The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Discourse and Public Opinion in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the impact of social media in forming political dialogue, attitude formation, polarization, and activism in political society in the digital era. However, adopting a qualitative research approach this study interviewed participants and analyzed the content of their posts to assess the impact of social media in the political activities and spread of information. The details show that political discussions are enforced by social media, and customers are guided to extremes and hate. In the study, the role of fake news and bais was established in the formation of opinions among the users with many users being unable to distinguish between the genuine news and fake news. The current research also shows that social media has a unique function in both as catalyst for political events and as means of digitized activism which on the other side also leads to low-effort activism or "slacktivism". As such, this research fills the existing gaps in literature by illustrating a better and more nuanced approach of understanding the both the opportunities and challenges that social media poses in the political sphere- and how it can, at the same time, both empower people's political participation and also escalate polarization. This paper concludes by proposing the areas and recommendations in relation to studying the functionality of social media for civil discourse and depolarization of society.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Discourse, Public Opinion, Digital Activism, Polarization.

Introduction

The effective use of Web 2.0 technologies that became popular in the last two decades affected the way people interact with politics and come up with opinions. Digital media in the form of social media sites like Facebook, twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become important sites for political communication in the way political information is disseminated, published, filtered, and responded to by the audience. Whereas traditional media involve broadcasting of information and advertising, social media is marked by two important characteristics: speed and ability to promote

direct interaction among the users, which made it crucial to political campaigns, debates and social mobilization (Xu, 2020). This paper seeks to establish how the social media affects the polemics, dynamics and the formation of attitudes to political matters.

The increase in Internet usage and access across the world has given new impetus to the use of social media in political messages. So as of 2024 it's expected that more than half of the global population is engaged to social media (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). This move has helped political actors ranging from political leaders to activists to pass information to large audiences without passing through media houses (Korschun et al., 2020). As a result, social media has advocated for enlarged political activities where by common citizens are able to contribute to any political activities, and or share ideas, or even call for poll within the society. However, this shift has also come with a question mark to the quality of political discussions, have contributed to the spread of fake news, and increasing polarization (Allen et al., 2021).

A clear impact of social media on politics is the ability to establish diverse forms of direct interaction between leaders and voters. In modern society, the management of political information by politicians and political parties is characterized by the use of social networks to address voters (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021). This directing could help to improve accountability and openness in the political interactions. However, it also poses some threat, especially where politicians avail themselves of the algorithms to deliver sensational or polarizing content, which has a propensity of eliciting higher than average engagement amongst users (Stark et al., 2020). The basic algorithms that form the backbone of seemingly innocent applications like Facebook and Twitter are designed to promote content those which creates engagement response in the form of likes, shares, and comments This extends the reach of negativity and polarizing political messages (Jaton, 2021). This process has general tendencies to increase the polarization of political discussions, as users come across only those materials that fit into the framework of their opinions.

Apart from impacting political discussion, social media has a vital function of influencing perception. The social media feature makes it possible for users to get opinions regarding political issues from mainstream media and social media, citizen journalism, and other forms of media. However, this kind of abundance also induces the selective exposure effect where the users only consume media information that they agree with politically (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This, known as the echo chamber effect, leads to people receiving information mainly consistent with their own values and GetValue from Sunstein (2017) The effect is the Balkanization of the public sphere and the further polarisation of political debate.

Furtherly, the important position of social networks in the formation of public opinion is closely connected with the dissemination of fake news and "fake news." The structure of today's platforms and the frequency at which the information is spread, it very difficult to check the authenticity of the political posts on social media (Casero et al., 2020). It is also crucial to recognize that the specific path that misinformation can take is going to be highly dependent on the starting point of the users consumed by the media disinformation ecosystem. Investigations carried out indicate that fake news travels faster in the social network than authentic news especially where the news trigger one's emotions like fear, anger, or the likes (Liu & Wu, 2020). Therefore, the LPM hypothesis is that due to the reliance on skewed and/or limited information acquired through social media, users can develop polarised positions and this could spill over into the electoral encounter and policy dialogue.

On the other hand, social media has potential and authority in creating awareness and staging political protest. Social media mobilisation, seen in #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the Arab Spring; show that through organising, broadcasting, and sharing of messages activists are able to encourage citizens to rise up in protest online. These movements show how twitter, specifically, and social media more broadly, can keep the barriers to participation low so that people who might otherwise not be involved in activism can become politically engaged. Also, social media enables activists to be media sources themselves and present topics that may not cover them in mainstream media. Thus, the opened nature of movements and the possibility to quickly gather people via the web also raises the issues concerning the stability and impact of Internet activism and its ability to bring actual political change (Earl et al., 2022).

