

WHAT DO SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS MEAN FOR POLITICS

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Politics are the processes by which societies make decisions. This can involve broad participation by the population of a particular territory or only the participation of a small number of elites. States are the institutions that implement these political decisions. Legitimacy is the willingness of people to accept state decisions without coercion. By creating new informational pressures that affect how citizens perceive a state's legitimacy, social media can erode, reshape, or bolster, the narratives that lead people to accept the outcomes of political processes as legitimate.

Narratives, the expression of the concepts a society holds about itself, are the key to legitimacy, since they shape citizen beliefs. The ease of publishing and accessing information created by the internet and accelerated by social media means that there is a diffusion of narratives and a struggle over the control of the narrative among citizens, between state and citizen, and between states. This is not new – there have always been competing narratives - but social media and the internet have changed the terms of the competition, by expanding the number of participants, by diffusing authority, and by creating competing narratives in ways that complicate societies' ability to govern themselves.

The political importance of social media is demonstrated by the sensitivity to which all politicians react to it. In China, an army of thousands of content moderators using AI tools purge material the Chinese Communist Party regards as dangerous. In the US, politicians hurl charges of bias and discrimination on the dubious grounds that they have a "right" to publish on a private network. These efforts show both the central role social media plays in political dialogue, but also the ambiguity over the status of social media - are they community bulletin boards or are they more like traditional publications? Social media companies have preferred the former, but as they face increasing complaints over the damaging effects of their platforms (on children, privacy, and political stability), they are being driven towards the latter. The general conclusion is that governance of social media is weak, and this weakness creates political risks for societies.

Technology has made it cheaper to create information, to find and acquire it, and to

share it. We are all familiar with the internet as a vehicle for the easy transfer and acquisition of information in ways that transcend borders. This is a major source of the economic benefits provided by connectivity. But access to information is an increasingly important determinant of the relationship between citizen and state. Citizen expectations of what they should know and how they exercise influence have changed in ways that create new political demands. The relationship between state and citizen is changing in part as a result of the use of the new informational tools. The increased access to immense amounts of information and an enormous online expansion of the “political space” (for discussion, debate, and organization) creates political and social forces that fragment societies, but there are also several other political effects worth noting:

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The internet replaces physical propinquity with virtual. The internet means that communities aren't just made up of those who live nearby; they include those with whom you connect online. This allows for a greater degree of selection and exclusion than is possible in the physical world. With these virtual communities, extremists no longer feel isolated as they did before the internet. It became apparent they are not alone in their view, but part of a broader virtual community. This first increased retention and then recruitment.

Online interactions produce effects that shape cognition. For example, some research suggests that online interaction can produce the hormone oxytocin, which enhances trust and affection and makes users more likely to believe and thus more likely to be misled. We are only beginning to understand the effects of online digital interaction on the chemistry of the brain, but some social media companies have learned to design the algorithms that cue up news and information to take advantage of these cognitive effects. As neuroscience progresses, our understanding of the cognitive effects will increase, and with it our ability to manipulate them.

The Internet and social media encourage extreme views. There is a preference in human cognition to prefer ghost stories, tales of woe, or disasters. Once a crucial survival strategy for early humans, it now distorts online perceptions. This preference

is reinforced by commercial motives since social media companies' algorithms tend to highlight items that receive more attention. These are generally "bad news" stories. By combining this preference with the propinquity effect, one is less likely to feel isolated when holding extreme views and less likely to question them.

There is a uniformity in the visual effect of online presentations. Onscreen, facts appear the same as falsehoods. An online interaction lacks the visual cues available during in-person meetings (such as facial expressions, nervousness, mannerisms) that allow one to judge a speaker's trustworthiness. The signs that would allow one to better assess truth and reliability in physical interactions are not available for online interactions. This explains the ease with which fraud can be committed online. When combined with other cognitive effects, this also helps explain the spread of conspiracy theories.

The internet removes the curation process for information. Since there is no editor asking for additional sources or rejecting stories as outlandish, there is parity among assertions regardless of their veracity. Unlike libraries or bookstores, publications are not organized into sections labeled "fiction" and "non-fiction." Similar online effects dilute the value of expertise.

These informational trends vary among nations but are politically disruptive for all. Whether a society is democratic or authoritarian, the internet creates new political forces. An authoritarian state may present a more tranquil aspect when it comes to cyberspace and politics, but it does so at the cost of suppression, censorship and potentially damaging effects on innovation. The decentralized, permissive approach to the internet and information that is common in democracies can be noisy to the point of creating alarm, but also has economic benefits and may, in the long term, confer political benefits as well. One strength of democracies is that they are better able to accommodate dissent than brittle authoritarian regimes, and this strength helps to mitigate the damage of social media and ultimately build stability.

The reaction to the internet and social media by authoritarian governments has been to impose tight controls on online information, accompanied by intrusive surveillance, to ensure political control of their citizens. China leads the world in combining censorship, surveillance, and coercion to ensure political stability, but other countries also use similar techniques. As yet it is too early to tell whether these authoritarian measures will be effective, since reporting on effectiveness is controlled by a regime that will always present the most optimistic view of public support for these efforts.

