Forum: Special Conference on Democracy (SPECON)

Issue: The impact of social media in the realm of politics

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INTRODUCTION

Alongside the internet revolution we have seen a rise in the use of social media and social networking sites. The use of the internet and computers has become prevalent in the 21st century especially in more economically developed countries (MEDCs). This is also seen in less economically developed countries (LEDCs) but to a much lesser extent. Social media has affected and been integrated into every facet of our life, how we communicate, how we share experiences, how we shop and how we are informed about what is happening in the world around us. It was eventual that it would also affect the domain of politics, seeing as it is such an integral part of our life. Social media has allowed people to communicate instantaneously and share their opinions instantly with a large group of people. This has far-reaching implications that are not apparent at a first glance.

Social media has changed how we interact with our politicians, but also how people enter the domain of politics. One of the key changes is that social media has allowed politicians to easily reach a broad audience. This has had both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, it has democratized political participation as it has allowed people from a wider range of economic backgrounds to be able to participate politically and spread their message which would previously not be possible as other methods of advertisement such as TV, radio and print advertising are really expensive and not accessible, making it hard for people without access to a large number of funds to enter politics. One of the negatives of easily being able to spread information is that it makes spreading misinformation much easier.

One of the biggest issues with the rise of the internet and social media is fake news and misinformation. The instantaneous and far-reaching nature of both the internet and social media has made it incredibly easy for bad actors and victims of manipulation to spread fake news or misinformation. This can be done through fake news or targeted advertising, which is even more dangerous as it can be used to target specific groups which are more vulnerable and likely to believe it. Such actions can have a tremendous destructive impact, affecting how people think and vote. That is why it can be leveraged by political candidates to garner support. This is a clear threat to democracy as misrepresentation, deception and propaganda are used instead of logical argumentation (which was the intended way of garnering support).

Furthermore, another concern when it comes to the impact of social media in politics is the use of profiling and targeted advertising, along with how content is provided to the users. Social media companies implement large scale data collection to profile users and serve them personalized ads. An issue arises when that data is used to serve them political advertisements as it can create an uneven playing field for political candidates and create echo chambers of political opinion.

Lastly, the issue of social media censorship comes up. Social media has become one of the main tools for spreading ideas or pollical messages such as campaign advertisements. So, the issue of what's considered fair moderation and censorship naturally comes up, especially in light of the banning of high profile individuals such as Donald Trump from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The question of political bias in social media companies becomes even more crucial when their size and influence is considered as they have the power to sway whole elections.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Social Media[1]

"Forms of electronic communication [such as websites for social networking and microblogging] through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content [such as videos]"

Conspiracy Theory[2]

"Conspiracy theory, an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events as the result of the actions of a small powerful group. Such explanations reject the accepted narrative surrounding those events; indeed, the official version may be seen as further proof of the conspiracy."

Fake News

Fake news has a rather broad definition, but it generally refers to false or misleading information that is made to look like legitimate news. The term is often weaponized and used to discredit information that one may not agree with even though it may be factually correct.

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[1] "Social media." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media. Accessed 27 May. 2021.
[2] Reid, Scott A.. "Conspiracy theory". Encyclopedia Britannica, 27 Jan. 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory. Accessed 28 May 2021.

Censorship[3]

"Censorship, the suppression of words, images, or ideas that are "offensive," happens whenever some people succeed in imposing their personal political or moral values on others." Censorship can also be used for political gain to cause a group of people to only believe a certain set of ideas, making it easier to gain support and election.

Misinformation-Disinformation

Misinformation is false, inaccurate or misleading information. Disinformation is false, inaccurate or misleading information that *is intended to mislead.* Fake news and propaganda fall under this category.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The issue of fake news and misinformation

One of the biggest issues when it comes to social media is how it's used to spread misinformation and fake news. The fact that social media are free for anyone to access and use means that anyone can misuse them since there is such a low barrier of entry. This is in contrast with traditional ways of sharing information through newspapers, books, TV and radio. All methods with much high barrier of entry, meaning it is much harder to abuse them to spread false information as there are thorough review processes in place before something gets published/aired. That combined with the nature of the internet means that spreading false information can be automated and happen on a massive scale using bot networks to create fake accounts and start posting disinformation and fake news. This is a threat to democracy and can be extremely harmful.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