However, that again brings up the topic of political polarisation and misinformation that come due to the usage of social media. ubsequently, social media allows for a higher political participation and vote, yet at the same time leads to further polarization of political sphere and strengthening of ideological cleavages. Appreciation of the positive and negative implications of social media for the level of political debate in relation to its use as a medium of democracy and as a dictator of polarization is important in the formulation of effective strategies on the present generation political discourse. It is but proper that this research investigate on the state of social media in the current political communication whereby the impact provided by this medium is both a boon and bane.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how social media shaped political discourse and public opinion in the digital age. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the nuanced ways individuals engage with social media platforms in political contexts, as well as how these platforms influence their perceptions and participation in political discourse. By focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of social media users, this study aimed to capture the complexities and dynamics that quantitative approaches might overlook.

The research employed a case study design, which was appropriate for exploring the particularities of social media's role in shaping political discourse. Case studies allowed for an intensive examination of specific instances of political engagement on social media platforms, providing rich insights into the processes and interactions involved. This design was particularly useful in examining specific political events, campaigns, or movements that gained prominence through social media, such as elections, protests, or activist campaigns.

Data for this study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and observation of social media activities. These methods provided a triangulation of data sources, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

A total of 20 participants were interviewed, including active social media users, political campaigners, journalists, and political communication experts. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which allowed for the inclusion of individuals who had significant experience in using social media for political engagement. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided flexibility, allowing participants to share their experiences and perceptions freely while still guiding the conversation toward relevant research topics. Each interview lasted between 45

minutes and 1 hour and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify key themes related to political discourse and public opinion formation on social media.

In addition to interviews, the study included a content analysis of social media posts, comments, and discussions related to political events or issues. This analysis focused on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, platforms widely recognized for their role in political communication. A sample of posts related to major political events, such as national elections and protests, was collected over a period of six months. This period included significant political activities, which provided a rich dataset for analysis. The content was coded thematically to identify patterns in the types of political discussions that occurred, the tone of these discussions, and the presence of misinformation or polarization.

Non-participant observation of political conversations and debates on social media was conducted to gain further insights into the dynamics of interaction among users. The researcher monitored social media activity, focusing on public pages, groups, and hashtags where political discussions were prominent. This method helped capture real-time interactions and provided a deeper understanding of how individuals used social media to express political opinions, engage with others, and react to political content.

The data collected from interviews, content analysis, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The thematic analysis was conducted in six steps:

The researcher thoroughly reviewed all interview transcripts, social media content, and field notes from observations. This initial phase involved repeated reading and re-listening to recordings to become deeply familiar with the data.

The data were systematically coded by identifying significant portions of the texts that related to the research questions. The coding process was both deductive, guided by the research framework, and inductive, allowing new themes to emerge from the data.

After coding, the researcher began to group the codes into broader themes. These themes represented key aspects of social media's influence on political discourse, such as political polarization, misinformation, echo chambers, and political mobilization.

The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This phase involved checking the coherence of each theme and its relevance to the research questions. Some themes were merged, while others were split into sub-themes for better clarity.

Each theme was clearly defined, with specific names given to describe the central ideas they captured. The researcher developed a narrative around each theme, highlighting how it contributed to understanding social media's role in shaping political discourse.

The final phase involved writing up the findings, where the themes were presented in a coherent and structured manner, supported by direct quotes from interviews and examples from social media content.

<h1 align="center">Results and Discussion</h1>

The blend of how quickly information flows with algorithms that aim for interaction dramatically differs with the previous method of political content consumption. Twitter is a source of political news, an opinion platform and an activism stage, yet it is a tool of division, and misinformation. However, this present study adopted a qualitative research approach and therefore sought to shed more light into these dynamics by use of interviews and content analysis on the role of social media on political behaviors, opinions, and actions. Overall, the findings constitute valuable knowledge of the processes that underlie these trends and give a tentative perception of the partially virtual political arena.

