Teach to reach!
Content Unit 4

bye, Polarity
Thinking beyond Polarity
for Europe united in diversity

SAY:
„BYE, POLARITY"

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4.1   Introduction (building knowledge) - 10min

What does "polarisation" mean?

Our world is a diverse place. People have different ideas, needs and desires, they pursue different goals and see meaning in different things. They have changing concepts of good and evil, they have not all had the same upbringing and education, they have not grown up in the same circumstances and have had very diverse life experiences.

This diversity can be a significant enrichment if we learn to deal with it. This is an excellent mission, especially in a rapidly changing world that is becoming ever closer through modern technologies. However, if we do not learn to do this, different life models can also lead to multiple conflicts and disputes. The emergence of these conflicts is called *polarisation*. This means that rigid *poles* develop among people, which, just like the north and south poles of the earth, are far away from each other and can even be opposite to each other. Polarisation can occur wherever different ideas, habits, circumstances, attitudes or expectations clash and are not mediated with each other. If, on top of that, polarisation between people remains unaddressed, many difficulties can develop: Ignorance, exclusion, arguments or even violence.

Recognising, addressing, and overcoming polarisation is therefore part of shaping a peaceful, communal and respectful world in which all people can find their home, on both a small and a large scale.

What is "polarisation in politics"?

Polarisation comes to us, particularly as a political phenomenon. Challenging situations can develop when people clash in their worldviews, different ideas of living together, and rules, laws, taboos, and customs. We do not understand politics here as something that only happens on the internet, in newspapers, or on TV but as our participation in *shaping our lives together*. We engage in politics as soon as we enter a conversation about how we want to live together. This can happen on a small or large scale, in the classroom, among friends, and in society. You see: politics is everywhere. We will now ask: how can we do it to prevent or at least reduce polarisation?

4.2   Regulating our coexistence (building knowledge) - 120min

Become aware of where rules determine your life. This does not only mean those rules someone lays down or pronounces directly. Rules can also be unspoken, tacit or (supposedly) self-evident. These are, for example, not so much laid down laws, but more customs, manners or courtesies. Rules that are clearly laid down are called *explicit rules*. Rules that are more likely to be tacit and that no one has really written down anywhere are called *implicit rules*.

Practical Relevance

Form groups in the class. Each group takes on one of the following areas:

a) your school class
b) your circle of friends
c) your family
d) our public space

Find as many implicit and explicit rules of your field as you can in 20 minutes. Then present them to the other groups in a few minutes.

You have certainly noticed that there are many explicit and implicit rules by which our life together is shaped. There are things we are allowed and not allowed to do in certain areas of life, things we are supposed to do and not supposed to do, things that are expected of us and things that should rather be prevented.

Practical Relevance

Now compare the respective areas with each other. Examine whether and to what extent there could be conflicts between different rules. Maybe there are rules in your family that the school does not accept or vice versa? Maybe you do things in your circle of friends that you would never do in public.

Speak as openly as you can. Record your comparisons and especially the areas of tension between the different areas of life together.

Polarisation arises at such pressure points. It arises when certain systems of rules that shape our lives together can come into conflict with each other. Maybe you are used to certain things having to be done in a certain way. Maybe you are convinced of it. If someone then does them in a completely different way or expects you not to do them or to do them in a completely different way, this often leads to irritation. Polarisation can arise from such irritations if you do not talk about it. So we talk about it.

Practical Relevance

We are now working on posters on how polarisation can arise through conflicts over rules and especially how this polarisation can be prevented or, if it has already arisen, how it can be reduced. Remember: there are not only written and clearly communicated rules among people (= explicit rules). There are also implicit rules, which are more tacitly expected of us.

When you have filled your posters well, you immediately turn to the questions: What should be done now? Which of the rules should be dealt with to prevent or at least minimise the formation of poles between people? What contributions should be expected from whom?

Based on these questions, create a grid together in which you enter the answers.

You now have a good overview of the emergence of polarisation through rule conflicts, which should be taken into account when shaping our coexistence.

