Research Statement – Ro'ee Levy

I am an empirical political economist, focusing on two interrelated areas: social media and political change, with a complementary agenda on political economy constraints in environmental policy. I combine descriptive and causal work. My descriptive papers assemble novel datasets to establish new facts about the media environment, while my causal papers develop new experimental methods or use quasi-experimental designs to estimate the effects of media and information on political outcomes. Across topics, I focus on new phenomena where rigorous evidence can inform the research community and policymakers.

1. Social Media

Social media has dramatically changed the media landscape. Ninety percent of internet users use social media, and, on average, they spend 2.5 hours per day on the platforms. As we discuss in **The Economics of Social Media** (with Aridor, Jiménez-Durán, and Song, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 2024), economics papers on social media have quadrupled in seven years, and there is growing evidence that social media platforms affect political outcomes and mental health. My research studies both outcomes and the main mechanism through which they have an effect—exposure to content on the platforms.

1.1 The Effects of Social Media

There has been a notable rise in mental health issues among adolescents and young adults in the United States around the time when social media became widespread, leading many to hypothesize that these two trends are related. Most existing work, however, is correlational and does not establish causal effects. In **Social Media and Mental Health** (with Braghieri and Makarin, *American Economic Review*, 2022), we leverage the staggered rollout of Facebook across colleges. We combine the dates when Facebook became available at different colleges with the National College Health Assessment, a comprehensive health survey, and find that Facebook's entry worsened students' mental health, and specifically increased depression and anxiety-related symptoms. Furthermore, students reported that their academic performance was negatively affected by conditions related to poor mental health. Increased social comparisons are the most likely mechanism explaining these results.

Social media can affect political outcomes both through the organic content users consume and the political ads they encounter. Organic content may polarize users if they are exposed to more like-minded content through social media. In **Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment** (Levy, *American Economic Review,* 2021), I use two datasets to analyze this argument: a large dataset of browsing behavior collected by Comscore, and the browsing behavior and Facebook feed of users who agreed to install an extension I developed. Using both datasets, I find that people are exposed to more extreme, like-minded news on Facebook, compared to other online news. To estimate how such exposure affects attitudes, I randomly nudged individuals to follow either liberal or conservative news outlets on

Facebook. I find that the platform's algorithm affects news consumption. When people's feeds randomly became more liberal (conservative), they visited liberal (conservative) websites more often and also shared this content. My second finding is that exposure to liberal versus conservative content did not affect political opinions. Due to my large sample size (over 17,000 endline participants) and rich surveys, I can rule out even small effects. While opinions were not affected, I do find an effect on affective polarization: random exposure to cross-cutting content, instead of like-minded content, reduces negative attitudes toward the other party. This paper provides the first field evidence that exposure to like-minded content on social media platforms exacerbates polarization.

This work helped establish methods for running large-scale field experiments directly on social media platforms. In a forthcoming handbook chapter, **Experiments On Social Media** (with Aridor, Jiménez-Durán, and Song, forthcoming), we detail the benefits and challenges of social media experiments, including targeted recruitment, leveraging social media to conduct interventions with high external validity, and the collection of behavioral outcomes.

Besides organic content, political advertisements on social media can also affect political outcomes. Political digital advertising has grown dramatically in the last decade and there are worries that social media ads are manipulating, polarizing, or demobilizing voters with custom-tailored messages. In **The Effects of Political Advertising on Facebook and Instagram before the 2020 US Election (**with Allcott, Gentzkow, et al., *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2025), we study the effectiveness of an entire social media campaign, among a sample of over 60,000 participants, in the weeks before a presidential election. In collaboration with Meta, we randomized participants into a control group and two treatment arms that removed either targeted political ads or all political ads for six weeks before the election. Based on post-election surveys, validated with Facebook and FEC donation records and administrative turnout data, we do not find effects on political knowledge, polarization, perceived election legitimacy, attitudes toward Trump, or turnout. While these results do not rule out that political ads have any effect, they suggest that fear about the impact of political ads on these outcomes may be overstated.

Finally, the literature typically studies the direct effect of social media on the platforms' users. However, social media may affect all news consumers, by altering outlets' business models and, as a result, their coverage even outside social media. In **ongoing work** funded by an ERC Starting Grant (ECHO 2024), I exploit quasi-random variation in access to news on social media to study how platforms affect what outlets produce—for example, whether incentives to maximize clicks shift coverage toward more emotional, extreme, or national-issue content.

