Social Media and Democracy

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Abstract

While social media has the potential to be a democratic platform for political exchange, it is questionable whether the ways in which it is being used currently is truly beneficial to society. My research will involve proposing methods by which social media users can steward social media in ways that are beneficial to democracy and their local and broader communities. I adopted the basis for these methods from research conducted in Sweden concerning the relationship between social media activism and public pedagogy (Andersson 2014). They used case studies to demonstrate how social media use can result in community formation and developments in communication. I will develop these methods by examining the empirical effects of social media on political engagement as well as the responses users express when exposed to political content on social media. I plan on studying the research of political scientists as well as economists, sociologists, and psychologists to obtain a holistic picture of communication, technology, and democracy and to operationally define what counts as being beneficial to society.

This research is relevant because as technology has progressed, communication has become more efficient, accurate, and widely accessible. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter represent a burgeoning area of communication technology that is an open market for anyone to participate in provided they have access to the internet (Jennings 2003). These advancements present opportunities for voices to be heard in the political sphere that might have gone previously unnoticed.

The political structure of the United States has evolved into a democratic republic meaning that it is a government by the people (Polin 1984). In such a government system, the participation of informed citizens is vital to the preservation of that society (Civiced). Political

participation takes many different forms including, but not limited to, voting, campaigning, contacting officials, and protesting. The most basic, but arguably the most important form of participation is engaging in deliberate political discussion wherein there is an exchange of ideas beneficial to society (Yonghwan 2015). If people are informed on how to use platforms such as social media in a societally beneficial way, then it could result in significant changes in the democratic structure of the United States (Leeson 2008).

<center>Literature Review</center>

The widespread use of technology in the 1980's and 1990's dramatically altered the atmosphere of several fields of study including political science. Technology develops at such a staggering speed that its impact in various enterprises must be continually analyzed to maintain current and relevant data. One fast-paced, ever-changing platform is social media. Most social networking sites allow users to create personal profiles to make connections with other users, enabling a virtual community to develop. Over the past twenty years, the popularity of these social networking sites has increased exponentially as 79% of internet users (which is 68% of all the adults in the United States) use Facebook, followed by other social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Pew Research Center 2016).

The relevance and impact of social media use on political and civic engagement is a subject of debate among the academic community. Many of those who have researched the correlation between social media use and civic engagement are optimistic about the relationship resulting in positive trends for social activism (Howard 2016; Koc-Michalska 2016). Social networking sites have the potential to form interactive communities that encourage online advocacy and empower users to participate in political discussions (Oser 2013; Pattie 2009). This mobilization theory views social media as a digital tool which can facilitate information retrieval,

political discussion, and political participatory behaviors such as voting, campaigning, and contacting government officials (Lenzi 2015).

Social media has increasingly become a platform for representatives and candidates to communicate with constituents and voters about their views. Politicians also use social media to keep followers updated on various events and news (Pew Research Center 2016). Social networking sites can then be a conduit for interaction between government officials and constituents to create horizontal and vertical structural, relational, and cognitive connections (Warren 2015). Furthermore, using social media to engage in political conversations can help develop skills necessary for civic engagement beyond the internet and foster feelings of self-efficacy (Lenzi 2015).

It is important to note that many of the studies that are optimistic about the relationship between social media and political participation were countries such as Mexico, South Korea, Italy, and Portugal where the online and political environment varies from the United States (Howard, Yonghwan, and Lenzi). These studies are unclear how the results would deviate if the same tests were administered in America, and thus the optimism these researchers express in those countries may not be warranted in the United States.