4.3 Diversity (Apply knowledge) - 30min

Especially in our social coexistence, we repeatedly encounter different *implicit* and *explicit* rules that we are expected to follow. This affects many areas of our lives:

- Occupational groups
- gender perceptions
- religion
- cultural customs
- age groups
- Internet
- body
...

Practical Relevance

Select some of the areas of life mentioned above or other areas where you identify potential polarisation based on implicit and explicit rules in these areas of life. Depending on how much time you can spare, you can research the individual areas on the internet and other media and conduct surveys.

In the end, you should not only have worked out the potential for polarisation, but also formulate concrete possibilities for action to reduce it: e.g., "One could ..." // "It would be advantageous if ...". You summarise this call to action in a common digital platform such as Google Drive, Dropbox or another and present it online.

4.4 Laws (building knowledge) - 50min

The *laws* are explicit rules that provide a framework for our life together. Laws not only regulate what we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do, they also help to determine what we should and should not do, what is expected of us in certain situations and how we should behave

(remember, for example, that in many countries you are *required* by law to provide help if someone is in need; laws also determine, for example, what rights a person has vis-à-vis another person or the state).

> **Practical Relevance**
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> Go online in pairs or in groups. In many countries, most laws are available online. As a class, choose one or more areas of life (e.g., education, work, environment) whose laws you want to research and learn about.
>
> Then work out to what extent laws in this area of life try to prevent possible conflicts and polarisation. Think, for example, of fundamental rights such as freedom rights, equality rights, ...
>
> Then also work out where the legislation you are examining may itself sometimes promote polarisation because, for example, it seems unfair or disadvantages certain people and favours others.
>
> Summarise your findings and present them to each other. Then discuss what should be done.
>
> As an additional task, you can also try to find out which political forces in your country stand for what with regard to the legal situation you have investigated.

4.5   Media (Building Knowledge) - 50min

The media very much influences people's social and political positions. Therefore, it is also essential in questions of polarisation to know the influence of the media and to be able to deal with them. Behind the word *media* there are many different formats.

> **Practical Relevance**
>
> Usually, when we think of the word media, we think of things like the internet, social media, television, radio, newspapers, ...
>
> Ask your class what other media you know. Then make a list of individual formats you know, e.g. certain newspapers, certain TV channels or programs, certain social media channels or content creators etc.
>
> Then discuss together how you would rate the quality of the formats listed using the following questions:
> - Credibility of the information?
> - Comprehensibility of the information?
> - Usefulness of the information?
> - Entertainment value of the information?
>
> Then discuss which media formats you trust and why.

4.6   News values (building knowledge) - 20min

You have probably noticed that different media formats such as television programmes, certain newspapers, magazines or special content creators on the internet also deal with information in very different ways. One newspaper emphasises long and detailed explanations, the other short headlines and lots of pictures. One content creator creates long videos in which he deals with topics in detail, and the other content creator rather tries to make his audience laugh.

This is all because different media formats follow different *news values.* A news value is what gives a news item its *style* and determines the way it is presented.

We distinguish three central news values:

a)   Information and knowledge value: The message is primarily oriented towards expanding knowledge, making the world more understandable or explaining the complexity of an issue.

b)   Usefulness value: The message is primarily intended to help people with everyday life and to help them find their way around.

c)   Entertainment value: The message should first and foremost cause emotions and thus entertain. It should make people laugh or cause anger, it should outrage or cause consternation.

Practical Relevance

Different media formats usually put one of the three news values at the centre of their reporting and information processing. As a class, check different media you know for their news values (internet, newspapers, TV programmes, radio broadcasts, ...).

If you can, find a current issue and look at how different media formats are reporting on it. Analyse the news values they are likely to use as a guide.

Finally, reflect on how orientation towards a news value could promote polarisation. Record your findings on a common board.

4.7   Framing (applying knowledge) - 30min

You probably know the old question: Is the glass half full or half empty? With this question, one wants to demonstrate a very particular phenomenon: called *framing*. Think about it this way: no matter what answer you give, it is true because the glass is indeed both half full and half empty. Nevertheless whether you say "half full" or "half empty" changes the way how the *information is perceived.*

Here is another example: A new car braking system is advertised on the market comes onto the market and is advertised. After extensive tests and studies, the advertisement can say the following:

a)   The braking system leads to a reduction in accidents in 90% of cases.
b)   The braking system shows no effect in 10% of the cases.

