

The Impact of social media in Shaping Political Discourse

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Abstract

With the advancement in technology, channels for political communication have widened. It has eased the dissemination of information and interaction with the masses. One such possibility arises with the coming up of 'Digital age'. It involves the use of social media to provide for quick information sharing, public participation, grassroots mobilization, and has completely changed the way political conversation takes place. The Digital age has led to democratization of information, has enabled people to access information, openly express their opinions and communicate with each others, politicians and influential public figures. In contrast challenges like disinformation, polarization, and other ethical issues have emerged rampantly, questioning the excesses made by use of technology. The paper highlights ways that social media has promoted political awareness, elevated underrepresented perspectives, impacted election results, and influenced political communication. The paper assesses the need for regulatory frameworks to curb the associated ills.

Keywords: Digital Age, Discourse, Polarization, Political Communication, Political Opinions, Social Media,

Introduction

Social Media has revolutionized the affairs of political communication. It has expanded the way people exchange, consume, gather and analyse information. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter allow citizens to have real time interactions, allowing them to communicate with each other directly. These platforms become channels to voice their opinions or throw light on various issues. The viewpoints across socioeconomic divides are given access and thus has helped to democratize political discourse (Chadwick, 2017). There are certain disadvantages too. Apart from the digital divide that continues to exist, such online platforms have created problems like cyber propaganda and spread of false information. The platforms have created problems like cyber propaganda, echo chambers, and false information. The paper offers a critical examination of social media's impact on political discourse in a number of democracies, including Brazil, the United States, and India, by examining both its advantages and disadvantages.

The Evolution of Media and Political Discourse

Over time there has been a progression of political communication from print media to digital platforms. In the pre digital age, Print, radio and television were the main forms of communication. Increased interaction and flow of information was brought by the development of the internet. With the use of social media, dynamics of communication took a great transformation. Social media allows users to initiate a conversation, participate in the conversation, and consume information given by others. Barack Obama's 2008 US President election campaign, served as an example on social media's capacity for political mobilization. It sets the standard for campaigns around the globe (Smith, 2009). The evolution of political discourse has been greatly aided by social media, which has given citizens, activists, and politicians new avenues for communication. Social media's beneficial effects can be categorized into four main areas: increasing political engagement, raising political awareness, amplifying underrepresented voices, and enabling direct communication between the public and politicians.

Identifying political affinities

Social media has reduced the barriers to information dissemination. It provides real-time updates happening around the world. The technology is used to track the political behavior of the users on digital media by the posts they watch, the posts they like or show their interest in. By curating feeds according to users' interests, algorithms facilitate citizens' access to pertinent political information in form of advertisements and recommended posts. For example, Facebook and Instagram became the main sources of political information for young voters, many of whom were participating in politics for the first time, during India's 2019 Lok Sabha elections (Mukherjee, 2020). Social media creates a ready electorate that is politically conscious by offering easily assimilated and captivating content by bombarding them with such information that can easily influence their psyche.

Voicing Marginalized Voices

With the rise of social media platforms, the voices that were neglected and unheard, found a medium through which the voices could be heard. Social media and other allying channels has encouraged a more inclusive political discourse. Social media has brought attention to structural injustices and caste-based discrimination that became the subtle default in the society. One such example, Dalit Lives Matter movement in India, that gained momentum in the recent past. By using videos, hashtags, and personal accounts, activists were able to reach a global audience and bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media. This visibility has prompted policymakers to address long-standing issues, demonstrating social media's capacity to elevate marginalized perspectives (Basu, 2019).

Enhancing Political Engagement and Mobilization

Social media has the capacity to increase political participation and citizen mobilization. Various methods like digital curated advertisements, hashtags, targeted campaigns, and posts by political parties aim to influence the masses who are their electorate during the times of elections. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are used by political parties during the political campaigns to communicate with voters directly, encouraging citizen mobilization and participation. Popular social applications like WhatsApp are used by political parties in India to reach out to voters during elections (Mukherjee, 2020). These tactics have changed the way elections are contested by placing a strong emphasis on digital grassroots mobilization. Another example from the recent past is the mobilization fueled by social media on hashtag Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Millions of people used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on various platforms after George Floyd passed away in 2020, bringing activists from all over the world together to call for justice and changes to the law. The movement served as an example of how social media could turn a local problem into a worldwide discussion, igniting demonstrations and national policy changes (Tufekci, 2017).

