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# **SOCIAL MEDIA: DO THEY ENHANCE OR ERODE DEMOCRACY?**

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2017. Fake news and Donald Trump continue to dominate the agenda since #Elections2016. @POTUS (claims he) works towards making America great again, but his social media communication with the public is more self-aggrandizing than discussion-oriented.

2016. Social media allegedly played a major role in the #Brexit campaign and “Leave” ended up as the preferred option at the referendum, because Brexit activists had more vociferous and emotional messages than “Remain” supporters.

2013. The #BlackLivesMatter solidarity movement for dignity, justice and respect for Black people started a discussion of race relations after a 17-year-old African-American teenager, Trayvon Martin, was murdered. The hashtag and the demonstrations organized under its umbrella continue to this day.

2011. Protesters of the Arab Spring used Facebook and Twitter to coordinate demonstrations, communicate between each other, and raise global awareness of what was happening in their countries.

Clearly, the list is far from inclusive and thorough, but even with this limited number of examples, it is evident that the influence of social media on democracy is complex and manifold. In this essay, I will focus primarily on the effects of social media on civic engagement and participation, action, and access to up-to-date and unbiased information, imperative for a successful political democracy. I argue that social media is not inherently detrimental for democracy, but the way we are currently allowing it to trample on citizens’ ability to think rationally, make informed decisions, and thus engage fully in the democratic processes, is eroding the democratic ideal both on a political and on a social level.

According to Robert Dahl, there are five criteria for the existence of a democratic process – effective participation, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, voting equality, and

the inclusion of adults. These ensure political equality between the members of the community and provide them with equal opportunities to exercise their responsibilities towards the state (Dahl, 1998, pp. 37-39). One channel through which citizens can get access to the information they need to understand the issues on the agenda and exercise the first three standards for democracy, is through media.

Media is referred to as “the fourth estate,” an additional power besides the established traditional division into legislative, executive and judiciary systems. The media is supposed to be outside of government control and serve as a watchdog, ensure political pluralism, offer an exchange of opinions and a platform for debate, and inform the public of the day’s events in an accessible and thorough manner. By extension, social media is supposed to have the same functions and responsibilities.

A key characteristic of social media is that it is much more unregulated, sporadic, and spontaneous than traditional media, because it is used and created mainly by the masses, not the informed media consumer or the educated media professional. Being so, it offers an infinite variety of opinions and reflects a variety of worldviews and political stances. Unlike traditional media, social media offers a two-way communication and provides more opportunities for response and “live” debate. In this way, it enhances democracy, because it provides the basis for Dahl’s first three criteria for a democracy – enlightened understanding, effective participation, and control of the agenda.

“The first duty of a man is to think for himself,” said José Martí, and what a better way to think critically than to acquaint yourself with different points of view first? Despite the variety of opinions it offers, however, social media also has several characteristics that are particularly detrimental to man’s ability to think for himself - the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, the feedback loop it creates, and the passive activism it breeds.

Social media creates echo chambers/filter bubbles/hermetic media bubbles/political ghettos/feedback loops/information cocoons/tunnel vision – call it as you may, this phenomenon entails that you get surrounded only by information you agree with and are ready to defend. “What’s so scary about that?,” someone could ask. After all, very few people like to torture themselves with reading and analyzing a point-of-view opposing their own, so they simply click on the “Unfollow” or “Hide post” and their problem is solved.

In fact, this is where the problem starts taking root. When you hide, ignore or reject the posts you don’t agree with, you are limiting your access to information and your ability to take rational and informed democratic decisions based on complete, thorough, and truthful account of the day’s events. Focusing on a one-sided representation of news limits your critical thinking and enlightened understanding. According to Dahl, “each member [of the community] must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences” (Dahl, 1998, p. 37). Despite social media’s freedom of expression and the lower levels of government and corporate control, access to unbiased quality information is restricted by algorithms based on personal preferences. This makes Dahl’s ideal for enlightened understanding close to unattainable, because control over what we watch, read or hear by a third party impairs our judgments.

The problem social media creates for democracy in this case is not a lack of pluralism of news. In fact, as Moses Shumow states, “at no point in history have we had more opportunities for seeking out and sharing information; at the same time, those choices are obscured, not through scarcity or lack of access, as may have been the case in the past, but through ubiquity and abundance” (Shumow, 2015, p. 203). Despite the ubiquity and abundance of information, however, information is often oversimplified and stripped from its content by news outlets craving for social media presence, and access to both sides of the narrative is often inadequate and inefficient due to social media algorithms.

