the broader societal foundation of stigmatization and polarized views remains a significant barrier to achieving widespread acceptance and understanding.

This paper argues that the issue lies not in individuals' lack of agency but in society's broader failure to embrace collective understanding. The proliferation of information—whether misinformation or disinformation—distorts perceptions, reinforces polarized narratives, and simplifies complex issues towards binary solutions. This dynamic perpetuates and exacerbates stigmatization and societal divides, hindering constructive engagement within contentious political issues. However, this paper will challenge the narrative that marginalized and dissenting groups are as widely despised as media portrayals suggest, towards demonstrating that societal divisions are often less severe in reality. To address these issues, I propose a solution rooted in Gadamerian hermeneutics, emphasizing the fusion of horizons and the recognition of individual lived experiences as a foundation for fostering direct communication, rebuilding public discourse, and promoting understanding.

[2] Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

[3] Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (London: Profile, 2020), 45–55.

## Stigmatization in Political Discourse

Stigmatization, as Goffman defines it, occurs when individuals or groups are reduced from "whole and usual persons" to "tainted, discounted ones"[4] through the attribution of discrediting traits that deviate from societal expectations. This discrepancy between an individual's "virtual social identity" (society's expectations) and their "actual social identity" (their true attributes) creates a social dynamic where stigmatized individuals are seen as inferior, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable.[5] In political discourse, this dynamic is reinforced by what Goffman calls "stigma-theory,"[6] an ideology that rationalizes exclusion by portraying stigmatized individuals or groups as threats to social norms. The modern media environment exacerbates this process, particularly through the mechanisms of sensationalism and digital amplification. Allcott and Gentzkow add to this by explaining that social media platforms prioritize outrage-driven content, promoting narratives that provoke strong emotional responses while sidelining nuanced or balanced perspectives. They explain that "the format of social media—thin slices of information viewed on phones or news feed windows—can make it difficult to judge an article's veracity,"[7] illustrating how these platforms' structures amplify sensationalism over accuracy. This leads to the proliferation of stigmatizing language in political debates, where opponents are labelled with moralizing and discrediting terms. For instance, climate activists may be dismissed as "anti-progress hippies" while proponents of traditional energy industries are labelled "climate criminals." These moral framings reduce complex policy disagreements to binary conflicts of good versus evil, making dialogue and compromise nearly impossible.

Moreover, stigmatization affects not only individuals but also entire communities, creating structural barriers to their participation in public discourse. Goffman emphasizes that stigmatization is not merely an individual experience, but a relational process shaped by societal expectations and stereotypes.[8] In Alberta's energy debates, for example, rural communities may be portrayed as resistant to progress, while urban advocates are dismissed as "elitist" or "disconnected from reality." These labels perpetuate cycles of exclusion, as more moderate individuals are separated into marginalized groups simply to have some form of opinion in the matter, further isolating them from spaces where their perspectives might challenge dominant binary narratives. This is known as "partisan sorting," a phenomenon where individuals are increasingly categorized into ideological silos based on shared preferences and opinions, which in turn align along partisan lines.[9] As Törnberg explains, "Digital media do not isolate us from opposing ideas; au contraire, they throw us into a national political war, in which we are forced to take sides."[10] Social media algorithms exacerbate this dynamic by reinforcing group identities and intensifying societal divisions through the alignment of cultural, political, and social differences. This digital ecosystem leaves moderate voices invisible, skewing public perception

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[4] Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

[5] Goffman, *Stigma*, 2.

[6] Goffman, *Stigma*, 5.

[7] Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (2017): 221, https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211.

[8] Goffman, *Stigma*, 6.

[9] Petter Törnberg, "How Digital Media Drive Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 42 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2207159119.

[10] Törnberg, "Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," 9.

to favour the most extreme and polarizing views. The stigmatized in this case are often left to navigate a public sphere that views them through a lens of inferiority or "fence-sitting," forcing them into partaking in binary decisions.

Despite these challenges, stigmatization is not a unilateral process. Marginalized groups frequently resist through counternarratives and activism, challenging the narratives that seek to exclude them. For instance, social movements have reclaimed stigmatized identities—such as the LGBTQ+ community's reclaiming the term "queer" mentioned earlier—to assert agency and disrupt dominant stigmatizing narratives. This resistance underscores the relational nature of stigma, showing that societal perceptions can be contested and reshaped.[11] Goffman emphasizes the relational nature of stigma by stating that "a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed" to understand the dynamics of stigma.[12] He explains that an attribute that stigmatizes an individual in a certain context may confirm normalcy in another, underscoring that stigma is not inherent in the attribute itself but is shaped by social perceptions and contexts towards it. This makes language a vehicle for both perpetuating and challenging stigma and explains how the queer community's reclamation of the term "queer" disrupts its historical use as a discrediting label, transforming it into a symbol of empowerment while revealing the relational and evolving nature of stigma surrounding it.