Both messages are true. However, which do you think the company will choose?

She also uses *framing*. This word comes from the *frame*. A piece of information is framed *in a* certain way so that it feels a certain way. This is called *framing* information. It can be *framed* by language, but also by pictures. Frames are not *lies,* but they make us perceive and feel information in a certain way.

Practical Relevance

In pairs, examine different media formats and determine how they *frame* information. It can be helpful to look for different reports on the same topic. You will then quickly find out what frames are erected for the reported information so that it appears in a certain light.

Then go to trends.google.com. You can track how certain search terms have developed for different periods and geographical areas. Compare different *frames* with each other. That is, you do not compare different topics, but different terms that have to do with the same topic (e.g. "climate change", "climate crisis" and "climate catastrophe"). Find out which *frames* exist in public.

Compare your results in class and then reflect on how framing information can contribute to polarisation among people. Think about what you could do to prevent polarisation through framing.

4.8 Social Media (Building Knowledge) - 50min

A very influential ground for the emergence of polarisation through media is *social media*. First, gather which *social media* platforms you know in class and explain how they work (e.g., Youtube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, ...).

To understand the importance of social media for polarisation, it is imperative to know how they work. Every social media works with so-called *algorithms*. Algorithms are program instructions that decide what is shown to you and what is not. For this purpose, your social media collects data about you through your scrolling and clicking behaviour. It collects what you press on more often, where you scroll or swipe, or what you look at and for how long. Based on this data, you are then shown similar and comparable content to increase the time you spend on social media. This is called *Seductive Interaction Design*.

Practical Relevance

Think briefly as a class about what topics and content might make people stay longer on social media. Make a list.

If you look at your list, you may notice some commonalities of themes and content. There is a simple ladder that illustrates how polarisation is encouraged or even created with certain topics and content formats:

a) Emotionalisation

Remember how *algorithms* work on social media. They primarily show those things that are clicked on frequently, viewed for a long time or interacted with many times (e.g. likes, comments, shares, …). The answer is simple if you look at what content it is where this kind of thing occurs the most. It is content that *emotionalises*.

Emotionalisation means that something triggers strong feelings. On social media (but not only there!), content and topics that *emotionalise* therefore rule. This is best achieved through topics of entertainment, aggression, sexuality or fear. For this reason, the most successful content on social media (but not only there!) usually serves these four areas. From here, however, the real problem occurs.

b) Self-fulfilling prophecy

If I am mainly shown content from those areas with which I frequently interact, which I look at for longer or which I forward, then a pull is created. Because the more I interact with certain content, the more such content is displayed to me. For this reason, it appears more and more that the world of topics and information consists primarily of the topics displayed to me and to which I react emotionally.

This can develop into a so-called self-fulfilling prophecy. This means that my own clicking, liking and sharing behaviour on social media contributes to my views or fears about a certain topic being confirmed by the posts displayed.

c) Filter bubble

In this way, a *filter bubble* is created on the side of the content and topics displayed to me. I limit my information behaviour more and more to selected topics and it appears more and more that the world consists mainly of the topics, content and information displayed to me. I begin to live more and more in my *bubble* and hear little or nothing about other topics, content and information.

In this way, a very selective view of the world is created. It also affects my contacts in social media in the next step.

d) Echo chamber

Step by step, my interpersonal contacts will also focus on people in my filter bubble. On the one hand, the algorithm ensures that I am primarily shown people with similar user behaviour. On the other hand, through like, share and comment functions, I will sooner or later find more like-minded people myself and people with other interests, topics or ideas will be displayed little or not at all.

This is called an echo chamber, i.e. I find myself in an information chamber from which precisely what I shout into it returns as an echo. In this way, the views in my filter bubble become more and more

entrenched and I begin to block out alternative points of view, critical objections and well-founded counter-arguments.

    e)   Isolation and polarisation

If it has come to the point that I primarily stay in my emotionalising filter bubble and echo chamber, which repeatedly self-fulfillingly confirms what I am looking for there, isolation from the diversity of the world occurs. I retreat to a few topics and points of view to which I cling and no longer have the time to reflect on alternatives. In other words, I *isolate* myself.