One of the prominent ways we saw this was with the COVID-19 pandemic. While social media was often used to connect during the pandemic and share valid medical information about how to protect yourself from the virus, sadly it was also abused. Conspiracy theories about the virus' creation and even existence ran rampant, medical misinformation such as that masks are harmful was spread amongst those who do not believe in it and were used to convince even more people that this is the truth. This led to a lot of negative consequences, leading to a reduced response to the pandemic. This misinformation led to people not taking the proper precautions (such as wearing

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[3] "What Is Censorship?" American Civil Liberties Union, American Civil Liberties Union, 2021, www.aclu.org/other/what-censorship.

masks), helping propagate the spread of the virus. Alongside that protests also happened further worsening the spread of the virus but also leading to political instability in a time of global crisis. False information on the COVID-19 vaccine is also being spread, leading people to avoid vaccination. This is extremely troubling as currently it is our only defense from COVID-19 but also the only path to normality and ending the pandemic. COVID-19 is only one example of how social media can be damaging and contribute to the spread of misinformation, but there are many more.

The 2020 US Presidential Election

Another example of how social media caused damage through the spread of disinformation and fake news regarding the 2020 US Presidential Election. The Republican party along with US President Donald Trump spread the false belief that there had been widespread election fraud. This happened both using paid advertisements on but also politicians sharing such views on different social media platforms. This combined with media coverage on the issue caused a lot of people to start believing this theory even though it had no basis in fact and was disproven multiple times [4]. Conspiracy theorists also used social media to further amplify the message as well as plan riots.

The 2021 US Capitol Riots

The January 6th US Capitol riots perfectly demonstrate the tangible damage that fake news can cause. All the misinformation combined with the legitimization of election fraud claims erupted with Americans invading their own government building. Social media had a huge effect in causing this. Firstly, social media help spread such claims to many people, but it also helped facilitate and organize the riots. As a result, many people were injured and some died, all based on claims with no evidence. This is a testament to the danger of the misuse of social media and how powerful they can be to incite violence.

Targeted political advertising

Social media has allowed people to be profiled and categorized on a massive scale. Through the collection of data, such as the things they view and the content they interact with, along with other factors such as their age, gender and location they can be put into groups such as by their hobbies and interests. Such information is normally used to serve people targeted advertisements by social media companies on the goods and services they are most likely to by, making advertising more effective than serving the same ads to all people. The issue with this

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[4] Corasaniti, Nick, et al. "The Times Called Officials in Every State: No Evidence of Voter Fraud." The New York Times, The New York Times Company, 11 Nov. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/us/politics/voting-fraud.html.

technology is that it can be also used to ascertain people's political beliefs. Politicians can then leverage this to serve targeted political advertisements. This creates a myriad of problems, and it makes the playing field very uneven for the candidates that are trying to sway people's views.

Targeted ads combined with the preference-based algorithmic nature of social media feeds can create an echo chamber of information, where an individual only hears things, they already support, instead of getting mix of perspectives from different places on the political spectrum. This leads to confirmation bias, where people keep seeking out information which confirms their belief. This leads to people being misinformed and be easily affected from political propaganda and fake news. What makes information valid is its ability to be validated and cross-examined by multiple parties. Therefore, fake news and misinformation thrive in closed off environments where there is no criticism or alternative perspectives. The echo chambers created by the targeted nature of content delivery in social media play a big part in the propagation and spread of fake news. When people receive their information from only one authority they can be manipulated and led to believe misinformation as they have no other sources to contradict what they are learning. Thus it is highly important to have a wide spectrum of opinions and information sources on social media. Free speech coming from a variety of people is a fundamental aspect of democracy. The current state of social media poses a threat to democracy as this aspect is often lacking. The rise of fanaticism and partisanship in countries like the US should not be considered coincidental and the link between such phenomena and the rise of use of social media should be analyzed to find any potential correlations.

The Cambridge Analytica Scandal

A worrying example of that is the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Cambridge Analytica was a political data consulting firm, which was hired by the Trump 2016 Presidential Election Campaign. The firm provided the Trump campaign with profiles and data on Americans for the purpose of targeting ads to those which the ads would be most effective too. The data Cambridge Analytica used to achieve this was obtained illegally through Facebook, the firm obtained the data of more than 87 million Facebook users (initially reported as 50 million). Thus, allegations have been made that this gave the Trump campaign and unfair advantage. [5]

This is a warning sign of what could come, mainly foreign or national election meddling using social media. This would directly attack the core of democracy; thus it has to be taken seriously.