Challenges and Criticisms

There are certain problems and criticisms leveled at social media and its usage. Foremost problem arises is spread and crafting of false information. The content posted online and what is viewed by users is amplified by algorithms. The deepfakes poses another challenge which uses artificial intelligence to manipulate audio, videos and spread misinformation. The deepfakes are spread across easily through platforms like instagram and twitter (Maras & Alexandrou, 2019).

Another critical problem with social media is the development of "echo chambers". The online algorithms, for example often displays the information on the basis of one's search history on search engine online, that aligns to ones belief systems or choices. It thus limits exposure to diverse perspectives and opinions. It is like an echo where the same voice is "echoed" without highlighting voices that are critical or diverse. This phenomenon, which Eli Pariser (2011) refers to as the "filter bubble," occurs when exposure to a wider range of viewpoints is restricted and limited. This carries with itself seeds of polarization in the society or creating factions, limiting constructive dialogue (Garimella et al., 2018).

With the advancement in technology, during elections, it is a common affairs that candidates and political parties use AI-driven tools in media to create highly customized campaigns. Through search history, algorithms target digital media users who are potential voters with messages based on their browsing preferences, demographics, and interests (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Coordinated campaigns are organised to spread propaganda and manipulate public opinion, raising privacy concerns and further complicating the situation. Cambridge Analytica has revealed how user data can be exploited for political gains.

In India, during electoral campaigns the use of social media proliferates. Different political parties use digital tools like WhatsApp and Facebook to canvass during elections. Through these

platforms political parties influence public opinion, woo voters to cast vote in their favor and understand the political culture of the society at large (Basu, 2019).

In the United States, Donald Trump's use of Twitter redefined political communication. His unfiltered tweets was able to set the agenda for media and also created polarized public opinion. It helped demonstrate both the power and risks of use of social media in shaping political narratives (Stieglitz et al., 2020). Similarly, in Brazil, social app like WhatsApp played a crucial role during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign (WhatsApp's Influence in the Brazilian Election, 2018). The social platform was used to disseminate campaign messages, at the other hand it also became fertile ground for spreading fake news. This highlights the dual-edged nature of social media in politics.

Regulatory Framework and Ethical Considerations

The challenges posed by social media necessitate robust regulatory frameworks. Content moderation remains one of major contentious issue. Platforms need to balance freedom of speech with the need to curb hate speech and spread of misinformation. Major companies like Facebook and Twitter have implemented policies to address harmful content. However their efforts often face criticism for lack of consistency and transparency (Gillespie, 2018).

Globally, governments are introducing policies to regulate social media. The European Union's Digital Services Act aims to enhance accountability and transparency, while India's IT Rules 2021 focus on content moderation. However, it is important that any of these regulations must be balanced and should not come as hindrance to innovation and free expression. As technology evolves, social media's influence on political discourse will continue to grow. In coming years artificial intelligence and machine learning are likely to shape the future of political communication. There is a deep concern about issues like deepfakes and automated propaganda (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

Expansion with Virtual Reality and the Metaverse

The emergence of metaverse platforms and virtual reality (VR) has expanded the scope of political participation in newer ways unknown in the past. Through this up gradation political process has become interactive, engaging and has served the means to spread awareness in interactive way. In the Metaverse, individuals can participate and attend virtual rallies conducted in simulated environments. This goes beyond texts, recorded videos and real time rallies. Virtual rallies surfaced in during Covid pandemic that hit the world in 2020. In spite of the potential, the metaverse presents certain difficulties, including the need to control online political forums within virtual reality, guarantee fair access, and prevent the spread of extremist viewpoints, and the need for technology for every participant. It may also require investment in the gears used for such technology. Whether these new platforms strengthen or weaken democratic discourse will depend heavily on how much control is exercised by governmental agencies.

Strengthening Grassroots Movements and Civic Participation

Social media has potential to strengthen grass root movements that makes different tools like Instagram, Twitter to be useful and viable options to voice different activists and underrepresented groups. The ease with which their voices can be heard through these platforms is noticeable. One such example is Fridays for Future. This youth-led climate action campaign, Fridays for Future, after Swedish activist Greta Thunberg demonstrations in 2018 in front of Swedish Parliament, has already shown how social media can garner support world wide (Chadwick, 2017). Another key example as discussed above is hashtag # Black Lives Matter following killing of George Floyd in 2020. The social media platforms were used to organize protests and educate the public and spread awareness on systemic racism (McDougall, 2020).