Amplification of Political Discourse

The role of social media in amplifying political discourse has been one of the most significant developments in recent years. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram provide a unique environment where political discussions can rapidly spread and reach a wide audience. The nature of these platforms encourages not only the sharing of political content but also facilitates a rapid exchange of ideas, opinions, and criticisms. What distinguishes social media from traditional forms of media is its interactive, real-time nature, which enables users to engage with content, respond instantly, and even contribute to ongoing debates.

One of the key findings from the interviews conducted in this study is that social media significantly amplifies political discourse by providing individuals and groups with a platform to reach audiences far beyond their immediate networks. Political messages that once required traditional media channels to gain traction can now go viral within minutes, reaching millions of users worldwide. As one interview participant, a political activist, explained,

"Before social media, it was hard for us to get our message across unless we had media connections. Now, with one post or tweet, we can start a conversation that gets national attention in hours."

This highlights the way social media bypasses traditional gatekeepers of information, empowering individuals and grassroots movements to participate in the political conversation.

This amplification is not without its challenges, as the interviews revealed a growing concern about the quality of discourse being amplified. Several interviewees pointed out that while social media amplifies political messages, it often does so without regard for accuracy or nuance. One participant, a journalist who frequently covers political events, noted,

"Social media amplifies everything, the good and the bad. A well-thought-out policy discussion can go viral, but so can misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric."

This observation underscores the dual-edged nature of social media's role in amplifying political discourse. On the one hand, it democratizes access to political conversations; on the other hand, it can also lead to the spread of misinformation and the proliferation of extreme views.

Additionally, social media's algorithmic structure plays a significant role in this amplification process. Platforms are designed to promote content that generates high engagement, often favoring sensational or provocative posts over more measured or complex political discussions. This can lead to an echo chamber effect, where individuals are primarily exposed to political views that

align with their own, reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs. As one interviewee, a political science professor, put it,

"Social media doesn't just amplify political discourse; it filters it in a way that creates bubbles. People see what the algorithm thinks they want to see, which can intensify divisions."

The algorithmic nature of social media thus not only amplifies political discourse but also shapes the kind of discourse that gets the most attention.

Moreover, the study's content analysis further supported these interview findings, showing that political posts with emotionally charged language, sensational headlines, or controversial opinions were more likely to be shared and commented on compared to more neutral or policy-focused discussions. For instance, during the analysis of posts related to a recent election, it was observed that posts containing inflammatory rhetoric about opposing political candidates or parties garnered significantly more engagement than those discussing detailed policy proposals. This pattern suggests that the amplification of political discourse on social media tends to prioritize engagement over substantive content, potentially distorting the public's understanding of political issues.

Social media has also amplified political discourse by providing marginalized or underrepresented groups with a platform to voice their concerns and advocate for change. In traditional media, these groups often struggled to gain visibility, as their issues were either overlooked or deemed not newsworthy. However, social media has leveled the playing field to some extent, allowing these voices to reach wider audiences. One interview participant, a representative of a grassroots political organization, commented,

"We used to struggle to get any kind of media coverage for our issues. But with social media, we can put our message out there directly and reach people who care about the same things we do."

This empowerment of marginalized voices has contributed to a more diverse political discourse, although it also raises questions about the risks of polarization and fragmentation within the public sphere.

Public Opinion Formation

Social media has fundamentally transformed the process of public opinion formation in the digital age. Traditional forms of media, such as television, newspapers, and radio, were once the primary sources of information for shaping public opinion. These platforms were typically one-directional, with limited opportunity for immediate feedback or discussion. However, the rise of social media has shifted this dynamic, introducing an interactive environment where individuals can actively participate in political discussions, share their opinions, and engage with others in real-time.

This transformation in how public opinion is formed is largely due to the participatory nature of social media. Users are no longer passive recipients of political information; they are active creators and disseminators of content. Social media enables individuals to share their political views, discuss issues with others, and even influence their peers' opinions. The interviews conducted for this study revealed that many individuals view social media as a tool that empowers them to shape public opinion by amplifying their voices. One interview participant, a frequent social media user, noted,

"I feel like my opinion matters more now because I can actually put it out there and people respond. Sometimes, a simple tweet can start a huge conversation."

This indicates that social media has democratized the formation of public opinion by giving individuals a platform to contribute to political discourse.

