



Is Social Media Contributing to the Dumbing Down of Politics?

Politics is always shaped to one extent or another by the technologies — and resultant social changes — of any particular age.

The last decade or so has unquestionably been the social-media era. No one can argue that social-media platforms have played and continue to play a major role in politics, usurping (to a certain degree) the influence once wielded exclusively by the traditional mass-media complex of radio, print, and television.

In America, both sides of the aisle can make claims to effective use of social media. The Barack Obama camp credited social media as an important tool that aided in the rapid ascension of the one-term senator turned president. In 2016, social media was widely touted as a crucial factor that contributed to Donald Trump's rise despite massive opposition by the mainstream media — a fact that resulted in social-media platforms cracking down on the speech of Trump supporters.

Given these cases, it's understandable why the effect of social media on political discourse continues to be a hot-button debate. In recent days, Congress' attempt to ban the Chinese video-sharing platform TikTok has made major waves, with numerous big conservative names — including Trump — going against the GOP grain and calling for an end to the anti-TikTok crusade.

Whether an app deserves banning is one question; the influence it has on individuals and on society as a whole regardless of its legality is another. How is social media molding politics? Is it a net force for good or ill?

Without a doubt, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have played an arguably positive role insofar as they have allowed for liberty-minded voices to reach wide audiences without the need for access to the traditional major channels of communication. YouTubers who would never have been given a slot on CNN or even Fox News have gained millions of views discussing important topics such as the Constitution while exposing those seeking to undermine it.

Facebook, before it was rendered virtually worthless for political dialogue by a series of speech-stifling updates imposed by the company's left-wing leadership, was a hub for right-wing ideas where small, independent publishers were able to build audiences that rivaled that of the largest multimedia firms.

Twitter, of course, is known as the platform that made Trump president; it allowed the brash, vocal real-



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estate developer to bypass the media and put his ideas directly before millions of readers with his brief, biting tweets. Many right-wing influencers with no other media asset but a Twitter profile were also able to rise to prominence in 2016 by riding the momentum surrounding Trump.

In view of all this, there's a clear case to be made that social media can be and has been a force for good when it comes to politics.

On the other hand, social media has other effects on political speech that suggest the importance of tempering and moderating usage.

The short-form nature of social media and its algorithmic nature combine to create a perfect storm in which the most polarizing, outlandish, and extreme statements go viral and get eyeballs. This incentivizes influencers, eager for ever more engagement and followers, to tailor their content to be as emotion-eliciting and sensationalist as possible.

Such influencers know that in the sea of text and images a user is confronted by as he scrolls through his smartphone, the content that will get a reaction must stand out from the crowd. Thus, one must be as bombastic as possible, saying things that would be panned as hyperbolic and facetious in real life, yet adhering to these positions tightly and even doubling down on them.

Once social-media users interact with this content, algorithms take this as a cue to start showing it to more people, and to show these users more of this type of content. Thus, material that is intellectual and subdued stands no chance — it is buried beneath the outrage fuel.

This is the common pattern much contemporary social-media discourse follows: A user makes a very outlandish statement, claiming it is absolutely true in all instances with no exceptions (even though in real life any reasonable person would recognize that there are infinite instances where there are valid variations).

For example, someone may write “Any man who married a woman older than him is an emotional cripple” or “a man who lets his wife drive while he sits in the passenger seat is a latent homosexual” (statements I have seen at one time or another from right-wing Twitter accounts).

The influencers are engagement farming; they know these catch-all statements will elicit a barrage of debate — which will benefit the influencers. The problem is that everyone engaged in the debates falls into the intellectual trap of dealing in absolutes. The influencers then realize that, just as a drug wears off and continually requires higher doses to produce the same hit, they have to continually publish more extreme content to stay relevant. And their followers go right along with them, continually consuming and internalizing the more radical content even as they devolve into absurdity.

In this way, political ideas are cheapened and dumbed down to the max.

Ultimately, while this is not an argument that social media should be restricted by legal means, it does support the notion that individuals should watch their online habits and exercise prudence, lest their minds be unduly shaped by the worst excesses of social media.



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