If other topics, points of view or arguments enter my filter bubble, I will quickly perceive them as opponents, enemies or threats and counter them with appropriate behaviour. Conflict-ridden polarisation then takes the place of a benevolent and reflective debate. This is further favoured by topics that strongly emotionalise.

Practical Relevance

Now get into small groups. Agree on an emotional topic and research user behaviour on social media. Look in particular for the emergence of conflict and polarisation and analyse how steps a - e take place or could have taken place. In the end, present your findings to the class.

Then go into individual work. Write a fictitious diary entry in which you reflect on your social media behaviour and work out what your emotionalisations, filter bubbles and echo chambers are and whether and how you are perhaps already in danger of polarisation.

If you do not use social media, you can invent a fictitious user to write about.

Be honest, you do not have to show your entry to anyone. It is for your self-reflection.

4.9   Fake News (Apply Knowledge) - 30min

In our age, a wonderful thing has happened: it is possible for more and more people to get more information and share information themselves with others. Never before in human history have we been so well connected and known so much.

Unfortunately, this opening up of information also very often leads to the dissemination of misinformation, deliberate misrepresentations and outright lies. Behind this is usually some goal that is to be achieved with the dissemination of this so-called *fake news*. Dynamics such as emotionalisation, filter bubbles or echo chambers also play into the hands of fake news (see exercise 4.8). *Fake news* can quickly lead to polarisation, as they usually work with enemy images, opponents and threats.

Practical Relevance

There are many sites on the internet that are committed to exposing fake news and lies on the net. Find such sites and research typical topics that are circulating on the net. Then, individually, in pairs or small groups, look into these topics and present to the class what is being "faked" and how, and what the facts are.

Depending on how much time you have, you can also make your research larger.

The term *research* came up in the last assignment. The art of *research* is one of the main tools against *fake news* and the danger of polarisation based on it. Therefore, here are some key aspects of good research:

    a)   Be critical not only of the information, but also of yourself.

It is effortless to have the attitude towards certain information: I do not believe it, or: it could all be wrong. Having this attitude toward oneself is more challenging because one could simply not have enough information, be mistaken, or merely understand certain things too badly. Then you become susceptible to falling for fake news. It is, therefore, important to always remain critical of yourself, not only of the world.

    b)   Research different sources

Always ensure that the information you obtain on topics does not come from just one or a few sources. The more different sources you seek out, the more diverse your view of the topic will become and the better you will be able to recognise fabrications. Become an expert as best you can.

    c)   Hear alternative opinions

It is particularly important in source research to look at those positions on a topic that contradict your own position. This does not mean you have to believe them right away, but it is crucial to get to know alternative views in order to get a good look between them.

    d)   Check the reliability of your sources

Even if you research many sources, that does not mean they are all equally important, significant or well elaborated. A source that has been the product of years of academic work has a different value than a source that was a spontaneous idea in someone's living room and then shared on YouTube. Therefore, do not only look at different sources, but also check the quality of the sources. It is crucial that the source gives you an insight into its own creation and development. If it does not, it could simply be made up.

    e)   Allow yourself the time to research

You can see that research is a time-consuming, tedious and complex matter. However, it is necessary if you do not want to believe everything you find in the media.

    f)   Media criticism is not total rejection of media

Be critical of *all* media. They could all be deceiving, spreading falsehoods or producing fake news. Nevertheless a critical attitude is not the same as simply rejecting all media or only listening to those that correspond to your opinion. Such a thing is not a *criticism*, but complete isolation against the world's diversity. Moreover, where there is isolation, there is polarisation, don't forget that. The media, too, are made by people and therefore often wrong, badly worked or pursued manipulative

goals. However, withdrawing from the media altogether or only consuming certain media does not reduce polarisation - neither in you nor in the world.

> **Practical Relevance**
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> Now choose a topic individually and go through the steps a - f. Make a presentation on your findings.

