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Election 2020: Social Media and Political Polarization

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THE EMERGENCE OF A DIGITAL SPHERE where public debate takes place raises profound questions about the connection between online information and polarization, echo chambers, and filter bubbles. Does the information ecosystem created by social media companies support the conditions necessary for a healthy democracy? Is it different from other media? These are particularly urgent questions as the United States approaches a contentious 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The influence of technology and AI-curated information on America's democratic process is being examined in the eight-week Stanford University course, "[Technology and the 2020 Election: How Silicon Valley Technologies Affect Elections and Shape Democracy](#)." This issue brief focuses on the class session on "Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarization," with guest experts [Joan Donovan](#) and [Joshua Tucker](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Misinformation, disinformation, and straightforward propaganda are not new, but new technologies and new media companies create novel opportunities for their purveyors to reach broad audiences.
- The leading social media platforms are not mere conduits of content – information that flows from a producer to a consumer. Platforms algorithmically constitute our information ecosystem, often in ways that highlight polarizing discussions receiving the most interest and engagement.
- The net effect of social media companies depends on the purposes for which they are designed and used, and their ability to mitigate harms to democracy, public health and the public sphere.

Introduction

In today's world, the digital sphere in electoral politics consists of a large realm of informal political participation, where citizens share their views online, seek out information, and form the basis of their choices, including how they may vote. The point of entry for many people into politics today is through private online platforms, especially social media companies whose business models are driven by data-gathering for personalized advertising.

The digital sphere has democratized access to information and expanded voices through the ability to share one's views without having access to traditional media outlets. The cost of producing and distributing content – text, images, video – is virtually zero. The impacts are considerable. Social media played pivotal roles in the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in 2014, many of the “color” revolutions around the world, the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, and the yellow vests movement in France. The youth-led climate action in the U.S. and Europe would not have been possible without social media.

At the same time, downsides exist. The use of social media made demonstrators and all users vulnerable to systematic surveillance. For activists in popular uprisings, this has led to imprisonment and violations of their human rights. For all social media users, their privacy has been negatively impacted. The same platforms that connect individuals throughout the world can also threaten the health of a functional online sphere

Escalating attempts to cause chaos and wreak havoc through online influencing now represent a continuing crisis in elections and democracies worldwide.

– and perhaps democracy itself – through disinformation, the commercially driven curation of information, and lack of transparency and accountability.

The erosion of trust is now upon us. Voters are susceptible to significant amounts of misinformation, disinformation, and even straightforward propaganda often unhindered online.

Scrutiny is needed when it comes to the business models of dominant tech firms. Their business models are premised on capturing and reselling users' data and attention, which raises concerns about reinforcing or exacerbating political polarization and the creation of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” where the like-minded speak to the like-minded, ultimately creating a problem for healthy political discourse. One imperative is greater access to data held within companies so that social scientists, and ultimately the public and regulators, can determine the scope and gravity of these concerns.

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Freedom of expression is now subject to private governance. The corporate policies of Facebook and Google are more consequential for permissible speech for more people than regulations decided by Canada, France, or Germany. As the British historian Timothy Garton Ash described it, big tech firms are the new “private superpowers.”

Social media companies routinely say they’re not responsible and liable for their users’ produced content. That brings us to the crux of the problem facing the digital sphere – what policies, if any, can best support the informational conditions of a healthy democracy?

Discussion

New York University political scientist Joshua Tucker examines the intersection of social media and politics. Harvard sociologist Joan Donovan studies internet technology, online extremism, media manipulation, and disinformation campaigns.

Below are highlights of their discussion:

In democracy, polarization is typically categorized as either affective or ideological polarization. Affective polarization, which is on the rise in the U.S., is defined as when ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust people from an opposing party. On the other hand, ideological polarization reflects the policy distance between party platforms.

Today, the issue is whether social media and tech

Government action occurs in Europe and elsewhere to curb social media’s harmful effects.

platforms are escalating affective political polarization in the U.S. Through comments and cues such as “likes” and “dislikes,” content on social media is algorithmically sorted to draw out and highlight polarizing discussions, distributing broadly those that receive the most interest and engagement, or that are amplified through paying for the spreading of advertised content. “Nuance” is often lost, and people get stuck on their side of a particular wedge issue where they’re likely to express sharper comments and reactions toward those they disagree with.

A decade or so ago, in the early days of social media usage, these platforms actually offered much more promise when they positively factored into democracy movements worldwide. So, what has happened?

Social media can offer both positive and negative effects. Social media are tools that give voice to people who may not have access to mainstream media, and as a result, can democratize access to information. Yet these same tools can be used for censorship when they silence voices or mislead people, especially through trolls, hacking, bots and misinformation.

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The platforms themselves are building tools and services with effects dependent on who the user is and for what purposes they're being employed. Generally, the commercial objectives are leading, even if the impact on society is significant. In recent years, groups and people, particularly anti-democratic ones, have shown an increasing sophistication in how they manipulate people and disguise their true identities or agendas on these global platforms. A problem is the lack of access to information about how ever-evolving algorithms through machine learning change, and what the cause and effect relationship exists between online information and offline behavior.

Wise public policy and regulation can help curb social media's harmful effects. A public interest responsibility exists to ensure the safety and security of people online, though freedom of speech issues are involved. And, while large social media companies rhetorically invite scrutiny and even some regulation, at the same time they pour millions of dollars into lobbying against such reforms. Policymaking and legislative initiatives on this front are not likely in the United States until after the 2020 election.

Final Thoughts

Policy and regulation of social media platforms and how they might ultimately affect elections and political discourse is uncertain at the moment. When regulation is proposed, questions arise about free speech, the efficacy

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of government involvement, and to what extent large social media companies are responsible for the content users put on their platforms.

At the same time, the status quo is reason for concern about the power of private companies in creating the informational conditions for political debates and access to reliable and factual information. The fact that people have shown up for demonstrations that were deliberately created to facilitate polarization and confrontation underlines that what is said online spills over into the streets.

Finally, greater access to social media data is needed for objective research and oversight. Rather than employees of social media companies analyzing this information, the data should be made available to scholars and scientifically analyzed with a public interest purpose in mind, so governance and policy measures are evidence-based.

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The Cyber Policy Center at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies is Stanford University's premier center for the interdisciplinary study of issues at the nexus of technology, governance and public policy.

The views expressed in this issue brief reflect the views of the authors.



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