



Social Media: Do they enhance or erode Democracy?

Jetmira Allushi



Contact: jna130@aubg.edu

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University Council Essay Competition for 2017

2016 was the year during which historic and unexpected political events caused upset and shock across the world. It was the year in which the United Kingdom held a referendum asking citizens whether they wanted to exit the European Union; the answer, against arguments, economic warnings, and the pleas of experts, was a narrow yes. The United States presidential elections ended with Donald J. Trump, the once unlikely Republican Party candidate and reality television star, winning the elections and emerging as the leader of the free world, again, against arguments and pleas from experts, economists, political scientists, and the vocal concerns of several minority groups. The global audience observed and reacted in shock the morning after each of the vote counts came in for these historic political outcomes, but the will of the people had spoken. The surprise was echoed by many that “we had no idea there were so many people that supported Brexit” and “we had no idea that so many people supported Trump!”, and of course it was surprising to many because of the overwhelming analyses, arguments, counter arguments in mainstream media, which leaned towards how both Brexit and Trump were terrible options. The reality realised from both political events was that there was a large division amongst the electorate. Fault lines were drawn between conservatives, ultra conservatives, liberals, and the working class, each with their own concerns and priorities. Whether it was the nationalist mantras for the “building of a great wall” or the false promises to “put wasted European Union money into the National Healthcare System”, conflicting arguments and analysis were strong amongst the core of each group of voters, and often dismissed by those with opposing views.

Nevertheless, the people had spoken. Etymologically, the word democracy is a combination of the Greek words *demos* – people; and *kratos* – rule, while the common definition for it is “a government by the people, especially rule of majority; a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections”.

Evidently, the concept of democracy being the afore defined is quite new: up until the seventeenth century, democracy was broadly associated with the idea of citizen gatherings to engage in public debate. Being informed and aware was a prerequisite for this form of democracy, which practically translated into inclusion of only people that had the resources to be informed and actively engage into discourse – elites. Leading into the beginning of the nineteenth century, as author Norberto Bobbio writes in his book “Democracy and Dictatorship”, the idea of democracy shifted to mean the right of the people to participate in the determination of the collective will through elected representatives. This shift in the understanding of democracy triggered the form of democracy we are used to today: representative democracy. The basic civil requirements of democracy can be summarised by the following quote of David Beetham:

“Without the guaranteed right of all citizens to meet collectively, to have access to information, to seek to persuade others, as well as to vote, democracy is meaningless. Democratic rights, in other words, are those individual rights which are necessary to secure popular control over the process of collective decision-making on an ongoing basis.”

History and more recent events have shown how powerful media can be in the democratic process. It is considered the fourth pillar of democracy, alongside the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. The media has the power to shape public understanding, frame agendas, and most importantly, hold the other three pillars accountable for their actions and decisions, by bringing public awareness and ultimately public pushback on representatives and institutions. This is applicable to both traditional and social media. However, traditional media has not always been the unbiased and independent voice of power that it should be. As post-totalitarian societies know all too well, state media can become a biased and powerful propaganda mouthpiece, and whilst this problem isn't limited to state media alone – it is echoed if propaganda is the only media allowed inside a totalitarian state. Privately owned media does not escape its own set of problems when measured against the

concept of a free and independent press. Private interests of the owners and stakeholders of media companies and outlets can interfere with the ethics and mission of media, which can result in biased reporting to further particular agendas and to lead certain narratives.

Moreover, the top-down approach of traditional media, where information is first shared with established media organisations who hold the power of relaying this information, is problematic, since it creates a monopoly in the reporting of information, and hinders diversity of opinion.

Social media seems to be able to efficiently tackle some of the problems prevalent in traditional media. First, social media provides a communication platform that enables each of its users to be reporters and journalists. The proliferation and affordability of modern internet-enabled mobile and recording devices now give the majority in society the ability to document events around them, and share reports on their social media profiles, along with their thoughts. Ideally and initially, everyone has equal access to platforms where they can publish their own commentary on events they witness, share with thoughts and opinions regarding a spectrum of local and international socio-economic-political issues. Connected social media users through a network of friends, followers and subscribers can access this global unfiltered and unedited commentary in real time. The wide reach of the internet and social media has the potential to make the original concept of democracy – citizen gathering together and engaging in public debate – a practical option, not only on a local “town hall” meeting level, where the discussion is then relayed to the representative, but at a much larger, even global scale, although that does not translate into individuals being able to directly represent themselves institutionally.