4.10 Propaganda (building knowledge) - 30min

A hazardous form of polarising information transfer is called *propaganda*. Today, propaganda is a term with negative connotations (this was not always the case) and means that people are to develop certain opinions, world views and prejudices in a targeted manner by manipulating and influencing information. Propaganda thus always results in polarisation.

Propaganda follows certain techniques that one should know about if one wants to reduce polarisation. Of course, it always develops new forms, so one must remain vigilant, but some basic methods always remain. The most important methods are:

    a)   Invented or framed information

Propaganda always works with framing or fake news. You have already been informed about this in the previous tasks.

    b)   Enemy images

In propaganda, a wide variety of polarising enemy images are built up. These can be certain groups of people, certain institutions or certain world views or lifestyles. The enemy images that are built up are then usually demonised, i.e., everything bad in the world is attributed to them, and the proponents of the propaganda, on the other hand, are moralised, i.e., portrayed as the good guys.

    c)   Categorisation and simplification

The world is a complex place. Propaganda is usually simplified and divided into invented, easily comprehensible categories (e.g. good and evil). This makes it easy to manipulate people because simple categories require far less effort than complex circumstances. The categorisation is also accompanied by a stereotyping of the world, i.e., the world is made explainable by a few simple clichés and prejudices...

    d)   Maximalisation

In propaganda, more and more extreme facts are built up step by step. What it advocates is presented as absolutely positive, and what it rejects as absolutely negative. What it wants to emphasise is considered particularly important, significant and great. What it does not want in people's consciousness is either considered unimportant, void or not disseminated at all. Maximalisation also includes heroism or portraying oneself or one's own group as particularly important. As a result, the representation of the world becomes increasingly extreme and polarised.

    e)   Euphemisation

A euphemism is a term intended to make a bad state of affairs more bearable by using a "nicer" word. For example, in propaganda one does not speak of "murder" but of "resettle" or not of "war"

but of "military operation" and the like. When this obfuscating or euphemistic linguistic expression finds its way into people's minds, they are more likely to believe the propaganda and the actions of the propagandists are presented in a favourable light.

f) Historicisation

Propaganda very often works by justifying itself through recourse to a usually distorted, specially framed or simply invented history. Historical facts are distorted, falsified or taken out of context in order to lend particular emphasis to one's own propaganda. In this way, propaganda also often justifies the lack of alternatives to their own actions (e.g., "We cannot help it now ...").

g) Emotionalisation

Propaganda works with simple emotions. In connection with the other techniques presented, it is primarily geared towards emotions that are easy to generate. This applies above all to fear, anger or hatred in relation to enemy images or euphoria, enthusiasm and certainty about one's own propaganda. This also includes techniques of glorification and exaggeration in all directions.

> **Practical Relevance**
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> In pairs, explore the vastness of the media landscape (online or offline). Analyse the content you find according to the criteria presented and consider to what extent it can already be classified as propaganda.
>
> Present your results to the class.

4.11 The own editorial office (apply knowledge) - 120min

Today, it is a central competence of a politically educated person to know about the media and how they work. This competence is even more important because media of all formats (social media, internet, television, newspapers, radio, ...) often contribute to societal polarisation. Whoever has information at their disposal, processes it and disseminates it, has great power.

However, we have long lived in a time when we are not merely consumers of media and information. At the latest, the triumphant advance of the internet has turned us into permanent producers and disseminators of information. In other words, we are all journalists ourselves.

For this reason, it is an equally central competence to be able to deal with this role as a disseminator of information. No school teaches better than its own practice. That is why we are now setting up our own editorial offices.

Practical Relevance

Get together in smaller groups and set up editorial teams. Decide which medium you would like to work on. You can choose between:

- BLOG (i.e. a website with texts)
- PodCast (i.e. audio formats like in radio)
- VLOG (i.e. video formats like in TV)
...

When you have found your topic, think about the first steps:
- What do we want to report on and how?

This means the topics you want to report about. Do you want to limit your reporting to what is happening at school or do you also want to report on world events? Do you want to be a factual information medium or do you also want to comment on things? Should there be interviews? What other formats do you want to use in your medium (e.g. guest commentaries, commentaries, criticism, ...)?

