WITH THE GROWING POPULARITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA, TWITTER HAS BECOME A POPULAR PLACE TO VOICE POLITICAL OPINIONS.

NOW, A RESEARCHER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI HAS FOUND THAT SOCIAL MEDIA MIGHT BE ARTIFICIALLY EXAGGERATING POLITICAL POLARIZATION.

MISSOURI SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM ASSISTANT PROFESSOR MICHAEL KEARNEY LOOKED AT USER NETWORK DATA ON TWITTER OVER SIX MONTHS LEADING UP TO THE 2016 GENERAL ELECTION. KEARNEY FOUND THAT WHILE TWITTER USERS TEND TO FOLLOW POLITICAL ACCOUNTS THAT ALIGN WITH THEIR OWN POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS, MODERATES AND THOSE WHO ARE NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS DID NOT GREATLY EXPAND WHO THEY FOLLOWED ON EITHER POLITICAL SIDE. THIS MIGHT CREATE AN IMPORTANT VOID ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

“If you have a political view that is highly charged, you are more likely to share it. If you have a political view that might be more moderate or ambivalent or uncertain, you are unlikely to share it, and so the discourse we see on Twitter as a consequence seems a lot more polarizing than maybe it really should be.”

KEARNEY ADDED THAT SOCIAL MEDIA USERS SHOULD BE CRITICAL OF WHAT THEY SEE AND UNDERSTAND THAT THE MESSAGES THEY ENCOUNTER ARE NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENTATIVE OF GENERAL PUBLIC OPINION.

“What they are seeing is kind of a cherry-picked representation of the most extreme interpretations of things and not necessarily maybe the more reasonable or more accurate assessments.”

I’M CAILIN RILEY, WITH A MIZZOU SPOTLIGHT ON SCIENCE.