**Polarization and Its Relationship to Stigmatization**

The relationship between polarization and stigmatization is deeply symbiotic, with each force amplifying the other to distort public discourse and degrade democratic engagement. Klein observes how the "construction of identities is based on empowering us to antagonize and harass others" with elections exacerbating competition and rivalry in this context.[13] He defines polarization as the transformation of partisan affiliation into a "mega-identity," where political identity transcends partisanship and subsumes other social identities, "consummating the politics of mega identity 2.0 filling the worldview."[14] This intensification of group loyalty fosters antagonism toward perceived outsiders. Klein further highlights the emergence of "negative partisanship," where "what unites us is the feeling of opposition to the 'other,'"[15] and political alignment is driven less by shared values and more by this oppositional stance. Together, these forces construct a public sphere where ideological conflicts are no longer seen as mere disagreements, but as existential battles. In such an environment, "we isolate ourselves to hear information that only says what we are right, becoming radicalized,"[16] escalating hostility and diminishing opportunities for compromise or mutual understanding.

Central to this process is affective polarization, a phenomenon described by Iyengar and Westwood as the intensification of identity-based animosity between groups. Unlike issue-driven polarization, which arises from substantive disagreements over policy, affective polarization

[11] Goffman, *Stigma*, 7.

[12] Goffman, *Stigma*, 4.

[13] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 444.

[14] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 445.

[15] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 444.

[16] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 445.

thrives on emotional and psychological biases.[17] This is exemplified by how "partisans discriminate against opposing partisans, doing so to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race."[18] This hostility is further amplified by "the absence of norms governing the expression of negative sentiment," allowing partisans to openly display animosity toward the "outgroup," further encouraging political elites to "engage in confrontation rather than cooperation."[19] It creates what they term as "hostile feelings for the opposing party [that] are ingrained or automatic in voters' minds,"[20] rendering adversaries not merely incorrect but morally and existentially threatening. This intensification of hostility between groups creates an environment ripe for stigmatization, where political opponents are simplified into stereotypes based on their perceived flaws. In such a setting, stigmatizing stories are used to discredit opposing views and boost the "in-group's" sense of moral superiority.

Media and digital platforms deepen these dynamics. Allcott and Gentzkow observe that "social media are well-suited for fake news dissemination" due to their structure,[21] which allows for easy sharing of content with little third-party filtering or fact-checking. This contributes to the formation of "echo chambers," which they describe as ideologically segregated networks where individuals are exposed predominantly to information aligned with their own beliefs. These networks are reinforced by social media algorithms that prioritize content based on user preferences, limiting exposure to opposing viewpoints. As a result, echo chambers intensify preexisting biases, amplify affective polarization, and encourage the spread of distorted narratives that further divide political groups.[22] Törnberg on the other hand rejects the traditional echo chamber hypothesis, arguing that digital platforms do not isolate users from opposing views but instead expose them to more interactions across ideological lines. Rather than reducing polarization, this exposure intensifies it by aligning diverse conflicts along partisan divides. He explains, "It is not isolation from opposing views that drives polarization but precisely the fact that digital media bring us to interact outside our local bubble," leading to "a growing and all-encompassing societal division."[23] This process mirrors Goffman's "stigma-theory" since dissenting groups are framed as archetypal villains, further marginalizing their perspectives, and as explained, solidifying the in-group's moral superiority.

Despite the overwhelming visibility of polarization, research suggests that ideological divides are often exaggerated through sensationalized media. Iyengar and Westwood observe that "partisan affect—either implicit or explicit—underlies the broader political ramifications of polarization," with animosity toward opposing groups being "ingrained and automatic in voters' minds."[24] Wesley et al.'s survey reveals that the perceived polarization of Alberta is largely exaggerated, fueled by narratives that amplify divisions rather than reflect reality: politically, Alberta is often framed as ideologically distinct from the rest of Canada, with sharp divides

[17] Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24583091.

[18] Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing," 690.

[19] Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing," 690.

[20] Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing," 693.

[21] Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News," 219.

