SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON DEMOCRACY: ARE WE INFORMED OR MANIPULATED?

Anushree Sharda[*]

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the influence of social media on democracy, highlighting its benefits and potential manipulations. It provides a historical overview of the rise of social media platforms and their widespread usage in today's society. The main theme of the article is to examine the influence of social media on politics as well as the mechanisms through which social media platforms influence public opinion, including the formation of echo chambers, microtargeting, and emotional appeals. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is discussed as an example of the misuse of personal data for political purposes and the manipulation of social media platforms during elections. Additionally, the article mentions Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, where social media platforms were used to spread disinformation and sow discord among the American electorate. While social media can be seen as a tool for transformation in movements like the Zapatista movement, the Arab Spring, and the Wall Street protests, a gradual shift can be observed where it has become a tool of manipulation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, a German YouTuber called Rezo caused a nightmare for an established mainstream party namely the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) by tearing apart the key policies of the party in his casual "YouTube-style". Within a few hours the web was buzzing, he had used his popularity to express his opinion. Due to this CDU lost 6.4% of its votes![1]

Social media platforms have become influential instruments in the digital age, shaping public opinion and impacting democratic processes. These platforms have completely changed how people interact and consume information, opening avenues for citizen involvement and promoting international political discourse. The introduction of the networking site Bolt (now closed) in 1996 marked the beginning of the rise of social media. Six Degrees, which allowed

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[*] BBA LLB, FIRST YEAR, SYMBIOSIS LAW SCHOOL, PUNE.
[1] Platform EL, 'German Youtuber Angers Political Establishment in Frank Video' (Liberties.eu) <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/youtube-freedom-of-expression-during-election-campaigns/17278> accessed 20 February 2024

users to create profiles and add friends, was released shortly after in 1997. Subsequently, AOL Instant Messenger, Live Journal, and Friendster were launched, all of which helped prepare the ground for the eventual leader, Facebook, to emerge in 2004.[2] Currently, Facebook is the leading social network with 3.03 billion users active worldwide. Along with that, new platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have also emerged.

According to data from 2024, an average person spends 2 hours and 24 minutes on social media every day which includes updating status, writing posts, comments, and scrolling through feeds.[3] Social media influence is being used to change a variety of fields, including business, politics, education, employment, global culture, and more. It has changed how people participate in politics by giving them a forum to voice their opinions, participate in debates, and rally support for causes they care about. Another study from Pew Research claims that social media is where nearly one in five American adults primarily obtain their political news.[4] It is also found that individuals who primarily rely on social media for political news are generally less informed and more prone to be exposed to unverified claims than those who obtain their news from conventional sources. We can infer that social media now has a far greater influence on political campaigns than it does on other media. Social media is used for campaigning by political parties, lobbying for tickets, booth-level meetings through WhatsApp groups as well as live streaming on big LED screens. From the declaration of the campaign to the declaration of results, social media is becoming an important link in electoral mahakumbh (conclave).

MECHANISMS OF INFLUENCE

It is crucial to look at the processes by which social media sways public opinion to comprehend how it affects democracy. One key mechanism is the formation of "eco chambers" or "filter bubbles".[5] This works through algorithm bias and personalization as various platforms analyze

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[2] Hines K, 'The History of Social Media' (Search Engine Journal, 8 November 2022) <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/social-media-history/462643/> accessed 20 February 2024

[3] Kemp, S. (2024a) The time we spend on social media - datareportal – global digital insights, DataReportal. Available at: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-deep-dive-the-time-we-spend-on-social-media#:~:text=Social%20media%20time%20spent%20in,of%20total%20social%20media%20time. (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

[4] Mitchell A, 'Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable' (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, 30 July 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/> accessed 20 February 2024

[5] Roese Vivian, "You Won't Believe How Co-Dependent They Are: Or: Media Hype and the Interaction of News Media, Social Media, and the User." [2018] From Media Hype to Twitter Storm, pp. 313-32.

user preferences and behavior to deliver tailored content that limits their exposure to contrasting beliefs and reinstates their opinions. In this way, like-minded citizens get insulated from meaningful interactions with people from different beliefs. Furthermore, microtargeting and behavioral advertising are additional mechanisms through which social media platforms influence public opinion. By targeting interests, preferences, and demographics, platforms deliver personalized political messages to specific individuals or groups. Now that mass marketing has been replaced by micro-targeting and nano-targeting, it allows candidates to put a campaign message in front of one group of voters, while simultaneously running an ad with a completely different message in front of a different group of voters.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal unfolded in 2018 and involved the unauthorized use of personal data obtained from Facebook users. Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm, accessed the personal information of millions of Facebook users without their consent. The scandal was exposed through investigations by journalists and a former Cambridge Analytica employee. It was revealed that the company acquired the data of approximately 87 million users through an app called "This Is Your Digital Life," developed by Aleksandr Kogan. This app not only collected data from users who took a personality quiz but also harvested information from their Facebook friends without their knowledge. Cambridge Analytica utilized this data to create detailed profiles for targeted political advertising and messaging during campaigns like the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum.[6] This incident raised concerns about the misuse of personal data for political purposes and the influence of social media on elections. It also sparked widespread outrage over privacy breaches and unethical data practices which led to Facebook facing significant backlash for its handling of user data and its failure to prevent unauthorized access by third-party developers.

Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections where Russian operatives utilized social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to spread disinformation and sow discord among the American electorate is another such example highlighting the vulnerability of social media platforms and the need for robust measures to safeguard democratic processes. They organized political events, created fake accounts, and disseminated divisive content to

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[6] Ünver H. Akın, "Politics of Digital Surveillance, National Security and Privacy." [2018] Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies.

influence public opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Furthermore, targeted the state election system by hacking and leaking of sensitive information.[7]

Social media thrives on content often driven by emotional or sensationalist elements. Regardless of their veracity or authenticity, the content gets amplified if it evokes strong emotional reactions like joy, fear, or anger. This can distort public discourse as these emotional appeals can override critical thinking and rational analysis, leading to the rapid dissemination of false narratives. False information, unverified remedies, conspiracy theories, and whatnot spreads on these platforms like wildfire. One such example is the misinformation spread during the COVID-19 pandemic. This not only impacted public health decisions but also hindered effective crisis management and trust in scientific expertise was questioned.

One mustn't underestimate the power of influencers and ambassadors on the younger generations. Even with invaluable authenticity and unpaid posts, they create impressions that paid posts won't be able to. Their ability to connect with audiences on a personal level creates a sense of trust and influences decision-making processes. Youtuber KSI's tweet urging his 3.5 million followers to register to vote can be partly attributed to the highest-ever application figure in a single day during the U.S. November elections.[8]

SOCIAL MEDIA: TOOL OF TRANSFORMATION OR MANIPULATION?

Internet technologies have also been effective in many events in terms of influencing socio-politics. Observed as a pioneering wave of social movement, it was used in the Zapatista movement to amplify the message of autonomy, social justice, and indigenous rights. Through platforms like Twitter and Facebook, Zapatistas gained international visibility, mobilized support, and disseminated their ideology, challenging traditional power structures and promoting grassroots activism. Social media helped them bypass traditional media channels and directly communicate their perspectives, demands and struggles to a larger audience.[9]

Historically, people were never as aware as they are now about government policies. Through social media campaigns, government outreach is increasing and so is the awareness among

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[7] Agawu, E. A., "The 2016 Election and the Response" [2018] , pp. 6-14
[8] Editor D, 'How Political Parties Used Social Media in General Election?' (Don't Panic London, 30 May 2022) <https://www.dontpaniclondon.com/how-social-media-has-become-a-political-battleground-this-general-election/> accessed 20 February 2024
[9] Yerlikaya, T., & Aslan, S. T., "Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: The Manipulation of Politics in the Election Process" [2020] Insight Turkey 177

people. During the COVID epidemic, for instance, social media was quite successful in raising preventive awareness and mobilizing leads for medications. Politicians are now reaching out to their supporters and making sure that they keep the public in the loop through their engagements and posts on social media.

A 2008 study found that the dissemination of information and communication technology has benefited democracy and freedom in Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.[10] Furthermore, it has been discovered that the region's effort to bridge the digital divide has been positively impacted. Similarly, the Arab Spring and the Wall Street protests that arose in response to neo-liberal economic problems are also examples of the effective use of social networks. Recently the #BlackLivesMatter movement also gained traction that highlights the potential of these platforms to drive social change.

THE DARK SIDE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCE

The Karnataka High Court noted on Friday that social media has been used to influence voters' political choices, undermining the democratic structure of constitutional institutions. A single judge bench of Justice Krishna S Dixit said the emergence of social media has changed how people participate in the democratic process.[11]

It is possible to divide the socio-political impact of these networks into two periods. The first period where the Internet was used as a platform to express discontent and collaborate support for social justice movements like Zapatista, Iran Green Movement, and the Arab Spring whereas in the second period after the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and Brexit, the Internet started becoming a tool of manipulation and a threat to democracy.

