

Role of Social Media Use in Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google hold the potential to alter civic engagement, thus essentially hijacking democracy, by influencing individuals towards a particular way of thinking. Today, social media plays a crucial role in facilitating and transmitting content related to all the matters that have larger effect on public opinions and democracy. Due to higher use of social media among new generations, they are exposed to politics more frequently, and in a way that is integrated into their social lives. New media hailed as vehicles for providing a voice to the voiceless. But the restrictions imposed by the government on social media sites and internet services, while allowing only that content that are government friendly amounts to compelled speech. This paper explores how social media have become a platform for fake news and propaganda to influence certain audiences towards a particular way of thinking. When it comes to healthy democratic networks, it is important that the news remains true so it doesn't affect people levels of trust. A certain amount of trust is very crucial for healthy and well-functioning democratic systems.

Introduction:

The current state of social media and networking sites leave individuals to conclude that these media platforms may be holding democracy hostage instead of leading to the free and equal democratic ideals they were believed to support. Social media platforms are also increasingly being used as a means for empowering disruptive voices, messages, or ideologies (Hashmi and Rehman, 2014). Social media or more specifically called as news media plays an important role in democratic societies, as they allow for participation among citizens of a country (Morgan, 2018). Communication platforms like social media is persuasive, and more often works to change or influence the opinions, when it comes to political views because of the bounty

of ideas, thoughts and opinions revolving through the social media plan of action (Diehl, 2015). Nain et al 2019 concluded that in especially formed WhatsApp messenger group most of the content shared was knowledge intensive with a mix of personal farming experiences. It promoted the creation of social wealth in the form of discussion forums of Innovative farmers for learning exchange. The extension mechanism for purposeful farmer to farmer learning exchange was created. Social media is one of the prime sources to connect with maximum population in a shortest span of time and concurrently provides a platform to unheard voices to transmit and disseminate their views and opinions and enabling them to finally being heard (Isaac,2020). Bond *et. al.*, (2012) found that online political mobilization

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message distributed via individual self expressions and shared through personal social networks (i.e. Facebook or Twitter) lead to self-guided information seeking and, perhaps, self-serving behavior. Consequently, these messages subsequently impact voting turnout behavior. Indeed, the study indicates the powerful effect of online political mobilization. Avello (2015) concluded that we need to develop technologies that, instead of monetizing communication, serve the people by letting them freely express themselves, access trustworthy information, engage in meaningful deliberations and organize themselves without fear of being commoditized, manipulated, monitored or harassed by the higher authorities. Breuer *et.al.*, (2015) confirm that the important contribution of the internet and social media in Tunisian revolution, where the internet and social media was used by the digital elites to bypass the barriers that prevented the flow of information in the country. Similarly, Khan *et.al.*, (2015) conducted a diverse response of the people regarding the impact of social media on the democratic behavior. Further, Jha and Sarangi (2017) found that Facebook penetration, a proxy for social media, is negatively correlated with corruption in a cross-section of more than 150 countries. Their findings also indicate the relationship between social media and corruption is greater for countries where press is highly repressed indicating the importance of social media in information dissemination through formal channels when formal channels are subject to government censorship. Enikolopov *et al.*, (2018) reported a causal negative impact of social media on corruption in Russia. Authors found that blog posts exposing corruption in Russian state-controlled companies is negatively related to their market returns and positively associated with both a greater management turnover and lower minority shareholder conflicts. Seema (2021) revealed that human rights are everyone's business; India must realize that a democracy cannot be reduced to only demanding praise from the rest of the world. The global concerns about democratic rights in India cannot be dealt with by arresting messengers, bullying 'amplifiers' or shutting down social media accounts. India does not have an image problem; it has a reality problem. Changing the reality and adhering to best democratic practices inside is the only durable solution if the government wants its image fixed.

Media outlets and people who consume information through them are putting pressure on the idea of democracy such that democratic societies as we know them may cease to exist (Water and Williams, 2011). "Media when free and independent of outside interventions can induce significant changes which may alter the whole course of future" (Willis, 2017). Media can generate support or opposition among public over some issues or for some policies. It can mobilize the masses for any cause by injecting its importance and developing a general consensus (Shin *et.al.*, 2016). It can propagate unity among masses by indicating their collective problems and promoting collective goals (Castells, 2013). Over many decades social media has emerged as a prominent source for literally people of every age group, to express themselves through various modes provided by social networking sites. This freedom of citizen's is expressed under Article 19(1) (a) of the Indian Constitution i.e. freedom of speech and expression, with certain reasonable restrictions. Keeping in

view the current scenario of social media this research is carried out to highlight the role, effect, and LFA (Logical Framework Analysis) of social media use and democracy.