1.2 Exposure to Political Content

My research shows that social media echo chambers can heighten polarization. A common counterargument has been that these concerns are overstated because (i) many users may not reside in echo chambers, and (ii) exposure to news on social media is limited. Two empirical challenges have hindered empirical testing of these claims: the literature typically measures slant at the outlet level rather than the article level, and researchers cannot observe what people

consume on their phones, now the primary gateway for news. I address both limitations in two recent studies.

In **Article-Level Slant and Polarization in News Consumption on Social Media** (with Braghieri, Eichmeyer, Mobius, Steinhardt, and Zhong, *Revise and Resubmit, American Economic Review*, 2025), we study the extent of echo chambers by measuring the slant of articles. We assemble the near-universe of online articles published by major US outlets in 2019, recruit experts to label several thousand articles, and fine-tune a large language model to predict slant for ~1 million articles. Merging these predictions with Social Science One's URL-level Facebook engagement data, we find that liberals consume more liberal content and conservatives consume more conservative content—even *within* the same outlets. When slant is measured at the article level (rather than the outlet level), estimated polarization rises by ~50%. This helps reconcile public concern about echo chambers with the previously limited empirical evidence.

While individuals report that smartphones have become a primary source of news consumption, most studies still focus on desktop consumption. In **Digital News Consumption: Evidence from Smartphone Content in the 2024 US Elections** (with Aridor, Dekel, Jiménez-Durán, and Song, working paper, 2025), we document, for the first time, the extent and the sources of the election-related content that individuals see on their phone. Partnering with a firm that detects, with users' permission, when and in which apps specific keywords appear, we track exposure to election-related terms. We find that for the median individual, election-related exposure is quite low. For example, on an average day, the median individual saw the words Trump, Biden and Harris on their phone for only three seconds, and saw no mentions of congressmembers. We also find that less than 5% of election exposure comes from news apps or news sites, and instead individuals get most of their content about the election from social media and music & video apps. This study raises concerns over both the quantity and the quality of information the electorate was exposed to ahead of a consequential election.

1.3 Changing the media environment

The papers mentioned establish that a large share of news exposure occurs on social media and that this content tends to be more extreme and like-minded. This raises two questions: are individuals deliberately choosing like-minded news and can simple interventions nudge users toward more moderate and higher-quality content? In **Frictions in News Consumption: Evidence from Social Media** (with Braghieri and Trachtman, working paper, 2025) we run an experiment on Facebook providing individuals with two types of interventions: personalized information on the slant or quality of the news they follow on Facebook, and a reoptimization interface allowing them to adjust the outlets they follow. We find that simply providing the reoptimization interface results in people choosing a more moderate portfolio that is closer to their self-reported bliss points. This suggests that like-minded news consumption does not necessarily reflect preferences, as benchmark models suggest, but may also reflect behavioral frictions (e.g., users passively follow what is offered by friends and algorithms). We also document that individuals suffer from substantial misperceptions regarding the quality of outlets (but not their slant) and that combining the reoptimization interface with information on quality results in people

following higher-quality outlets. This paper shows that a simple, scalable intervention can moderate news consumption and improve its quality, while aligning users more closely with their bliss points. The paper also has a methodological contribution as we provide a new method to study experimental demand, by adding a treatment arm where participants' decisions are not observed in real time and only collected ex post.

2. Political Change

My interest in social media stems from its impact on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. More broadly, I study recent shifts in political attitudes across settings.

In **The Effects of Social Movements: Evidence from #MeToo** (with Mattsson, *Revise and Resubmit, Review of Economics and Statistics*, 2025), we analyze the effect of the MeToo movement on reporting sex crimes to the police. The MeToo movement almost instantly dominated US news coverage and gradually spread to additional countries. Still, a plurality of Americans thought the movement only changed things for celebrities and not for everyday people. Using a triple-difference design—across countries, between crime types, and over time—we find that the movement increased the reporting of sex crimes by about 10%. Using both survey data and administrative records that include the dates that crimes occurred and the dates they were reported, we show that the effect reflects an increase in propensity to report crimes (as opposed to an increase in crime incidence). Our paper shows that social movements can affect costly personal decisions, which have potentially strong positive externalities, and that these effects persist for at least two years.