Social media sites, as well as news outlets, operate for profit, which is why they look for marketable stories, which does not always result in the public's interest. Traditional types of media – TV, radio, newspapers with online presence – tailor their content to fit the requirements of social media in order to get more shares, likes, and engagement. This is why they choose a certain format, and use a language that appeals to the masses, but is not necessarily the most accurate and representative one. Social media also tends to favor posts that are funny, surprising or shocking over complex material, which is another reason why media outlets sometimes simplify their messages to the audience, thus swaying their meaning, or rely on entertainment-related posts altogether.

But the main reason why we have limited access to information from both sides of the narrative is due to social media algorithms. Facebook, for example, uses special algorithms to tailor the content on your News Feed to your wants. Based on what pages you like, what key words you use, how much time you spend looking at certain posts while scrolling down your newsfeed, and who knows how many other variables, Facebook algorithms use your preferences to provide your “daily me,” an idea toyed in 1995 by MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte, but increasingly gaining momentum in recent years, particularly due to the advances in technology and the rising recourse to automation and algorithms.

“Daily me” is envisioned as a highly customizable digital source of information that considers your interests and filters out anything that would not match them, thus offering you a highly biased, inflexible and one-sided account of the day's events. This sure matches your “want to know,” but in a democratic society, citizens also should have access to what they “need to know” in order to be able to exercise their rational thought and enlightened understanding. Such customizable source of information, as is Facebook News Feed, focuses on the “want” rather than on the “need” of the people and this creates a whole lot of problems for democracy and citizen participation.

Information cocoons and social media echo chambers lead to confirmation bias, groupthink, group polarization and ideological radicalization. In his *book Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Cass Sunstein discusses how social media often serves to confirm and enhance users' antecedent views (resulting in confirmation bias), exactly because they surround themselves with like-minded people. According to Sunstein, Barack Obama's success in 2008 was mainly due to the widespread support and enthusiasm for him in social networks – the more it appeared in users' social networks, the more likely they were to support him, the more likely they were to share their opinions, the more their opinions would appear in their connections' social networks,... (Sunstein, 2009, p. 24).

Similar circular patterns of support, confirmation bias, and groupthink became evident following the elections in the United States in November 2016. Hillary supporters, including pro-democrat media news outlets, were dumbfounded when the results became known, never having contemplated the possibility of her losing. Why? Because the opinions in their social network were predominantly in her support – they were offered pro-democrat opinions by news algorithms, anti-republican messages like “We all hate Trump” were scattered across their news feeds, shocking posts about the scandalous billionaire president-to-be raced for their attention. And they never saw outside their political cocoon.

Lack of cross-ideological engagement leads to ideological segregation and group polarization where otherwise it would not have happened. Sunstein argues that on many political issues, people tend towards the middle by virtue of humility, but once they see other people agree with them, their beliefs are confirmed, confirmation breeds confidence, and this brings an even more extreme stance (HarvardLawSchool, 2017). Precursor and necessary factor for group polarization, the idea of groupthink has negative implications for the democratic process. In Irving Janis' words: “groupthink leads to many problems of defective decision-making, including incomplete survey of alternatives and objectives, failure to examine the

risks of the preferred choice, poor information search, selective bias in processing information, and failure to assess alternatives” (as cited in Sunstein, 2009, p. 86).

Due to the political ghettos they create, social media end up spreading conspiracy theories and fake news much faster than any other medium of communication, further limiting enlightened understanding and effective participation, and influencing public agenda. On the one hand, the spread of false information impairs citizens’ access to truthful and unbiased information and suppresses political activism; on the other hand, it disempowers politicians from being accountable for their actions.

This vision is exemplified by Ivan Krastev who argues that conspiracy theories “produce zombies either unwilling or too uncomfortable to challenge their political leaders.” In a world where conspiracy theories are the primary basis for explaining the outcome of events, political leaders can take bad decisions and blame the “enemy” that is conspiring against them, without taking any responsibility for the outcome. In a worldview dominated by conspiracy theories, the focus is on the past, what went wrong and who is to blame, rather than on a constructive and prospective vision of the future (Krastev, 2012).

Attempts to correct for the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories have been met with mild skepticism and even outright criticism. Facebook and Google have talked about introducing new bot- or human-driven algorithms to intersect and isolate fake news, but it is very hard, being on impossible, to identify a piece of news as “fake” in a social network so ideologically segregated. It will always be the case that one side will accuse the other of censorship.