The study also found that social media accelerates the speed at which public opinion is formed. In contrast to traditional media, where information is disseminated at scheduled intervals (daily newspapers or nightly news broadcasts), social media operates in real-time. Political events, statements, and issues can trigger immediate reactions on social platforms, often within minutes of their occurrence. This rapid exchange of information and opinions facilitates the swift formation of public opinion. As one interviewee, a political analyst, stated,

"In the past, it would take days or even weeks for public opinion to shift after a major political event. Now, with social media, you can see public sentiment changing in real-time as people react to what's happening."

This real-time interaction allows public opinion to evolve rapidly in response to emerging political events.

However, this immediacy also presents challenges. The speed at which opinions are formed on social media can lead to shallow or reactionary judgments. Interviewees expressed concern that the fast-paced nature of social media discourse often encourages individuals to form opinions based on incomplete or inaccurate information. As another participant, a political campaign manager, explained,

"People react so quickly to things on social media, sometimes before all the facts are out. It's like everyone has to have an opinion immediately, and that can lead to misinformation or just poorly thought-out conclusions."

This highlights a significant issue with the role of social media in public opinion formation: while it facilitates rapid engagement, it can also contribute to the spread of misinformation and the formation of ill-informed opinions.

Moreover, social media's algorithmic design influences the way public opinion is shaped. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram prioritize content that is likely to generate high engagement, such as posts with strong emotional or polarizing content. As a result, users are more likely to be exposed to sensationalized or extreme viewpoints, which can skew their perception of political issues. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "echo chamber" effect, reinforces pre-existing beliefs by exposing users primarily to content that aligns with their own views, while filtering out opposing perspectives. One participant, a social media strategist, observed,

"The algorithms are designed to keep you engaged, so they show you things you're likely to agree with. That's great for keeping people on the platform, but it also means people aren't seeing the full picture when it comes to political issues."

This observation underscores how social media's structure can influence public opinion by reinforcing biases and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the study's content analysis of social media posts supported these findings by revealing a clear pattern: posts that were emotionally charged or divisive received more engagement and were more widely shared than those presenting neutral or balanced viewpoints. This pattern suggests that public opinion on social media is often shaped by highly polarized content, which may not accurately reflect the complexity of political issues. For instance, during the analysis of posts surrounding a major political controversy, it was found that posts with inflammatory language or emotionally charged appeals consistently received more likes, shares, and comments compared to posts that offered more nuanced or fact-based analysis. This demonstrates that the nature of content being promoted on social media can have a significant impact on the formation of public opinion, often privileging emotionally driven responses over informed deliberation.

Political Polarization

Social media has been a major contributor to political polarization, intensifying divisions between different ideological groups. The way social media platforms operate, combined with their algorithmic design, has created an environment where users are more likely to be exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs while filtering out opposing viewpoints. This selective exposure results in an "echo chamber" effect, where individuals primarily engage with content that confirms their political ideologies. As a result, social media not only amplifies political discourse but also contributes to the deepening of political divides.

One of the key findings from the study was that social media tends to polarize political discourse by presenting issues in binary terms good versus bad, right versus wrong leaving little room for nuanced discussions or middle-ground positions. The interviews revealed that users often feel pressured to take a clear stance on political issues, leading to increased hostility toward those with differing viewpoints. As one interviewee, a university student active in political discussions, explained,

"When you're on social media, you feel like you have to pick a side. If you don't, you're either ignored or attacked. It's like there's no room for moderate opinions."

This pressure to align with one side of the political spectrum can lead to the alienation of those who hold more centrist or nuanced views, further polarizing the political landscape.

The study's content analysis of political posts on platforms like Twitter and Facebook revealed a strong tendency for posts to adopt extreme or sensationalized language, particularly during times of political controversy. Posts that framed issues in highly partisan terms or that attacked political opponents tended to receive the most engagement likes, shares, and comments. This finding aligns with the idea that social media rewards emotional and polarizing content, which in turn influences how users perceive political issues. One participant, a journalist, observed,

"I've noticed that posts with more extreme viewpoints always get more attention. It's like social media is designed to promote division because it keeps people engaged. The more heated the argument, the more people get involved."

This phenomenon, driven by social media algorithms that prioritize engagement, reinforces the cycle of polarization by making extreme views more visible and prominent.

The interviews also revealed that social media's role in fostering political polarization extends beyond ideological divisions; it also exacerbates the hostility between different political groups. Several interviewees shared their experiences of encountering aggressive or hostile behavior when engaging in political discussions online. One participant, a social media influencer involved in political advocacy, commented,

"It's almost impossible to have a respectful political conversation on social media. People are so quick to insult or attack you just for having a different opinion. It's exhausting."