[22] Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News," 221.

[23] Törnberg, "Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," 4.

[24] Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing," 693, 698.

dominating public discourse. However, the data paints a different picture, where over half of Albertans place themselves at the political center, and 82% identify with both progressive and conservative labels.[25] This overlap in values and identities challenges the notion of irreconcilable divisions, showing that Albertans are far more united than portrayed. Of course, radically partisan identity still exists but it is not nearly as prominent as sensationally portrayed by media. Together, these findings highlight how polarization and stigmatization create a false illusion of division, fueled by narratives that amplify biases rather than reflect substantive disagreements. Addressing this requires dismantling these distortions and fostering environments where dialogue and understanding are prioritized over conflict.

**Media Sensationalism and the Simplification of Complexity**

Modern media increasingly prioritizes sensationalism, focusing on emotionally charged content that drives engagement while sidelining balanced, more moderate discussions. Allcott and Gentzkow identify economic incentives as the primary driver of this trend, where algorithms amplify emotionally provocative material—such as outrage and fear to capture user attention.[26] This focus on sensational content fosters an environment where polarizing narratives dominate, limiting critical engagement and further reinforcing ideological divides. Sensationalism simplifies complex issues through moral framing, turning multifaceted debates into stark conflicts between good and evil. Kubin and Von Sikorski argue that political polarization is often exacerbated by media content that fosters division, as "exposure to like-minded media increases polarization," and counter-attitudinal content can even create a "backfire effect where people become even more entrenched in their belief systems."[27] This supports the idea that moral framing transforms disagreements into moral confrontations,[28] leaving little room for compromise and stigmatizing dissenting views as morally unacceptable while marginalizing moderate or alternative perspectives.

Digital platforms amplify partisan sorting by restructuring conflicts into rigid ideological categories—Törnberg explains this as "effacing the counterbalancing effects of local cultures" and aligning diverse issues along partisan lines.[29] This process deepens affective polarization, where societal divisions grow more entrenched as platforms foster an environment of intensified alignment, or "sorting," of beliefs and identities.[30] Törnberg critiques the "echo chamber" concept, noting that polarization arises not from isolation, but from the exposure to contentious interactions outside one's immediate social network.[31] This phenomenon reduces the pluralistic interplay of perspectives, reinforcing extremity and erasing moderate voices. Druckman et al. observe that inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks in partisan media are actually

[25] Jared Wesley, Garin Alfaro, and Lauren Hill, "Political Polarization in Alberta," *Common Ground: Connecting Communities & Politics*, April 21, 2023, https://cground.substack.com/p/political-polarization-in-alberta.

[26] Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News," 221.

[27] Emily Kubin and Christian Von Sikorski, "The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 3 (2021): 194, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070.

[28] Kubin and Von Sikorski, "(Social) Media in Political Polarization," 193.

[29] Törnberg, "Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," 3.

[30] Törnberg, "Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," 5.

[31] Törnberg, "Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting," 6.

purposefully crafted to solidify group loyalty and deepen animosity toward out-groups.[32] This incivility strongly aligns with Iyengar and Westwood's concept of "affective polarization," where antagonism toward opposing groups stems from identity-driven animosity rather than specific policy disagreements. Simply, as individuals increasingly view their political opponents as existential threats, the possibility of constructive dialogue diminishes.

**Cognitive Biases and the Polarization of Perception**

Misinformation thrives in an environment dominated by sensationalism, exploiting emotional triggers like fear and outrage to distort public understanding and further entrench these divides: Lewandowsky et al. explain that "outrage, characterized as 'political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g., anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation)... [often resorts to] overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information.'"[33] This effect is amplified by the media's ability to create "epistemic islands," where the "fractionation offered by social media has allowed people to choose their favored 'echo chamber' in which most available information conforms to pre-existing attitudes and biases."[34] These islands of separate realities, reinforced by cognitive biases, not only distort how individuals process information but also prevent constructive dialogue, further entrenching polarization and eroding the possibility of a shared understanding.

Cognitive biases are deeply embedded in the mechanisms of polarization, influencing how individuals process information and perceive opposing viewpoints. Lelkes examines different aspects of political polarization in the U.S., showing that while the general public isn't deeply polarized, partisans have grown more divided, both in their views and feelings toward the other side, highlighting how this divide is measured and understood. Lelkes explains that selective exposure and motivated reasoning cause individuals to align themselves more consistently with ideological groups (thereby contributing to polarization), explaining that "scores on this scale have polarized over time."[35] This alignment intensifies stereotypes and hostility, with the overlap between partisan views shrinking significantly further noting that "in 1972, the two distributions were heavily overlapping […] by 2012, the degree of overlap had dropped by 45 percent."[36] To put simply Lelkes found that the overlap between partisan views has significantly diminished, indicating a sharp ideological separation between Republicans and Democrats over time, reflecting an increase in polarization and reduced common ground for compromise.