Methodology

An analysis of the social research methodologies suggests that the survey is the handy tool for researcher to collect data. This research paper includes data collected from secondary sources i.e. books, brochures, annual reports, newspapers, articles and research papers etc. Further, this paper explores how social media have become a platform for fake news and propagandas to influence certain audiences towards a particular way of thinking. Consequently, social media outlets and people who consume information through them are putting pressure on the idea of democracy such that democratic societies as we know them may cease to exist. The desk research methodology and qualitative analysis was exploited for the purpose.

Result And Discussion:

Effect of social media use on individuals democracy

Social media provide information for individuals in certain networks while it also creates multiplier effects as those same individuals attempt to reach others in their networks. Multiplier effects such as those that occur through social media can go on in perpetuity. On 11, February 2021 '*TheHindu*' published an editorial, '*Media as target*', on the enforcement directorate's raids in the office of NewsClick, an online video news network. The editorial was addressed 'the present regime's record i.e. quite dismal when it comes to the obvious use of central such as the Central Bureau of Investigation, Electorate Directorate, Information Technology department and National Investigation Agency, to rein in dissenting voices. According to the Pew Research Centre, nearly 90.00 per cent of people between the ages of 18 and 29 used at least one form of social media (Maya, 2020). Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for its users to express themselves-conspicuously. It affect users, but that the aggregate effects are of limited magnitude, for e.g. individuals behavior towards certain social media communication system is not so much different as how they respond to other communication media (Tesler *et.al.*, 2019).

Effects of internet shutdowns on individuals

A principal concern nowadays has been the recurrent shutdowns, ordered by the Ministry of Home Affairs, of the Internet services around many boarder areas of NCR since the unruly incidents on January 26 (Antony, 2021). India shuts down internet services more than any other democracy in the world as indicated in the Table1. The Supreme Court also declared in January 2020 that

the right to access the Internet is one of our fundamental rights, alongside the freedom to carry on any trade, business or occupation over the medium of Internet, mentioned under Article 19 of the constitution. The impact of shutdowns becomes more pronounced during pandemic. During COVID-19 outbreak, the ones with good connectivity and know-how of digital tools were able to carry on with their lives with relatively fewer disruptions (Rainie, 2019). Meanwhile, the ones without digital literacy or connectivity found themselves completely left out of all social and economic systems (Junet. al., 2018).

Internet shutdowns freeze economic activity in affected areas and cause large-scale disruptions in economic output. India is estimated to have lost over Rs.20,000 crore in 2020 because of internet shutdowns (Kuklinski, et. al., 2018). The central government issued notice to Twitter to block around 250 social media accounts on it for allegedly promoting misinformation about the protests and this impacting the public’s order and peace.

From Table 1 it can be concluded that the highest number of internet shutdowns was recorded in India in 2020 was due to political instability. Protests and elections also triggered such blackouts in some regions. As many as 109 internet shutdowns were recorded in India in 2020 – 70.00 per cent of all the shutdowns in the world in that year. India’s share in global shutdowns increased by 30.00 per cent, since 2016 (Antony, 2021).

Table 1: Internet shutdowns in World and India

Sl. No.	Year	Internet shutdown (%)	
		World	India
1	2016	22.00	40.00
2	2017	40.00	65.00
3	2018	62.00	68.00
4	2019	64.00	57.00
5	2020	60.80	70.00

(Source: Data Point “The Hindu” Internet denied editorial)

Mixed attitude of individuals about the internet effects on politics

Most of the countries having the larger shares and indicating that the internet has positive effects on politics but countries with smaller share concluded that it has negative effect on democratic system because of effect on issues such as education, the economy or local culture. Further, study conducted by Bimber et.al. (2019) about attitude of people towards social media and politics and revealed that among all countries India accounts for about 38.00 per cent of good influence on politics, followed by 08.00 per cent no influence on politics at all and 20.00 per cent of bad influence. The inaccurate beliefs threaten the foundation of democracy (Kuklinski et al, 2000). Falsehood undermines democratic processes by distorting decision making. Support for people or policy depends on what one believes and interprets and falsehoods can colour individuals judgment’s, potentially leading them to support positions that run counter to their self interest (Lau et al., 2008).