- Who will take on which tasks?

Each of you has certain strengths and weaknesses. Depending on the editorial team you set up, allocate the tasks so everyone can play to their strengths. One person might be better at reporting, the other better at organizing, and the third is technically proficient (e.g. creating videos, if you start a VLOG).

- How often and through which channels do we want to publish?

Depending on your chosen medium you have chosen, think about how often you want to publish (e.g. once a month, twice a semester, etc.). Also consider how the publications will take place, e.g. will you set up a YouTube channel? Do you use any other social media? Do you print your newspaper at school or do you have it printed elsewhere? If there are costs, how do you finance them? How else can you cooperate with the school?
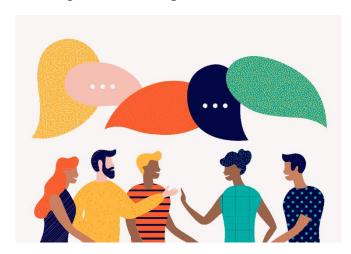
- Choice of topics: Polarisation

Let your teachers help you. The following is always crucial: Try to pick up on issues that could polarise through your reporting. These do not have to be the only topics of your editorial work, but they should definitely find their place. Look at these issues from different angles, report as objectively as possible on causes and connections, let people have their say on an equal footing so that everyone can form their own opinion. Try to remain as neutral as possible and, where conflicts exist, do not simply take sides, but contribute to mediation through a well-considered presentation. You will see that this is difficult enough, but at the same time it is the central task of today's media.
If you enjoy and are interested in working in your own editorial department, you can continue it for longer. Remember your influence as media makers and be aware of your responsibility so there is no conflict or polarisation.

4.12 Panel discussions (apply knowledge) - 50min

Nothing in the world helps to reduce polarisation better than talking to each other, getting to know the position of others and understanding them as people, communicating one's own positions to them and, in the best case, being able to come together.

One way of bringing people with different positions on polarising issues into conversation is the *panel discussion*. A panel discussion is a moderated discussion in front of an audience in which different positions on a selected topic or issue are discussed.

> **Practical Relevance**
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> Organise panel discussions at your school, depending on your possibilities.
>
> Look for topics or issues that are polarising. Put together a panel of 4-6 people + moderator. Then approach these people and invite them. Conversely, you can also set up a "casting" so that people can apply for the panel.
>
> Then think about when it makes sense for the panel discussions to take place and where they will happen. Plan how the venue will be set up, what equipment you will need and how much of an audience you want.
>
> Another crucial question is whether to involve the audience or not. In this case, you also need to plan how the audience can participate.
>
> These discussions are intended to have two effects:
>
> a) They should address polarising issues and serve as mediation
> Think about what these topics could be - there are probably already topics in your everyday school life that polarise within the school. It is best to invite 4-6 people who you know may have different positions on the chosen topic. We want to bring them into a sympathetic conversation with each other.
>
> b) They should demonstrate that polarisation can be reduced through conversation
> It is crucial for the panel discussion that it not only serves the purpose of entertainment, but that its goal is to bring polarised positions into conversation with each other and perhaps even contribute to the reduction of polarisation. For this, the person who takes over the moderation is crucial. Therefore, choose the moderator well, because his/her task will be to ensure that all positions are sufficiently addressed, to lead the discussion smoothly and not to introduce his/her own opinion.
>
> In addition, if all participants agree, you can record the discussion and make it the subject of your lessons and work.

Such discussions can be held again and again in different settings and frequencies. They can take place in each class separately as well as across the school. The more this creates an open and benevolent culture of discussion, the more polarisation will be reduced or prevented in the bud.

4.13 Networking with other schools (securing knowledge) - 10min

Now that you have learned a variety of ways to deal with polarisation, it is time to take it to other schools. Make a first plan on how to cooperate with other schools (e.g. social media campaigns, panel discussions, editorial boards, creating diversity awareness, ...). You could then decide what you want to do to become ambassadors for reducing polarisation beyond your own school.

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