Furthermore, Lelkes demonstrated a growing correlation between party identification and various issues, noting that "the average correlations between issues and party identification have increased by roughly .05 per decade,"[37] driven primarily by moral issues, though economic

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[32] James N. Druckman et al., "How Incivility on Partisan Media (De)Polarizes the Electorate," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 1 (2019): 291, https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/jnd260/pub/Druckman%20et%20al%20JOP%202019.pdf.

[33] Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, and John Cook, "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the 'Post-Truth' Era," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, no. 4 (2017): 360, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008.

[34] Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, "Beyond Misinformation," 359.

[35] Yphtach Lelkes, "Review: Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (2016): 394, https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005.

[36] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization," 397.

[37] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization," 395.

issues have maintained a stronger relationship with party identification overall. Perceived polarization, often exaggerated by cognitive biases, plays a significant role, as "respondents exaggerate party extremity as a way to criticize the other side and engage in partisan cheerleading."[38] These biases not only distort reality but also fuel affective polarization, where feelings toward the out-group grow colder over time, consequently, cognitive biases perpetuate ideological divisions, creating a feedback loop that deepens polarization.

**Political Tribalism and the Moralization of Conflict**

Political tribalism and the moralization of conflict are reshaping public discourse, turning policy debates into identity-driven clashes. Clark et al. describe political tribalism as a natural human tendency shaped by evolution, emphasizing that "the human mind was forged by the crucible of coalitional conflict" and that group cohesion and loyalty were essential for survival.[39] This loyalty manifests in modern politics as cognitive biases, where individuals "selectively approach information that supports their tribe's interests and avoid information that has potential to harm their tribe."[40] Furthermore, tribalism leads to stigmatization of dissent, as "groups are particularly prone to giving status to individuals who conform to and vocalize support for moral norms and deducting status from individuals who rebel and vocalize dissent."[41] This creates an environment where holding contrary views invites social penalties, reinforcing stigma and deepening polarization. Clark et al. conclude that such biases are "a nearly ineradicable element of human nature" and are especially pronounced on morally ambiguous issues, which amplify the importance of group identity and loyalty in shaping beliefs and behaviours.[42]

Hall compliments this idea exploring the process of communication in media, emphasizing the complex relationship between the encoding of messages by producers and the messages' decoding by audiences, which can lead to dominant, negotiated, or oppositional interpretations depending on cultural and ideological contexts. Hall describes communication as a dynamic process asking us "to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction."[43] He critiques the traditional sender-message-receiver model, arguing it is overly simplistic and proposing instead a "complex structure in dominance," where "no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated" due to each moment's "specific modality."[44] Hall emphasizes the significance of encoding and decoding, explaining, "At a certain point, the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse," which must then be "decoded" to have an effect.[45]

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[38] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization," 400.

[39] Cory J. Clark et al., "Tribalism Is Human Nature," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, no. 6 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419862289.

[40] Clark et al., "Tribalism Is Human Nature," 2.

[41] Clark et al., "Tribalism Is Human Nature," 3.

[42] Clark et al., "Tribalism Is Human Nature," 5.

[43] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 163. https://spkb.blot.im/_readings/EncodingDecoding_HALL_1980.pdf.

[44] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 163.

[45] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 165.

He notes that encoding and decoding are often asymmetrical, further explaining that "the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical... distortions or misunderstandings arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange."[46] He identifies three decoding positions: the *dominant-hegemonic* position, where audiences accept the encoded meaning fully, described as "perfectly transparent communication"; the *negotiated* position, which combines agreement with local adaptations, creating "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements; and the *oppositional* position, where the audience rejects the encoded message, "detotalizing the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference."[47] Hall also highlights the ideological dimension of communication, asserting: "Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language."[48] Visual and linguistic codes, often perceived as natural, are in fact shaped by cultural conventions: "Naturalism and 'realism'... are the result of a certain specific articulation of language on the 'real.'"[49] He concludes that communication is a site of ideological struggle, where dominant meanings reflect and reinforce power structures but remain open to resistance where "the 'politics of signification'—the struggle in discourse—is joined."