A more complex forms of decentralized activism, movements that function without centralized leadership, is made possible by such emerging technologies. Traditional activism involved a leader, and a hierarchical setup with different level of organizers and decision makers. Blockchain technology has the potential to improve accountability and transparency in activist groups while guaranteeing efficient use of funds and resources (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016). Tapscott and Tapscott (2016) discuss how blockchain technology could revolutionize the way activist groups organize and operate, reduce inefficiencies, increase accountability, and make the distribution of resources more equitable. They have suggested how blockchain could improve the transparency and traceability of funds in non-profits or social movements. This would ensure that money raised for a cause is used rightly.

Globalized Political Narratives

Political issues that were earlier just local or national are now deliberated globally. Social media has crossed boundaries. Political discourse has now become more globalized. This will strengthen ties between people from various nations have similar issues. It leads to spread of propaganda, disinformation and foreign meddling in domestic affairs. To address these risks while maintaining the free flow of information, platforms and governments will need to work together (Howard et al., 2018).

Rise of Decentralized Social Media Platforms

The centralized online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been criticized for their role in data breaches, misinformation and algorithm bias. This has led to increased interest in alternative decentralized platforms. The decentralized platforms are built on blockchain technology or peer to peer networks. They offer greater transparency and user control rather than any centralized control. These platforms have the potential to challenge and replace traditional social media giants, thus providing a space for freer, less manipulated political discourse (Li & Chen, 2024). However, decentralization also brings challenges, such as problem of regulating harmful content and ensuring accountability. These decentralized networks have independent servers and are open source softwares. Such platforms on the flip side, may struggle to curb the

spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies, requiring innovative governance models because these platforms are unmoderated and lack single control.

Digital Democracy and Inequality

Another notable issue of digital age is the digital divide that exists even to a large extent today. The digital divide exacerbates inequality and there is lack of equal digital access and internet connectivity. While the issues of fraudulent activities and misinformation exist, there are sections of society particularly the rural and economically disadvantaged communities that do not have access to digital resources. According to International Telecommunication Union in its press release in 2023, 33% of global population remains disconnected from internet.

Inequalities in digital access and illiteracy and unintelligible behavior presents serious problems as social media becomes a fundamental component of political discourse. Ensuring digital inclusion is essential for functioning of democracy. Digital inclusion includes access to internet and having digital literacy skills among the individuals. Citizens must be equipped with knowledge to filter the relevant information. Political discourse today is not just limited to traditional media channels like television and print, but also includes social media, online news, and other digital platforms. Programs for digital literacy are crucial in assisting citizens to identify reliable sources, to critically assess online content, to avoid misinformation and become aware and educated.

Regulatory Frameworks and Governance Challenges

Growing social media access world wide, demands framing and building regulatory frameworks and legislations that focuses on key parameters like data privacy, and transparency. Governments around the world are working towards creating regulations, such as the European Union's Digital Services Act but these efforts are just the beginning. Balanced approach with governments, civil society and private companies must bring together steps to have equitable digital space. 21st century demands regulatory approaches balances the competing interests and which caters to free speech, national security, social harmony, privacy and accountability. The growing dependence on social media for political discourse also accelerates the risk of cyberattacks and breach of data. Interference in the smooth execution of the election process through hacking, phishing and cyber espionage can lead to mistrust in democratic institutions by public. It is very imperative that governments and tech companies to invest well in advance in cybersecurity measures to protect the integrity of digital political processes (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

Conclusion

The role and relevance of social media in political discourse has huge potential to improve global connectivity and democratic participation in the future. Technology must be used responsibly, catering to the divide, ensuring awareness of the users, adhering to the regulations and ethics. It should focus on catering inclusiveness, bridging disparities, and bringing forth togetherness. Social media provides a platform to mobilize masses but it should be in right and positive direction.

Inclusiveness and equitable access to information is central to digital era of 21st century. Challenges like misinformation, polarization must be eradicated. Governments and various agencies must formulate proper rules and regulations and establish certain codes and principles for digital space. With such rules in place, efforts must be made to promote digital literacy and intelligence to cater to the worrisome problems and competing interests in political discourse.

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