In **"Decomposing the Rise of the Populist Radical-Right"** (with Danieli, Gidron, and Kikuchi, *Reject & Resubmit, Journal of Political Economy, 2025*), we test theories explaining the rapid rise of populist parties in Europe. These parties have more than doubled their support in the last two decades; they influence policy, and in some cases, may threaten democratic institutions. We complement studies estimating causal effects in specific countries, by taking a bird's-eye view and describing how populists gained strength across Europe around the same time. We decompose this rise into four factors: changes in party positions, changes in voter characteristics (demographics and opinions), changes in voters' priorities, and a residual. Contrary to common narratives, shifts in voter characteristics and party positions explain little of the aggregate rise, as voters did not develop more right wing populist attitudes during this period. Instead, a primary driver behind the success of populist parties lies in voters' changing priorities. Specifically, voters increasingly place a higher priority on cultural issues compared to economic issues, allowing populist radical right parties to tap into a preexisting reservoir of culturally conservative voters.

Moving from electoral politics to conflict settings, I also study how people form and avoid beliefs in moments of crisis. **In Paying Not to Know: News Avoidance in Times of War** (with Shayo and Yanay, working paper, 2025), we first document that Israelis and Jordanians strongly disagreed on basic facts regarding the recent Gaza war. This disagreement could stem from differences in coverage, as both Israeli and Arab media outlets focus on ingroup victims and ignore outgroup victims. What explains such coverage, and what are its consequences? In a series of online survey experiments, we find that individuals are willing to forgo monetary payments to

avoid reading about outgroup victims, suggesting that gaps in coverage may be demand-driven. This does not seem to be driven by instrumental considerations (as individuals prefer reading about stories that they are already familiar with) or universal affective factors, and instead is driven by social identification. We then randomly expose participants to news about ingroup and outgroup victims and find that exposure to outgroup victims increases knowledge about the outgroup, fosters empathy, and shifts policy positions. These results suggest that news avoidance may fuel factual disagreements and exacerbate conflict.

I will continue studying which policies exacerbate conflict and which interventions can reduce hostilities. In **ongoing work** (with Oren Danieli, Yoav Goldstein, and Dina Pomarenz), we will study how the memorialization of collective trauma shapes attitudes toward the outgroup in two Israeli settings: (i) High-school study trips to Poland about the Holocaust (leveraging random variation in the trip timing and the gradual suspension and resumption of trips during COVID-19), and (ii) contrasts between national memorial ceremonies centered on ingroup sacrifice and alternative joint ceremonies highlighting the suffering on both sides.

3. Political Economy of the Environment

My third research agenda focuses on political economy in a specific context—environmental policy. The climate crisis, overuse of common-pool resources, and the severe health harms of local air pollution make environmental economics increasingly important. Yet optimal policies often fail to materialize because of political economy constraints. My work uses field and online experiments across diverse settings to examine how we can overcome these constraints or identify second-best solutions.

An oft-discussed constraint is overuse of common resources in the absence of effective governance. In **Adoption of Community Monitoring Improves Common Pool Resource Management Across Contexts** (with Slough, Rubenson, et al. *PNAS,* 2021), we study whether community monitoring can improve the management of local common-pool natural resources. We analyze six experiments in different countries, all conducted as part of EGAP's Metaketa Initiative, which aims to increase external validity by running coordinated harmonized field experiments. The meta-analysis shows that community monitoring reduces extraction from common-pool resources and raises user satisfaction. The results suggest that communities can successfully monitor their resources, though initial facilitation by NGOs or governments may be necessary.

A second constraint is that citizens may prefer inefficient policies. In **Why do Governments Implement Inefficient Environmental Policies? The Roles of Misunderstanding and Equity** (with Jiang, Lauletta, Shapiro, and Taubinsky, working paper, 2025) we show that Americans prefer environmental standards over market-based instruments (taxes and cap-and-trade), even though market-based instruments are cost-effective. This could stem from incorrect beliefs as individuals think that standards keep consumer prices lower than market-based instruments do, while environmental economists believe the opposite. We find that short videos that explain

principles of allocative efficiency and incidence can increase understanding of economic fundamentals and support for market-based policy instruments.

A third constraint is limited or distorted enforcement. In Bangladesh, air pollution reduces life expectancy by nearly seven years, and brick kilns are among the major contributors. Most kilns violate government regulations, but enforcement is weak and the kilns keep operating. In **ongoing work** (with Doreen Boyd, Martin Mattsson, and Sumil Thakrar) we are conducting a nationwide field experiment providing local bureaucrats with information on the harms of brick kilns under their jurisdiction. The study tests whether information can redirect enforcement and thereby increase its effectiveness and reduce health harms.

In sum, my work combines new datasets, quasi-experimental designs, and experimental methods to study recent political phenomena and challenges, including the effects of social media, the rise of populism, and environmental crises.

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