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[5] Granville, Kevin. "Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What You Need to Know as Fallout Widens." The New York Times, The New York Times Company, 19 Mar. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/technology/facebook-cambridge-analytica-explained.html.

Social Media Censorship

As mentioned in the introduction social media censorship is one of the impacts of social media in the realm of politics. This can be categorized in two main ways. One being the censorship of individuals and another the censorship of politicians.

Social media has allowed the free sharing of ideas between people across the world. Freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right, being at the core of a functioning democracy. While this is used in a positive manner most of the time, on occasion, it is used negatively to spread hate or misinformation. Thus, to combat this most major social media companies have implemented rules on the type of material that is allowed there, as well as moderation and removal from the platform if they are breached. Commonly such rules include the prohibition of hateful or racist speech, violent content, inciting violence, spreading false information, etc.

While such rules sound reasonable their enforcement can become a slippery slope as there are no clear definitions on what speech falls under the above categories. This becomes increasingly more worrying considering how much power social media companies possess. For many people social media is their primary news source and the primary way politicians communicate constituents. This will become even bigger in the future with the rapid proliferation of computers and the internet. Thus, social media companies will have an incredible amount of power to censor and silence politicians who violate their interests.

So, the question becomes how much power companies can have to control and influence politics and democracy. And on the other side how much power should governments to control and regulate social media companies. Thus, the issue has to be examined an discussed more, with the participation of youth all the more important since they are the primary users of social media. In matters like this there isn't one solution, it's a combination of many and it also isn't on one side of the argument or another. There has to be a balance between the freedom social media companies have to govern their platforms and the regulatory reach governments have on social media companies (and private entities in general).

It is important to note that social media companies have the right to moderate their platform accordingly as they are private entities, so any freedom of speech regulations usually do not apply. Governments also cannot change the terms of use/terms of a service of a private company unless explicitly legislated (which would bring on concerns of how much governments can regulate the operations of private entities). An issue arises in the moderation of social media as there is no clear definition of hateful speech as it varies from person to person depending on their personal values. It is crucial that there is a diversity of political opinions on social media in order to facilitate democracy but it's also equally important to ensure that they are also safe places.

In the past social media companies such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have been accused of favoring left-wing political opinions. This can be hard to judge as larger patterns have to be detected instead of looking at individual cases. Though it's important to recognize that social media companies have an immense amount of power to influence people if they are biased on the material, they allow and promote. This is further exacerbated because only a few platforms exist and are controlled by a small group of people.

Donald Trump Facebook, Twitter bans

Social media censorship is not only limited to individuals, but it can also happen to politicians. One prominent example is the ban of former US President, Donald Trump on Twitter. On the 8th of January 2021 US President Donald Trump was permanently banned off the platform. The platform cites inciting violence as the main cause of the ban, which goes against the company's policy on what is allowed on the platform. This is considering the riots at the US capitol (6th of January 2021) where rioters violently breached congress and entered unlawfully. Looting and vandalism occurred as well as the deaths and severe injuries of rioters and capitol police officers. Twitter claims that Trump's language in Tweets right after the riots legitimized the violence posing a threat of future violence. [6] While Twitter's actions against the US President were well within their rights and a lot of people could agree were justified, especially considering past conduct on the platform, several accusations have been made of bias against conservatives, claiming the ban was unjustified. This is an example of the threat is posed by social media companies to influence politics and impede democracy.

While in the case of Donald Trump the bans are unlikely to have a big impact on his political career. The issue of private companies being able to silence a president (and politicians as a whole) comes up again and is all the more troubling. In the case of other politicians, it may have had catastrophic impacts on their careers and social media companies could have managed to sway the opinions of people by silencing the voices of those who they don't agree with.

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[6] "Permanent Suspension of @RealDonaldTrump." Twitter, Twitter, Inc, 8 Jan. 2021, blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

USA

The US is the home of many social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, naturally they are also heavily used. The US has struggled many times with the negative impacts of social media in politics. This main issue in the US is fake news and misinformation. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic much resistance was seen to the health measures as a lot of people did not believe in the pandemic, a view often perpetrated through social media. The Capitol riots are also an example of how social media is affecting US politics. In the US many politicians leverage social media to communicate with their audience and spread their message.

