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DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

When social media platforms were created around 1990s and early 2000s, their supporters promised it to be a democratic revolution, stating that it would foster robust public participation and enrich civil life. With time, the role of social media has diversified and has become a significant part of our world in this digital era. This paper analyses the relationship between social media and democracy across globe to answer the question of “how social media would enhance the idea of democracy?” The research discusses the concept of democracy, the evolution of media and particularly social media and the role played by social media in a democracy. Further, the research analyses the positive impact of social media on democracy as well as the negative impact of social media on democracy and finally concludes.

INTRODUCTION

The world has seen a huge spike in the number of users of internet and the social media platforms. Today around 4.5 billion people have internet access and as many as 3.8 million people are users of one or more types of social media and networking sites. This shows that a large number of people today engaged on the social media for various reasons and this is expected to increase with time. Many people don't use social media just to be connected with people but they consider it to be a platform having its unique characteristics through which they get connected to unseen avenues and have a connection with the rest of the world. It is also identified to be used for staying updated on various things going on around the world just like the catchy trends or important information.

A survey was conducted by Pew Research Centre which found that almost 2/3 rd Americans receive some form of news from the social media and as much as 42% of people believe the

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news they get from social media as accurate. Social media is soon identified as an open space which allows netizens to voice out their concerns and reach to larger audience. It has never been given so much importance as now when it is considered essential for government, public and society which is only expected to solidify as more users start joining every day. A logical question which can be inferred is that, does these facts have any influence on democracies, their values and its processes? This paper will discuss on how social media is having an impact on the concept of democracy and based on its conclusion shall be derived.

CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

The term democracy is the of Greek terms named *demos* i.e. people and *kratos* i.e. rule², besides the common understanding of democracy is a government by the people which is the rule of the majority; a government in which the power is vested with people and exercised by the through a system of representation usually involving free elections to be held periodically. The concept here defined is quite new as it was started from the seventeenth century where the idea of engaging in public debate was related to democracy. The prerequisite of this type of democracy was to be informed and aware which implied that only those who has sufficient resources was to engage into discourses.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of democracy shifted to mean people's right to participate in determining the collective will through representative who are by proper procedure elected.³ This major shift has triggered the concept of democracy that we witness today. The requirement of democracy can be understood as, "Without the guaranteed right of all citizens to meet collectively, to have access to information, to seek to persuade others, as well as to vote, democracy is meaningless. Democratic rights, in other words, are those individual rights which are necessary to secure popular control over the process of collective decision-making on an ongoing basis."⁴

EVOLUTION OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

For exercising democracy there are certain pillars like the legislative, the executive, the judiciary and media being the fourth pillar. The role of media is to shape public understanding, make agendas and the most important being to make the other pillars accountable for their acts.

² Dahl, Robert A. "democracy". Encyclopedia Britannica, 9 Mar. 2021

³ Norberto Bobbio, Democracy and Dictatorship, Political Press, 1997

⁴ David Beetham

Media acts as a representative of public opinions and helps in spreading awareness. This is applicable to both traditional media and the evolved social media. It is seen that the traditional media has not been unbiased or the actual voice of people as state sometimes hold stake in media making them biased towards a particular opinion and they are sometimes involved in propaganda. Private owners of media can also interfere with the media ethics, resultantly leading to biased reporting to fulfil their agendas and show their narratives.

As social media emerged it has also started taking the role of traditional media in a democracy and at a societal level. It provided a communication platform that enabled every user to be have an involvement in various issues of the society and government. With the evolution of modernisation, the internet services and mobile gave majority of the people an ability to have an opinion and share their documents or recordings. Initially every person enjoys equal accessibility to publish or share opinion on any national, international or social issue. People are better connected through social media as any unfiltered comment can be accessed globally. The great reach of internet and social media has led to making the concept of democracy more practical in digital era as it is similar to earlier times when people used to gather together and engage themselves in public debate.

ROLE PLAYED BY SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DEMOCRACY

Platform for assembly of People-Social media plays a similar role in digital set up as an assembly of people play in real world but with certain advantages such as there is no physical or geographical boundary if they want to assemble. We have seen how Facebook groups from some people to millions of people joining to discuss on trending issues. Protests on something are being shared on social networking sites as events where people join and learn about a cause.

Enables for pushing for change in society- It has become a powerful enabler for challenging the norms created by society. Also, the platform can be used to create awareness about important subjects for the welfare of society. For example, in Albania many Facebook pages started receiving private messages from citizens who shared their stories or pictures. These stories of abuse, arbitrary taxation etc. get shared on the page helps in reaching larger audience and help even resolve formal procedure in courts or any services. So, for a country which does not promote free speech, resorting to social media can actually be helpful.