Internet technologies were once regarded as agents of transformation and societal change, offering the potential for increased transparency and the dismantling of barriers in liberal societies. The optimistic belief that enhanced social connectivity would lead to global voter unity and more effective utilization of the internet, however, has remained confined to literature

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[10] Shirazi, Farid & Gholami, Roya & Higón, Dolores, "The impact of information and communication technology (ICT), education and regulation on economic freedom in Islamic Middle Eastern countries" [2009] Information & Management 426

[11] Plumber M, 'Social Media Often Misused to Perpetrate "Mass Level Psychological Manipulations", May Eventually Hijack Democratic Setup: Karnataka High Court' (Live Law, 30 June 2023) < https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/karnataka/karnataka-high-court-social-media-manipulation-democracy-x-corp-twitter-petition-rejected-account-blocking-231607 >accessed 20 February 2024

rather than practical realization. The elections in France and Turkey, Brexit, and other referendums illustrate that manipulation and other anti-democratic interventions have been pursued through the Internet. Computational propaganda refers to the manipulation of the public in a desired direction through computer technologies. It manifests itself in multi-fold stages. It begins with the opening of a fake website similar to the mainstream website in terms of design and visuals. Bots and trawl accounts then share the manipulated and fake content. In the final stage, content is brought to the agenda of online social networks and mainstream media to attract the attention of large masses and further expand the scope of manipulation. Efforts to manipulate search results and voting behavior accordingly have also intensified. Through voter profile studies, personalized content is shared that triggers voters emotionally and acts as a catalyst for changing political decisions.[12] The fact that the UK-based Cambridge Analytica gathered profile information about the electorate on Facebook and intervened in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections alongside presidential elections in France, the June 24 presidential elections in Turkey, and the Brexit referendum shows the degree of use of social media to spread misinformation and interfere in democracies.

Political parties are now engaging tech-skilled young people to perform cyber operations for them. These operations include flooding apps with misinformation, and clickbait messages, developing new tools, and looking for flaws in social media apps to exploit the voters and manipulate their decisions. In India, ahead of the general election in April and May 2019, political parties started using social media aggressively to propagate their ideology, mobilizing public opinion and discrediting critics. Five years later, social media has established itself as the major communication platform for India's political parties. As many as half of around 15 crore first-time voters received political messages through various social media platforms, according to the report based on an online survey of around 25 lakh participants. Nonetheless, social media's democratization as a vehicle for political communication in India has not meant its professionalization as a means of disseminating information.[13]

India was identified as one of the 10 major countries of organized social media manipulation by the report of the Oxford Internet Institute.[14] Landmark judgment in the case of Shreya

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[12] Yerlikaya, T., & Aslan, S. T., "Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: The Manipulation of Politics in the Election Process" [2020] Insight Turkey 177

[13] 'Polarisation and Politicisation: The Social Media Strategies of Indian Political Parties' (giga) <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/polarisation-politicisation-social-media-strategies-indian-political-parties> accessed 20 February 2024

[14] 'Social Media Manipulation by Political Actors Now an Industrial Scale Problem Prevalent in over 80 Countries – Annual Oxford Report' (OII) <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/social-media-manipulation-

Singhal vs. Union of India,[15] struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, a controversial provision criticized for empowering authorities to remove online content arbitrarily, infringing on freedom of expression. Recognizing the influence of social media on elections, the Election Commission of India has also issued guidelines requiring political parties and candidates to disclose social media expenditures and regulate political advertising on these platforms. However, implementing and enforcing these guidelines remains a challenge.

CONCLUSION

To address the challenges posed by social media in democracy, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. Firstly, social media platforms themselves need to prioritize transparency in their operations. This includes being transparent about their algorithms, content moderation policies, and data practices. By providing users with clear information on how their data is used and how content is curated, platforms can build trust and accountability.

Regulatory measures are also crucial in ensuring fair practices and protecting users' privacy. Governments should establish effective regulations that hold social media platforms accountable for their actions. This can involve measures such as data protection laws, stricter guidelines on political advertising, and oversight mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance.

Equally important is the promotion of media literacy and critical thinking skills among users. Education programs should focus on teaching individuals how to navigate social media effectively, evaluate the credibility of information, and engage in informed political discussions. By equipping users with the necessary skills, they can become more resilient to manipulation and make well-informed decisions.

Ultimately, the responsibility for maintaining a balance between the benefits and risks of social media in a democracy lies with both individuals and social media platforms. Platforms must take proactive steps to address the challenges, while individuals need to exercise critical judgment and be mindful of the information they consume and share.

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by-political-actors-now-an-industrial-scale-problem-prevalent-in-over-80-countries-annual-oxford-report/>
accessed 20 February 2024
[15] [2020] 5 SCC 1

By understanding the mechanisms of social media influence and learning from real-world examples, we can harness the positive potential of social media while safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes. It is through collective efforts that we can ensure that social media truly empowers an informed citizenry rather than becoming a tool for manipulation.