This means that contrary to the sunny optimism of the 1990s and the dawn of the internet age, the effect of the internet is that it is destabilizing and the new informational and cognitive forces it generates place immense strain on the mechanisms nations have developed to manage (or govern) their societies. Whether the government is authoritarian or not, political discontent is a global phenomenon, especially in developed countries.

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The unfortunate precedent is the printing press and the introduction of moveable type to Europe. These early technologies greatly expanded communication and access to information. The democratization of knowledge sparked centuries of political turmoil until a new model of governance emerged - representative, parliamentary democracy - which citizens accepted as legitimate. Neither this model, nor the enlightenment values associated with it, meet expectations nor ensure the consent of the governed. As a result, new political mechanisms will be required to accommodate citizen expectations regarding access to information and direct participation in decision-making. While liberal democracies are best positioned to deal with the internet's political challenge, because they offer the tolerance and flexibility of change that are anathema to authoritarian rule, it is likely that governments will undergo periods of instability as they evolve. The Internet also drives politics to the extremes, requiring either more flexible and accommodating processes or much more stringent controls and restrictions.

Social media companies had once claimed that they were not censors nor editors, and no one asked them to be censors or editors, but rather that they provided a platform like an online bulletin board where anyone could post, and readers would decide on the validity of what they read. They have abandoned this rationale, at least publicly, but it still undergirds the policies of many companies, reflects the American origins of the internet and the technology, and reflect American cultural predilections for speech and access to information.

These American views date back much further than the internet, in fact, further than

the United States. The Enlightenment ideal of freedom of speech and publication is a core part of the 18th Century American Constitution and of what is now called “European values”. Later interpretations of freedom of speech held that it was not the role of the government to determine what was true or false and that this should be left to the “marketplace of ideas,” where sturdy competition would eventually reveal truth. But the marketplace of ideas was not designed for an online environment and, at least in the near term, the marketplace has been overwhelmed by the floods of information both true and false the internet creates, creating a kind of Gresham’s Law¹ for information.

The internet gave these western Enlightenment ideas an immediacy in the politics of all nations. The results include both a gravitational pull towards “universal” values that revolve around individual freedom and also a powerful reaction and discontent with these western values, embodied most visibly in both the authoritarian reactions that seek to expand sovereign control over the digital space and in the multitude of conspiracy theories that sweep the internet. Each provides an alternative to the ideas of science, rationality, and individual freedoms once thought to embody progress. How these ideas are interpreted depends very much on the cultural prism through which they are viewed, and while the end of the Cold War did not mean the permanent triumph of market democracy, it reinforced the centrality of global institutions (like the UN) that are based on democratic and market values. Few nations would declare, for example, that they do not need elections (whether these elections are a shame of not) and the forms of governance reflect values at which the internet chips away.

This essay is not the place to discuss whether these ideas and values are universal or merely western (there are arguments for both sides), but to highlight that, universal or not, these are the ideas that form the conceptual framework that underlies social media, even in authoritarian countries that have produced their own social media platforms. Now, even the most powerful authoritarian states must tolerate a greater expression of public opinion online, and instead rely on incentives and coercion (including censorship) to control it. Online expression is a global norm, and the exceptions that reject online expression, such as North Korea or Cuba, do not offer attractive alternatives for economic growth or cultural vitality.

The political turbulence the internet creates is not amenable to easy or immediate solutions by governments, but that does not mean it is unmanageable. The key variable for states is finding ways to shape narratives to reinforce legitimacy and, for democracies, and to do this in a way that accommodates public discussion and dissent.

¹ Gresham’s Law says that “bad money drive out good” in ways that damage stability.

The heavy-handed approach is to censor and surveil, accompanied by relentless propaganda. In contrast, a democratic approach would instead expand conversation while restoring the marketplace of ideas to create accountability for falsehood. A first step would be to reduce the space for online anonymity or pseudonymity, since making it harder to hide identity may decrease the likelihood of making extreme or inflammatory statements.

Digital technologies have created a period of fundamental social and economic change, but it has not been even a generation that humans have lived with the internet. Although social media platforms are less than two decades old, their users now number in the billions and their social and economic effects are still evolving. It is likely that cognitive effects will become more positive over time as more people become digitally literate and as social media companies take greater responsibility for identifying truth from falsehood or restricting extremist speech (most easily defined as speech that advocates violence). Eventually, these trends will result in achieving the original hopes of internet founders to provide a source of information that would be widely available, easily accessible, and used to inform the public and conversations more than ever before. Artificial intelligence tools, if designed and used appropriately, can assist in this. The long-term prospects for the internet are favorable.

Influential economist John Maynard Keynes once said, “In the long term we are all dead.” This is true of individuals but not of societies. Societies are dynamic and will evolve in response to social media and networks, and their politics and institutions will evolve with them. We do not know where the evolution of globally connected virtual societies will take us, but if we identify certain characteristics that network technologies produce – connected, global, knowledgeable, richer – the long-term prospects are encouraging. Social media is less than twenty years old, so we should not be surprised that societies have not yet adjusted or developed the mechanisms needed for social control, an ominous sounding term which in this instances, simply means the ability to maintain social order. It took centuries to accommodate the first information revolution; but there is every reason to expect this time it will be quicker.