Russia

Russia also has a very regulated climate. Many websites criticizing the government are blocked. The same applies to social media that does not comply with the government. Russia has a very regulated media climate. In the past social media has been used for good, a notable example being Alexei Navalny and his use of social media to inform the Russian public of corruption within Putin's regime, something which was not possible in other ways as the media in Russia are heavily controlled by the state. The government also uses social media to spread propaganda and get support from the public and squashes and dissenting voices.

China

China follows a vastly different system of government than most North Americans and European nations. In China power is centralized in the Chinese Communist Party, which has been ruling the country for years with no opposition or democratic elections. The Chinese government tightly controls which information is disseminated through censorship and a heavy control on the internet and social media. That being said Chinese people use social media very heavily although they use Chinese social networking sites which are tightly controlled by the government and most western social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are banned by the "Great Firewall of China". The same goes for most foreign media, the media in china are state controlled and represent the party's beliefs and interests.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
10th of December 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights gets adopted by the United Nations General Assembly
September 1998	Google LLC is founded
14th February 2005	Video sharing and delivery platform YouTube is launched
15th July 2006	Twitter is launched
26th September 2006	Facebook becomes open to the public
30th June 2010	Social Media Day is launched by Mashable
9th November 2016	Donald Trump wins the 2016 US Presidential Election with Mike Pence
17th March 2018	The Cambridge Analytica Scandal is brought to light
May 2019	Instagram begins utilizing third-party fact checkers
22nd October 2020	The Facebook Oversight board official begins operations
3rd November 2020	The 2020 US Presidential election takes place where Donald Trump looses to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris

6th January 2021	The US Capitol is breached by rioters under the impression that the US 2020 Presidentially election was conducted fraudulently
8th January 2021	US President Donald J. Trump gets permanently banned on Twitter

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a fundamental international document in the area of human rights. It sets out to define the fundamental human rights all people are entitled to. This is set out in 30 articles and a preamble. It was the first international effort to do such a thing and it has been hailed as fundamental in the fight for greater equality and freedom. The UDHR was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris, France on 10th of December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A). [7]

Article 19

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." [8] This article calls for freedom of expression but also for freedom of the press. While social media is a privately moderated forum and therefore restrictions to speech can be applied, social media is becoming a main part of how people communicate so a question is raised if and how the right to free expression and free speech will start to apply, seeing social media are a large aspect of modern life.

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[7] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations, United Nations, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.
[8] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations, United Nations, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

Social Media Day

Social Media Day was launched by on 30th of June, 2010 by online digital platform and news website Mashable to recognize the impact of social media on global communications. It is celebrated annually on 30th of June. Such an event demonstrates how much impact social media has had on our lives and how big it has become over the years, thus proving the importance of the issue at hand. [9]

World Press Freedom Day

In 1993 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed May 3rd World Press Freedom Day. Its purpose being to promote and encourage initiatives of press freedom as well as to raise awareness on the issue and combat press censorship. [10] Every year it has a different a different theme, this year (2021) notably being "Information as a Public Good". A Global Conference is hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the issue. This year it is held in the city of Windhoek in Namibia. [11] Press freedom is a recurring issue especially due to the shift of news delivery from print and TV media to social media and the internet. Thus the question of press censorship by social media companies comes up, and thus the importance of press freedom.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Terms of use/Terms of service policies

Most social media platforms have implemented policies against the spread of misinformation and fake news although enforcement varies widely while it is key. How well a platform moderates and how much they take actions to stop the spread of misinformation is what makes a difference. It is a tough balancing act between being too strict in moderation or letting misinformation and fake news run rampant. As it is not a top priority in a lot of social media companies the issue is still largely unchecked. The large volume of content being posted makes it hard to moderate and due to its nuanced nature, it is not easy to be autodetected by tools such as with other violations like foul language. Although a main contributor to its proliferation is the lack on investment by social media companies in improving the situation.

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[9] "Social Media Day." Mashable, Mashable, Inc., mashable.com/smday/?europe=true.