To that end, I think that the complexity lies in how each individual's lived experience shapes their understanding of the world. As Clark indicates, political tribalism is deeply ingrained in human nature. When information spreads and reaches us, the way we interpret and internalize it depends on our perspectives and biases. Inevitably, we tend to gravitate toward our "tribe," whether we consciously acknowledge it. Over time, this tendency has fueled growing polarization, often driven by the moralization of debates that were once primarily policy-focused. This moral framing does not just alter how we see specific disagreements—it reshapes how we perceive the world itself. Hall points out how our realities sit outside of the realm of language, but language remains the only binding factor that holds us together, meaning that the way we interpret the world and the language we use influences not only our interpretation of the issue but also our understanding of the issue itself.

**Reframing Political Discourse from Interpretation to Understanding**

Gadamer, in his seminal work *Truth and Method*, argues that understanding is neither a static nor an isolated act but rather a dynamic and relational process that emerges through the interplay of differing perspectives. Central to this idea is the concept of the "fusion of horizons," which he explains as follows: "What I described as the fusion of horizons was the form in which this unity actualizes itself, which does not allow the interpreter to speak of an original meaning of the work without acknowledging that, in understanding it, the interpreter's own meaning enters in as well."[50] This process highlights the dynamic nature of understanding, which arises from the interaction between one's current perspective and the historical context. Rather than

[46] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 165.

[47] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 171–3.

[48] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 167.

[49] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 173.

[50] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 2nd, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 600.

merely adopting a fixed meaning, it involves a transformative merging of the two, resulting in a new, enriched perspective that goes beyond either viewpoint on its own.

To understand the concept of the fusion of horizons, it's important to first grasp the meaning behind the term "horizon" as Gadamer uses it. In his explanation, a horizon refers to the boundaries of our understanding, shaped by the unique combination of our cultural, historical, and personal experiences. These horizons are not fixed or isolated; instead, they are always in motion and inherently open to influence. When we engage with different perspectives—whether from another person, a text, or a historical tradition—we do not merely absorb or replicate their viewpoint. Rather, our own horizon is transformed as it encounters and interacts with the horizon of the other. That particular interaction is what Gadamar defines as the "fusion." The resulting fusion does not erase the differences between two different horizons but integrates them, creating a new, expanded field of understanding. This fusion is not automatic or superficial; instead, it requires active engagement and critical reflection of one another's horizon. Gadamer further emphasizes that understanding involves testing and reshaping our prejudices in light of what we encounter. As he notes, "The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices."[51] This ongoing process of dialogue and reflection ensures that understanding is not static but dynamic and evolving.

At the heart of this process is what Gadamer calls historically effected consciousness. The interpreters in the foreword explain that "understanding is never a subjective relation to a given "object" but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood."[52] Gadamer argues that interpretation requires recognizing and "foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices" so that the text can present itself "in all its otherness" and assert its truth against the interpreter's preconceived notions.[53] Far from being mere obstacles to clarity, these prejudices are essential to the act of understanding itself. He writes, "The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust."[54] For Gadamer, these prejudices are not distortions but necessary conditions of interpretation, enabling us to engage meaningfully with the world. This is underscored by his assertion that "to bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness."[55] The fusion of horizons—the merging of the interpreter's perspective with the historical perspective of the text—is not something that happens passively or haphazardly. Instead, it requires deliberate effort to acknowledge and navigate the interplay between one's historical conditioning and the otherness of the text. By doing so "in a regulated way," Gadamer suggests that this process should be guided by critical awareness, openness to the text's meaning, and an effort to engage constructively with differing perspectives, leading to a deeper and more authentic understanding.

[51] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

[52] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxviii.

[53] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

[54] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

[55] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

This applies not only to the texts themselves but also to the dialogue surrounding them, which Gadamer sees as the primary medium for achieving the fusion of horizons, since "language is the language of reason itself."[56] Understanding cannot arise in isolation but requires interaction with others, in which differing viewpoints come into contact and challenge our assumptions. In this context, he emphasizes, "Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing... but the art of thinking."[57] This means that through "genuine" engagement, both participants are altered, as the "fusion of horizons" brings about understanding.