Effect on opinion of people by fake social media news

It is evident from the Figure 1 that majority 39.00 per cent of the democrats said that their political opinions were affected by social media posts followed by 36.00 and 37.00 per cent respectively (Berry and Sobieraj, 2016). Whereas, 44.00 per cent of the Independents said that their political opinions were affected by the social media advertisements, followed by 40.00 and 38.00 per cent (Guess, et. al., 2019). Furthermore, about 57.00 per cent of the Republicans said that their political opinions were affected by the social media events, followed by 55.00 and 52.00 per cent respectively. Similarly, Allen, et al., (2020) have quantified that fake news consumption across multiple platforms including television, desktop, and mobile web, constitutes less than 1/10th of 01.00 per cent of total daily media consumption, and less than 01.00 per cent of overall

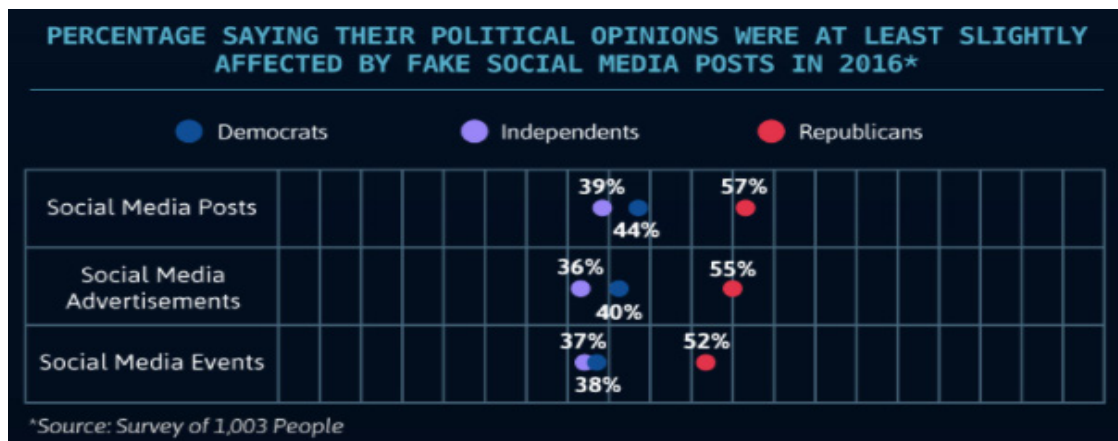


Figure 1 Percentage of individuals saying that their political opinions affected by fake social media posts (Source: Survey done by Hutchinson, A., 2019)

news consumption (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). Surprisingly, they also find that news consumption in general constitutes a small fraction of overall media consumption (roughly 14%) and is heavily biased toward television across all age categories (Garrett, 2016). Accurate information will be used strategically, as when confidential communication is leaked (often selectively) in order to cast political opponent in negative light (Jamieson, 2018).

Furthermore, from Table 2 it can be clearly observed that various social media create different effect on the political opinions. It can be concluded on the basis of survey done by Hutchinson that majority 41.00, 46.00 and 52.00 per cent said that Facebook most affect their political opinions in all three categories i.e. democrats independents and republicans respectively, followed by Twitter (33%, 30% & 36%), Reddit (20%, 21% and 09%) and Instagram (06%, 02% & 03%) (Dilliplane *et al.*, 2018). From Figure 2 it can be elaborated that majority of democrats (86%), independents (78%) and Republicans (76%) said that Facebook is a type of social media platform which they most associated with fake political news (Gastil, *et al.*, 2019). Similar results were obtained by Oliver and Wood (2014) revealed that promoting inaccurate claims about social issues is one of many communication strategies used to manipulate people or voters at the time of elections. Conspiracy theories, which weave together truth and fiction in ways that appear to justify attributing social phenomenon to a small but powerful group of self-interested people (Garrett, *et al.*, 2016).