[10] Allyn, Bobby. "Facebook Bans President Trump From Posting For The Rest Of His Presidency." NPR, NPR, 7 Jan. 2021, www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/01/07/954453630/facebook-bans-president-trump-from-posting-for-the-rest-of-his-presidency.

[11] "World Press Freedom Day - EN." United Nations, United Nations, www.un.org/en/observances/press-freedom-day.

Companies have even permanently terminated high profile individuals on their platform like US President Donald Trump (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) which does send a message that such behavior is unacceptable although to have a widespread impact enforcement must be systematic and platform wide. The issue remains largely unsolved. [12]

Fact checking services

Some social media companies have enlisted the help of independent fact checkers to combat the spread of misinformation and fake news. A notable example of that is Instagram which flags posts which contain fake news or misinformation and then provides what fact checkers have said about this and why, giving users a protection from misinformation and an alternate source where they can research further. Along with that Instagram implemented official information portals for the 2020 Presidential Elections and COVID-19 giving users an easy-to-use way to get verified information from reliable news sources. While this is a step in the right direction it remains largely up to question how effective such measures are, especially once a person has already started believing in certain fake news such as the claims that the 2020 US Presidential election was fraudulent or that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Terms of use/Terms of service policies

As aforementioned social media companies due have rules and regulations which define what a user is allowed to do and their limitations in using their respective platform, these are often referred to as the terms of service or terms of use. However currently there are a number of issues to their application. One being that often they lack clear definitions on what is acceptable (for example what constitutes hate speech) or not, especially on how speech is regulated. While the ambiguous nature of language and speech poses a challenge on regulation social media companies can do better and should be more explicit with their expectations of users conduct. Additionally, many times the terms of service/use are inaccessible to the average user as they very long, complicated and hard to read, while covering the legal basis only. This results to a lot of users avoiding reading them, further exacerbating the issue. Social media companies should provide users with easy-to-read short versions of their terms of use/service, making them more accessible to the average user.

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[12] "Facebook's Trump Ban Upheld by Oversight Board for Now." BBC News, BBC, 5 May 2021, www.bbc.com/news/technology-56985583.

Raising awareness

Raising awareness is a solution that targets many fronts and can help accomplish many different things. Firstly, one of the things it can combat is misinformation and fake news. It is important to inform people of fake news and misinformation, this is especially important with older generations who are new to social media and are more effected by the issue. Independent research must be promoted to ensure people get accurate information. It also can help make people aware of the echo chambers that they are often placed in due to the algorithmic nature of how content is served to them, helping them be more aware of any biases and encouraging a more diverse stream of information, which can help people be better informed. One of the most effective ways we can raise awareness is by embedding such information in social media where people are bound to encounter it. Although it is important to note that raising awareness also includes educational reform. It is important to teach the youth of the risks social media pose and encourage them to research and question the things they read. Only by encouraging a culture of thoughtfulness about the things we share online we will have an impact, in a world where information comes and goes, with virality often overshadowing the truth. While raising awareness does not mitigate all the aspects of the problem, it is an important first step and a solution of crucial importance.

Independent fact checking

Sadly, we have seen in recent years that journalistic outlets that are supposed to be neutral are becoming all the more opinionated. This along with the ability of individuals to share their ideas on a large scale through the use of social media has created a media and information landscape which is tough to navigate and avoid bias. Thus, its more important than ever to encourage independent fact checking. This is especially true in social media where misinformation and disinformation run rampant. A possible implementation is through NGOs dedicated to the purpose of fact checking. This could be implemented by either such NGOs assisting with fact checking of platform content or by operating completely independently. This is one of the most effective solutions although it is not always easy to implement as its important that such organizations maintain impartiality.

Third Party Oversight

Many social media companies are highly centralized in leadership, thus their impartiality in moderation decisions as well as other practices often comes into question. Thus, having independent oversight boards to look over moderation decisions is highly important. Such boards would have to be staffed by independent journalists and academics to ensure impartiality and they must a degree of power over decisions to either remove or keep content or people on a platform as well as the power to audit the organizations practices (such as their advertising and monetization practices especially political advertisements). It is important to

note that there are certain challenges in implementing such a solution although it could have a big impact. One of the issues is ensuring that companies cannot influence such boards. Although the biggest difficulty is getting large social media companies to implement such solution, thus regulations may have to be formed to make it mandatory after a platform exceeds a certain size.

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