Social media also facilitates assembly. Citizens are no longer bound by physical and geographical factors if they want to assemble. Facebook groups, with memberships from as little as several thousand up to millions from across the world, facilitate discussions about

topical and trending issues. Protests are shared as events on social media, where people can learn about the cause and confirm their attendance in the same way they would RSVP to a social gathering. Petitions are started online and shared to gather electronic signatures from all over the world, to the extent where entire websites are dedicated to online activism, such as avaaz.org.

How does the advent and use of social media translate into actual political change? One recent example was the Arab Spring, dubbed as “the facebook revolution” or “the twitter revolution”. Social media was crucial in bringing core activists of this movement together, and was used as a platform to engage in free discussions. Research from the PEW Center showed that social media was not a cause of the social uprising itself, but it was utilized to show people what was happening on the ground during the uprising and to spread information and details of the uprising beyond the region to an international audience, acting as an amplifier of news.

Social media in instances like these become a powerful enabler of pushing for change and challenging the status quo. However, this potential relies upon the availability of technology, access to internet and engagement with social media platforms within a population. Trends show that those who have such access are mostly young, college educated people – this indicates that social media users are not entirely representative of the wider population. The degree of internet usage varies widely across countries. Over 90 percent of the population in the United Kingdom has access to internet, whereas Eritrea has a little over 1 percent of the population being able to access the internet. This leads to question whether social media (and its reliance upon internet availability) can truly enhance democracy in countries where internet users are amongst the smallest percentage of the population, or where engagement is limited to narrow demographics. Furthermore, an individual’s consumption of commentary from their social media network and peers can lead to a false

perception that it is a consensus representative of the overall population, which may not be the case.

Another example that shows positive use of social media is when citizens use it to raise awareness on issues like respect for the rule of law and treatment of citizens by authorities. In Albania, popular (as measured by number of likes) Facebook pages receive messages in their private inbox from citizens sharing stories, pictures, and videos. These citizen reports range from physical and verbal abuse of children in schools, to arbitrary taxation of small businesses by local authorities. These stories get shared by the pages and reach an audience of hundreds of thousands of people, and have led to formal complaints and protests, court cases, and boycotts of certain products and services. Albania is a country that does not score well when it comes to freedom of press, and social media is the last unregulated space for sharing information that traditional media will not or cannot share.

The use of social media has shown that it does make it easier for common interest groups to organize. They give voice and power to different minority groups, and can spark movements as large as “Black Lives Matter”, or the “Women’s March” wave of protests, which began in the United States and spread throughout the world following the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump. The amount of information available and the diversity of this information is soaring at an all-time high.

So far this essay has treated information being shared on social media as user-generated content. This is incorrect and does not represent the entirety of information circulating on social media. With the rise of internet use and access, traditional journalism had to adapt and provide online access to their content. In addition, media outlets that operate solely online flourished. Some of the biggest medias in the world are now BuzzFeed or Politico, neither of which operate offline. There are hundreds of thousands of online news

outlets which are all aggressively competing for clicks and hits on their websites. The business model of media has changed, and to potentially detrimental results.

Online business has become the new gold rush. When the internet was created, users preferred to get online products and services for free, and websites made money by showing ads on their pages. This was passed on to social media, where users willingly input information such as age, gender, political stance, family, preferences, and so on. This information is then sold to advertising companies, which can target with incredible accuracy individuals, and advertise them exact products that they want. This is not news to anyone that has ever wondered “how is it that I get to use facebook for free”, but the extent of how much personal data is being stored, and what is being used for, is unknown. Up to the point that these algorithms were being used to advertise products and services did not seem problematic, but the trouble began with news and information being marketed to users the same way a product or a service was.