On the other side of the debate are dissident voices that identify the potential negative effects that social media may have on civic engagement. Many researchers have dismissed the "Slacktivism hypothesis," which states that use of social media for political purposes correlates with decreased activism due to the satisfactory fulfillment one receives through online participation (Howard 2016). However, this dismissal may be due to the inclusion of online activism in the definition of political participation (Oser 2013). One qualitative study found that perceptions of the increased importance of social media significantly correlates with perceptions

of decreased importance of community service activities (Mihailidis 2014; Miller 2016). Social media activism, which includes actions such as forming awareness groups, sharing news articles, and engaging in political debates, could be replacing traditional forms of civic engagement such as volunteering or participating in service organizations (Gibson 2013; Hoffman 2017).

Another detractor is the possibility that social media only facilitates increased political participation of citizens who are already politically active (Dawes 2011). This reinforcement hypothesis asserts that social media has little impact on the quantity of citizens engaging politically and only increases the volume of those who already involve themselves in political discussion and activism (Swigger 2013; Valenzuela 2009). Therefore, social media does not change people's minds about political issues; instead it serves as an echo chamber of their original opinions.

While the presence of political issues on social networking sites may have increased, concerns have been raised about the quality of the resulting discourse. One study found the increased use of social media to have harmful effects on public discourse (Miranda 2016). While social media allows for the widespread access to conversations regarding political issues, the content quality can decrease and possibly be restrictive. Furthermore, surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center have found that while some users enjoy the debate and discussion that is prevalent in the political environment on social media, a larger share of users are aggravated and put off by these online interactions.

Other studies conducted by the Pew Research Center involved surveys that required participants to self-report revealed data that supported the theories stated by dissenters. In favor of the reinforcement hypothesis, one study found that when users come across political content with which they disagree, 83% of users will ignore the post and move on, and 39% have taken

steps to block or minimize the source (Pew Research Center 2016). These findings are supported by research conducted by Patrick Miller who found that social media users prefer discussing politics only with like-minded individuals and edit their settings accordingly (Miller 2015).

Additional concerns about the use of social media as a platform for political participation suggest that online activism attracts only certain types of people who tend to be more aggressive and risk-seeking (Kam 2012). Other users who prefer to avoid conflict will thus be disinclined to participate in political environment online and this may leave important voices out of the conversation (Ulbig 1999; Gans 2001). Research conducted by Daniel Miller and his team found that social media could be contributing to a decline in community and social values. Instead, social media use could be encouraging individualistic traits and more self-centeredness (Miller 2016). Some researchers such as Wendy Cho doubt whether social media use really does contribute to political participation but instead the results could be due to other variables (Cho 2008; Xie 2015). Therefore, it is questionable how effective social media is in encouraging political discourse and civic engagement.

Even if social media use is positively correlated with civic engagement, that does not mean that such participation is necessarily meaningful or beneficial to society. While some users may be enthusiastic about creating a political influence on social networking sites, other users might be discouraged to engage civically due to the content that they are exposed to on social media. Social media is a potential platform for citizens to participate in political discussions, sharing information, exchanging ideas, or encouraging one another. I would like to research possible methods for users to steward social media in such a way that it maximizes the benefits and minimizes the harmful consequences of using social networking sites as platforms for political activism.

There have been a couple of attempts made by researchers to test if steward of social media can be taught. One such study was conducted in Sweden, and the case studies revealed a potential for public pedagogy via social media use to facilitate conversations and support community building (Andersson 2014). Another study was conducted in Portugal attempting a form of media education to foster community and responsibility toward the public good (Dias-Fonesca 2016). I intend to study the methodology used in these studies and find ways to implement them in American society. The construction of these methods will include an empirical analysis of the effects of social media on civic engagement and the types of responses that users demonstrate when exposed to political material on social networking sites. The goal of civic engagement in America is a thriving democracy and thus the proposed methods will be measured by their ability to contribute toward that end. Presenting these methods for using social media in a civically responsible manner will contribute to the body of research on the relationship between social media and political engagement as well as provide recommendations for the public on how to use platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for the benefit of local communities and the broader society. Therefore, my research will bridge the gap between what the experts in the field hypothesize about the impact of social media on political participation and the real-life responses from those who actually use social networking sites.

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