Table 2 Individuals opinion affected by fake social media

Sl. No.	Social media	Percentage of individuals affected by fake social media		
		Democrats	Independents	Republicans
1	Facebook	41	46	52
2	Twitter	33	30	36
3	Reddit	20	21	09
4	Instagram	06	02	03

(Survey of 350 people done by Hutchinson, A., 2019)

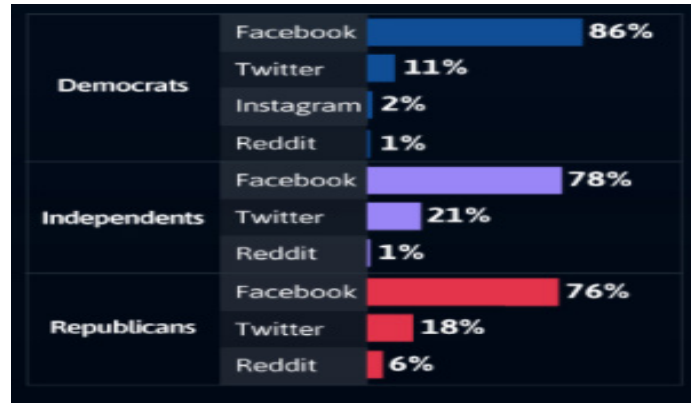


Figure 2 Social media platform associated with most of the fake news (Survey of 350 people done by Hutchinson, A., 2019)

	Intervention Logic	Objectively measurable & verifiable indicators	Sources of verification	Important Assumptions
objectives/ Goals	To measure the impact of social media use in democracy	Effect of social media on individual, pros and cons of social media use on democracy	Review of related literature, Annual reports from secondary data(Books, websites)	social media has positive impact on democracy
Purpose	Documenting and verifying how social media use affecting the democracy, why govt. announced new guidelines to regulate digital content	Analysis of impact of social media on democracy as Positive/negative	Data retrieved from various recent revolutions	India was downgraded from a 'Free; nation to 'partly Free' due to curtailing of personal liberties like crackdown on media use.
Results/output	Social media is needed which may enable citizens to be in a position to distinguish between truth and falsehood.	Provide safeguards in the event that democratic processes are being intentionally disrupted, help to found out the truth	Development of distributed and federated social media systems and by continuing work on provenance in social media and credibility Assessment	Social media use help in detection of astroturfing, smear campaigns and social- bot networks
Activities	Collection of data from various secondary sources for finalizing results	Data was collected from authentic sources and reports	Relevant and credible sources were used while finalizing the results	Data was retrieved with due care
Inputs/ Resources	All graphs and tables are extracted from secondary sources and appropriate statistical tools were used for the study	Proper selection of objectives and statistical tools	Outcomes objectives framed for the study	Adequate sources were analyzed to prepare the final report

Figure 3: Logical framework matrix of the proposed study (Source: self-developed on the basis of study)

Logical Framework Matrix of the study

Social networking can be defined as a phenomenon that has recently taken over the web, allowing more connectivity and interaction between web users (Sides, Shaw, Grossmann & Lipsitz 2011). Social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online media, and it serves many functions in its role as a linkage institution such as: One is to provide information to people about what is happening in their government, second role is to provide a forum for public discussion and third role is to convey the interests of the people back to the people whom they have elected (Amartya, 2001). Recent studies on the internet and political activism have highlighted the significant role of digital media in shaping diverse forms of political participation and mobilizing large scale social protests around the world (Lee and Chan, 2018 and Loader and Mercea, 2013). Digital media such as Twitter and Facebook provide a platform for cognitive, affective and behavioural connections that enable people to network collaboratively (Sandoval and Gil, 2014). Below framework is designed on the basis of study which gives a better picture and insight learning of social media and democracy.

Conclusion

From the present study regarding effect of social media use on individual's democracy it can be concluded that on an average the marginal effect of social media use is negatively significant with all the variables related to peoples democracy. Digital media have rapidly integrated different functions and affordances, it is important to revisit the different ways that they have been utilized to understand how the influence of these different applications may vary across platforms, practice and connections to explore new modalities of political engagement and civic practices. All the aforesaid results suggesting that there is negative effect of social media use on democracy (Chan *et. al.* 2017). Therefore, some measures have to be adopted to remove these negative effects and fake news grapevines, the government has to ensure that they are not affecting the fundamental freedom of speech and expression and upholding the democratic rights of citizens while formulating any rules. A democratic state grants its citizens the right to elect their representatives along with the right to criticize the government if they are not satisfy with their decisions or policies, and this makes the social media an integral part of the democracy.

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