These insights are particularly relevant to addressing issues like stigma and polarization, which are exacerbated by media sensationalism, echo chambers, and political tribalism, all of which emphasize "the weakness of what is said" over the strength of the argument.[58] In a time when public discourse often amplifies division and entrenches adversarial positions. Rather than advocating for sweeping systemic overhauls, Gadamer emphasizes the importance of critical self-reflection and an openness to testing and expanding one's perspectives through meaningful exchange stating that "The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices."[59] Understanding, he suggests, is not merely a passive reception of information but an event—a process through which individuals and communities are taken beyond themselves into new realms of meaning.

**What Does This Mean?**

As discussed throughout this paper, a recurring issue in modern discourse is the tendency for conversations to shift away from "understanding" the issue at hand, rather toward morally charged, divisive, and polarizing rhetoric based on binary notions of right and wrong. This approach doesn't just create hostility—it changes the entire dynamic of dialogue. Instead of seeing others' perspectives as opportunities to reflect or reconsider, we treat them as obstacles to overcome. This tendency reinforces polarization and stigmatization, making it harder to see the ways in which these very interactions shape how we think and understand the world around us. Stigmatization operates by reducing individuals or groups to single traits or labels, essentially dismissing their perspectives before they're even considered. However, even when we reject or oppose certain viewpoints, those ideas still interact with our own thinking. These moments, whether subtle or overt, change how we approach similar issues in the future. Polarization adds to this tension. On the surface, it seems to trap people in opposing camps, but in reality, it brings differing perspectives into contact. Whether we consciously accept it, engaging with these opposing ideas forces us to question what we think we know. This is especially evident in the role media plays. As Allcott and Gentzkow describe, modern media does not just polarize us—it simplifies complex issues into emotionally charged narratives. Algorithms push outrage, amplifying the divide between opposing views. Yet even within these spaces, ideas continue to interact. Törnberg highlights that polarization is not about isolation from opposing ideas—it is about how those interactions are framed. By treating disagreements

[56] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 420.

[57] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 376.

[58] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 376.

[59] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 317.

as adversarial instead of constructive, the media deepens divisions. But even these contentious moments can challenge our assumptions and subtly broaden our perspectives.

This same process is reflected in how stigmatized identities are reclaimed. When the LGBTQ+ community redefined terms like “queer,” it forced society to confront its own assumptions about identity and belonging. This was not just about shifting public perception, but also creating space for dialogue and change. Similarly, when we engage with perspectives that we find uncomfortable or polarizing, they have a way of shifting how we think about ourselves and the world, even when the conversation feels unproductive at the moment. Polarization and stigma often feel inescapable because they are so pervasive in our daily lives: they dominate headlines, social media, and public spaces, creating an illusion of division that feels impossible to overcome. But what these dynamics actually reveal is that our perspectives are constantly evolving. Each interaction, whether agreeable, forces us to test and reshape our assumptions. This is why polarization feels so prominent—is part of the quotidian process of reevaluating how we think.

Looking back on any moment of understanding, it becomes clear how much this process is at work. A paper that feels polished and complete today will seem naive or incoherent a year from now. This is not because the paper was meaningless—rather, it is because our experiences, interactions, and engagement with others have expanded our understanding since then. What once felt like clarity now feels incomplete because we have come to see and know more than we did before. This is the very nature of understanding—it’s dynamic and always shaped by the people, perspectives, and tensions we encounter. Those who stigmatize others or polarize contentious issues, however, will never fully understand the complexity of the arguments they are articulating. By reducing conversations to binaries or moralizing narratives, they close themselves off to the broader, nuanced realities of the issues they claim to address. Yet, whether they realize it, every conversation they have—every interaction they engage in—affects their outlook on the issue at hand. No dialogue leaves us untouched, and no exchange fails to reshape, even subtly, the way we see the world.

Ridding the world of stigma and polarization—or even striving to destigmatize or depolarize every issue—is not the way to foster deeper understanding. Forcing people to align with a singular narrative, whether it is deemed “scientifically factual” or socially correct at a given moment, undermines the possibility of genuine engagement. True understanding emerges not from erasing differences but from allowing individuals to bring their own lived experiences into dialogue. It is through these interactions—not to win arguments or assert moral superiority but to openly explore tensions—that horizons are broadened and deeper insights emerge. The challenge, then, is not about eliminating division or demanding conformity to a single narrative. It is about creating conditions where diverse perspectives can meet, challenge each other, and grow to form something new. Every conversation, no matter how contentious, contributes to this ongoing process of understanding. The goal is not to win or to be “right,” but to allow the interaction itself to expand what we know and change how we see the world—together.

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