Enhances public participation- Social media platforms are designed in a way that it captures the attention of any human being and promotes them to participate or have an opinion on

everything. Thus, people are constantly engaged in the world of trends, trolls, news or debate.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENHANCING THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY

Social media has soon been emerged as platform which has created some substantial positive impacts on democracy. Some of the notable aspects of this are as follows:

Civic Engagement

The implications of social media are profound as it has provided a platform discussion and debate for the netizens. Many people who are found to engage in debates are contributing to society through volunteering and spreading awareness.⁵

Voice of people

Social media keeps people informed about what is happening around the world and became voice of the unheard citizen of a country. It played a critical role in the places like Tunisia in Arab Spring, where technology is used for liberation. It brought core activists in this movement together to let people know what was happening on the ground and to spread information beyond their region, amplifying the news.

It has been seen that the common interest groups find it difficult to organise, social media gives them the voice to come together and empower different minority groups. Many movements such as “Black Lives Matter”, or “Women’s March” which started from United States and eventually spread to the whole world. Thus, the amount of information is soaring and minority movements are becoming public movements.

Digital Democracy

The values of democracy are developed when people have freedom of expression enabling the concept of digital democracy.⁶ Like in Egypt in the year 2011, Facebook was actively used for uniting and mobilizing people and these protest had led to President Hosni Mubarak being overthrown bringing an end to long authoritarian regime.

Setting Accountability

It functions as an instrument that have the ability to question the invincible governments, making them accountable and bring major changes driven by public involvement beyond one

⁵ Social Media in Government: Benefits, Challenges and How It’s Used, blog.hootsuite.com

⁶ Chandan Kumar Jha, Does Social Media Promote Democracy? Some Empirical evidence, SSRN Electronic Journal, DOI: 10.2139/ssrn3277152, January 2018

vote in years.

CONCERNS RELATED TO ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY

Inaccurate representation of people

In the wider population, the users of social media are not entirely represented. As the degree of internet varies across various countries, all of the individuals don't have equal access to voice their opinions. Like 90 percent of UK's population has internet access whereas Eritrea has only 1 percent of their population accessing the internet. In countries having very small percentage of engagement by people or internet users, the opinion on social media may create false perception.

Also, the information shown on social media is not the entirety of information as with the rise of internet there has been emerging online news outlets and businesses fighting for click and shares amongst them. Though online articles are mostly free but they all earn through displaying advertisements and in social media where people wilfully put information such as gender, age political opinion etc. Lot of time personal data is being gathered by these social media platforms. Besides, there is an overload of information which is difficult to verify and may lead to misleading people. Those articles which are publish first or are commented or liked more are shown more to people according to algorithms, this displays a news having more reach has nothing to do with authenticity.

Political Polarization

One important criticism of social media is that it's how people those viewpoints which they agree with creating an echo chambers driving us apart and having a significant impact on democracy.

A visualisation of how significant this information polarisation is shown in the protect "Red Feed, Blue Feed" by the Wall Street Journal. In the web page, of a source is considered that if it is shared in red feed then it is classified as "very conservatively aligned" and if shared in the blue feed then it is aligned to be "very liberal". So, as the distorted news found their way in the social media of users and fake news confirms with the existing bias, there is very less likelihood to check or verify. Opposite views would generally enter the information bubble and if it does then it is likely to be ignored.⁷

⁷ Samidh Chakraborti, Hard Question: What Effect Does Social Media Have on Democracy? about.fb.com

Propaganda Setting

As witnessed in last 2 years, a huge amount is being spent on election campaigning (around \$800 million⁸). This shows that political parties rely hugely on campaigning through social media which sometimes leads to micro targeting spreading toxic culture. The online troll groups can also be place for breeding online extremist or terrorist. An unregulated platform allows anyone to reach out to people and indoctrinate them. The web 4chan created its own words for spreading hate speech and found ways to disrupt peaceful gatherings.

Foreign Interference

With social media having global reach, we have seen how foreign countries have started interfering. In 2016 US election, Russia promoted fake pages on facebook for influencing public sentiments, used social media as a weapon. Also, during the time farm laws were introduced in India, several people from international community including activist Greta Thunberg supported the cause of farmers using social media.

Fake News

Social media gives empower more voice which sometimes lead to spread of hoaxes and misinformation.

RECENT INSTANCES

The relationship between social media and democratic processes reached new levels of complexity during 2024-2025, with platforms serving as both catalysts for civic engagement and vectors for misinformation. Recent developments have highlighted the dual nature of social media's influence on democratic institutions worldwide.