Hundreds of articles, reports, think pieces are published online by the minute, in different languages, targeting different demographics. Not only is there an overload of information, this information is also difficult to fact-check and verify. The internet has eliminated confines of time and space, and at this point the “winner” is not whoever has the most accurate and well-reported information, is who reports the fastest. If in the pre-internet era, information came into the newsroom, was fact-checked, and published the next morning, now reports need to get to the audience within minutes of the occurrence of events. In the business model of profit per clicks, readership is aggressively sought out on social media, and the more a post is shared, liked, and commented on, the more it will appear on newsfeeds. And once a user engages (in the form of likes, comments, shares) and clicks on a news article, the more of the same type of article they are exposed to. The perpetuation of this information bubble “popped” after the US presidential elections. It was only then that

analysts turned to social media as one of the places to try and find explanations for what had seemed as the unlikely outcome.

What happened was that elements of human behaviour were amplified by social media. First off, people like to hear, read, see, and perceive things that align with what they already believe and think. This is called confirmation bias, and it was amplified by a social media algorithm that is designed to show the user more of what they have already been exposed to, in other words, to create an “echo chamber”. A good visual on how deep this information polarization is shown in the Wall Street Journal project “Red Feed, Blue Feed”. As explained on the web page, if a source appears in the red feed, a majority of the articles shared from the source were classified as “very conservatively aligned”. For the blue feed, a majority of each source’s articles aligned “very liberal.” To add to this information bubble, distorted news and actual fake news found their way into users’ social media feeds, and since this fake news serve to confirm existing bias, people were a lot less likely to fact-check and verify. Opposite views almost never made their way into someone’s information bubble, and even if it did, cognitive dissonance came into play, manifesting in extreme discomfort when one is faced with evidence that changes a well-grounded belief. Even if one saw opposing views, they would simply ignore them. Different groups over-estimated consensus, and wrongly assumed that people on opposing camps were online trolls and teenagers.

On the topic of online trolls and people who create sub-groups on lesser-known social media platforms, those are perfect breeding ground for online recruitment of terrorists and extremists. Several analyses on the Islamic State online media recruitment tactics give chilling insights on techniques used, and the success they yield. An unregulated internet allows anyone, of various interests and agendas, to reach out to individuals and indoctrinate them, using decentralized media operations and flooding feeds with news from various sources, making even fact-checking insufficient. On the other end of the web, 4chan users

have created their own code words to freely engage in hate speech, as well as have found ways to disrupt peaceful protesters, as in the case of Shia LaBeouf's livestream project, where 4chan users posted their own livestreams of them disrupting the gatherings.

As the biggest unregulated medium of expression, content creation, and information sharing, social media looks like a looming threat. The potential of it to reduce costs of information sharing gets lost in the click-per-pay money making schemes of websites that will attract hits and traffic at any cost. The change in the balance of distributional power and a shift from the "top-down" dissemination of information from corporates becomes obsolete when big online media outlets have managed to create monopoly in readership, at the expense of smaller, local reporters and media. Fake news generated in small towns in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia reaches a larger audience among US citizen than articles published by five of the biggest established and reputable media sources, combined.

Is this obstructing democracy? Yes. However, lets not forget the potential of media. Just like the Albanian case, and the Black Lives Matter movement, social media gives the opportunity to everyone to share their views, their stories, counter hateful narrative. Social media only erodes democracy at improper use, and the solution cannot be regulating the internet. It's a very slippery slope from trying to stop the internet being used as breeding territory for hate, to all principles of net neutrality becoming invalidated. What social media websites can do is alter the algorithm that isolates opposing views from a feed. News outlets can work with providing "serendipity news", or to link different views on a certain issue they write about. Users becoming aware of the information bubbles and actively seeking alternative opinions. News outlets across the spectrum, online and offline, pushing for media literacy. The issue is not about whether social media enhances or erodes democracy. It as the potential to do both. What remains to be done is figure out how to push for use of social media in a way that enhances democracy, because it is not going anywhere.