To quote John Stuart Mill, “it is hardly possible to overrate the value, in the present low state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar...

Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress” (as cited in HarvardLawSchool, 2017) And here is where the major distinction between the average person and the educated media user takes place. The former is perfectly satisfied with the one-sided view they are offered through their custom tailored Newsfeed and Twitter home page, they do not feel the need to step out of their comfort zone and face opinions and facts they immediately discard as false. The educated media user, however, is able to evade confirmation bias, groupthink and radicalization of opinions, because she deliberately searches for views that oppose her own, engages in discussion, and considers alternative facts and points of view. She employs the positive aspects of social media to contribute to the democratic process, whereas the average media user is suppressed by algorithms and information cocoons.

Luckily, digital technologies are already coming up with solutions to how to pop the political information bubbles we are forced in by the social media. Twitter’s plug-in *FlipFeed* provides you with the opportunity to see your feed as if it were a stranger’s; Chrome extension *PolitEcho* analyzes your Facebook network and visualizes your political biases; Facebook plug-in *Escape Your Bubble* shows you opposing political views and offers you news stories from the other side of the political spectrum (Hess, 2017, para 4-7).

Another positive aspect of social networks is that they give voice to the voiceless and empower civic engagement and activism. The Arab Spring, the 15-M Movement of *los indignados* in Spain, the Euromaidain, #ДAHCwithme protests in Bulgaria – social media was a powerful platform for communication and coordination for all those social movements. Few would dispute its influence on those demonstrations and political upheavals, but there do exist some criticisms.

Tsvetan Todorov sees social media and the Internet as a double-edged sword regarding its implications for democracy. On the one hand, sharing information on the social network is

free from any centralized control, facilitates political upheavals, and helps topple repressive governments like in the Near and Middle East in 2011 – something individuals by themselves would not have been able to achieve. On the other hand, however, social media can also be used for submissiveness: “if all the members of the network dutifully reflect the views of a dominant figure, the result is a strengthening of conformism, not liberation of ideas” (Todorov, 2014, p.132)

Another criticism is that social media arguably creates an age of “slacktivism” – a generation of passive, lenient activists, who show their support for social causes and political issues through hashtags, not through “real action.” Moreover, since campaigns in social media are increasingly easy to implement, hashtags end up fighting for attention. Sometimes important issues end up eclipsed by more “popular” ones – such as the #DAPL hashtag, which trended for a while on Twitter following President Trump’s signing of the memorandum allowing the Dakota pipeline to be built, but ended up suppressed by tweets from the Academy Awards Ceremony.

So, with passive “slacktivism” and an overwhelming amount of campaigns in the digital world, social media users end up exercising less of their civic responsibilities towards the democratic process, because they don’t engage in effective participation nor have control over the agenda. They cannot see the important issue, and if they do, how much really do the changes demanded in the digital world reach the ears of those in power?

Although I seem to have painted a pretty bleak and corrosive portrait of social media and its effect on democracy, I stand assured that its manifold effect on democracy depends on how we use it. The effects of social media are boundless and we are yet to explore exactly how far-reaching they could be. This is an ever-evolving and intimately connected to our lives

medium of communication, which inevitably makes it an essential part of our daily lives in all of its aspects – social, political, and personal. How we use social media makes a whole lot of difference –an informed media consumer would not fall for the ‘filter bubble’ and the echo chambers social media creates, they would be skeptical towards conspiracy theories, and would seek rational and critical arguments in order to form their opinions. This would not be true for the average social media user, however, who would continue to surround themselves with like-minded people, indulge in groupthink and ideological segregation, and fall for the emotional rather than logical appeal of the news in social media, merely because it is easier like that. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that social media can pave the road to a better and all-encompassing democracy so long as educated media consumers become the norm, not the exception.

Goethe has said: “There is a big shadow, where there is much light.” I am a bit more optimistic than Goethe, and would interpret his saying in a slightly more hope-inspiring manner – “If there is a big shadow, there must be much light.” If some aspects of social media like algorithms and the feedback loop they create are detrimental to the democratic process, there are others aspects that offset the balance. Despite its flaws, social media is a powerful platform for debate and freedom of expression, and there must be many others, maybe yet unexplored and unexploited positive aspects. It is our choice whether we want to stay in the shadow or rejoice in the light.

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