The 2024 U.S. Presidential Election: A Digital Battleground

The 2024 U.S. presidential election became a defining moment for social media's role in democracy. Elon Musk's platform X (formerly Twitter) emerged as a particularly contentious space, with research showing that Musk's false and misleading election claims generated over 2 billion views throughout the year. This unprecedented reach of misinformation posed significant challenges to electoral integrity, as election officials struggled to combat the spread

⁸ Google Transparency Report

of falsehoods that traveled "hundreds of times further" than fact-checks from government sources.

The transformation of X under Musk's ownership created what many researchers described as an environment where hate speech and misinformation flourished. The platform's reduced content moderation teams and the elimination of key misinformation features contributed to concerns about democratic discourse deterioration. State secretaries across the U.S. were compelled to publicly urge Musk to address his platform's AI chatbot, which was spreading election misinformation, demonstrating the real-world consequences of algorithmic content distribution.

Global Perspectives on Social Media and Democracy

Despite the challenges observed in the United States, international research revealed a more nuanced global picture. According to Pew Research Center studies, across 27 countries surveyed, people generally view social media as more beneficial than harmful to democracy. In 20 of these nations, majorities believe social media has actively benefited their democratic processes. However, the United States stands as a notable outlier, with only 34% of Americans viewing social media positively for democracy, compared to a global median of 57%.

This divergence reflects varying experiences with platform governance, misinformation management, and civic engagement across different political systems. Countries with stronger regulatory frameworks and more robust fact-checking mechanisms often reported more positive outcomes from social media's democratic influence.

The Echo Chamber Effect and Political Polarization

Social media's architecture continued to create what experts term "echo chambers" in 2024-2025, where users primarily engage with like-minded individuals, amplifying confirmation bias and deepening political divisions. Unlike traditional media, which historically aimed for some level of objectivity, social media algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, often reinforcing existing beliefs rather than challenging them with diverse perspectives.

This phenomenon proved particularly problematic during election periods, where rapid information spread could influence voting behavior before fact-checkers could respond. The speed and scale of social media distribution meant that false narratives could become entrenched in public consciousness faster than corrective information could circulate.

Corporate Responsibility and Platform Governance

The period saw increased scrutiny of tech companies' responsibilities in safeguarding democratic processes. The Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections represented a notable initiative, with major U.S. technology companies agreeing to prevent deceptive artificial intelligence content from interfering with global elections. However, implementation varied significantly across platforms, with some maintaining stricter content moderation policies while others embraced more permissive approaches.

The debate over platform governance intensified as governments worldwide grappled with balancing free speech principles against the need to prevent harmful misinformation. Several countries began developing new regulatory frameworks to address these challenges, though enforcement remained inconsistent.

Artificial Intelligence and Election Integrity

The emergence of AI-generated content added new dimensions to social media's impact on democracy during 2024-2025. Deepfakes, AI-generated text, and sophisticated bot networks created unprecedented challenges for distinguishing authentic political discourse from manufactured content. These technologies made it easier to produce convincing but false information at scale, further complicating efforts to maintain election integrity.

Platform responses to AI-generated content varied widely, with some implementing detection systems while others relied primarily on user reporting mechanisms. The effectiveness of these approaches remained limited, as AI technology often outpaced detection capabilities.

CONCLUSION

Thus, social media has emerged to be an important platform for netizens to debate or discuss. It has become a platform for amplifying voices of suppressed and unheard. It has also become an important factor for determining the government in the state, its power and rights of citizens. Hence, all parties in power have faced greater pressure of being accountable to citizens and therefore works with better efficiency. Today it has become really easy to share agendas, organise public meetings, stay connected with public throughout the tenure of a government and easy comparison with other parties or agendas. Therefore, it is definitely true that social media has enhanced the idea of democracy.

Generally speaking, it can be said that social media has become a source of democratization but at present there are some concerns too. The recent trend is concerning as nowadays there

are more and more authoritarian tool used in states like China which manipulate social media to destabilise democracies abroad as well. Besides, bigger concern is how authoritarian segment gain benefit from the nature or power of social media. In today's time social media giants though have given voice to unheard and created a connected world however, sometimes social media giants can be a threat to sovereignty and freedom of speech. Social media erodes the concept of democracy when used improperly and the solution to this can't be regulation of social media as it is quite a slippery slope from stopping internet to be used as a breeding territory for hate to the principles of net neutrality being invalidated. Steps can be taken by social media giants to alter its algorithm which isolate opposite views from the feed of an individual to stop polarisation. News making companies can be guided for providing "serendipity news" or to involve different views on the topic they write about. Users should be made aware of the wide information and seeking alternative opinions. There should be media literacy to people. Thus, the question of whether social media enhances democracy can be understood from the research conducted that social media has the potential to enhance the concept of democracy however the concerns like hate speech, polarisation, fake news etc. are also relevant to further enhance idea of democracy. What remain with us is how to push social media to keep enhancing democracy as social media has a long way to go.

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