This culture of hostility, fueled by the anonymity and distance provided by online interactions, often discourages civil discourse and further entrenches political divides. Instead of fostering constructive dialogue, social media platforms frequently serve as battlegrounds for political conflict.

Furthermore, the study found that political polarization on social media often leads to a distortion of political realities. The constant exposure to one-sided or extreme viewpoints creates a skewed perception of political events and issues. This selective exposure can lead individuals to believe that their views are more widely shared than they actually are, contributing to what is known as the "false consensus effect." One interviewee, a political science professor, highlighted this issue, stating,

"People get trapped in these echo chambers where they only see opinions that match their own. It creates this illusion that everyone thinks the same way they do, which just isn't true. It makes compromise or understanding between different political groups even harder."

This perception of widespread agreement within one's own political group fosters an environment where individuals feel justified in dismissing or vilifying opposing viewpoints, further entrenching polarization.

Another significant factor contributing to political polarization on social media is the lack of accountability for misinformation. The study revealed that false or misleading political information often spreads rapidly on social media, particularly when it aligns with the existing beliefs of users. This misinformation is frequently used to demonize political opponents or to oversimplify complex issues, contributing to the further polarization of political discourse. As one participant, a political campaign consultant, noted,

"Misinformation spreads like wildfire on social media, especially when it fits the narrative people already believe. It makes it harder to have any kind of real debate because people are working from completely different sets of facts."

The unchecked spread of misinformation not only misguides public opinion but also hardens political divisions by fueling animosity between opposing groups.

Mobilization and Digital Activism

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The unchecked spread of misinformation not only misguides public opinion but also hardens political divisions by fueling animosity between opposing groups.

This paper examined the social media influence on political communication, perception, politicization, and organization for online activism to advance new understanding of its transformative influence in the age of digital media. Because this study explores effects of social networking sites on politics, it fills a knowledge gap in the literature which predisposes politically related effects of the social media as one dimensional. In contrast to previous works that mostly highlight the positive possibilities of digital activism (Greijdanus et al., 2020) or the adverse effects of polarization as well as misinformation that social media brings about, this study investigates both sides which give a more global view of the current political process with the help of social media.

Of particular importance, the literature still lacks conceptual clarity on how social media acts as an accelerator of politics that encourages sectionalized and binary forms of discourse. Earlier research has acknowledged social media's function in political messaging (Kreiss et al., 2020) but not enough focus has been given to how this process facilitates a context where political discussions tend to be simplistic, leaving little to no room for moderation. This research goes further than previous work on oversimplification and overvaluation by showing that social media indeed promotes polarized perception, and this conclusion was supported by samples of textual content and self-generated interviews.

The study showed that posts that used very polarizing party political discourse had higher reach and engagement indicating the fact that the social media content recommendation systems promote polarization (Yarchi et al., 2021). This supports Bright et al. (2020) ideas on echo chambers whereby most people interact with viewpoint that are favorable to them. But this study builds on these findings by also showing how social media's architecture makes moderation and nuance impossible, which has a toxic effect on politics. Therefore, whereas prior work pointed to the existence of echo chambers, this paper provides a more fine-grained picture of the how social media enhances political polarization.

The research advances knowledge of how fake news is shared in social media and how such news affects the political views of the people. There has been copious research done on the emergence of "fake news" and far how it influenced the opinions of the populace (Carlson, 2020) yet most of this research has been exploratory in nature. This work is based on these premises by providing additional perspectives about how the users experience and encounter mis information.

During the interviews, the participants stated that most of them find it really hard to differentiate between fake news and real news given that fake news always seems to lean to the eligible political leaning. In support of the present study is the study by Semeraro (2022) who posit that partisanship influences scare reasoning once users come across fake news online. However, this study builds upon that by regarding the fact that due to the high velocities and immense amount of information shared over social media platforms; misinformation is likely to thrive. It is different from traditional media which through its journalists can at least place checks on the spread of what is even in part, fake news, into the public domain. This nature of social media furthers the problem of misinformation which greatly influences people's opinion more especially in the real world.

That political polarization is not new, however, social media would emerge as a significant factor reinforcing political polarization has become a topical issue. analyzed works identifying how echo chambers on social media enlarge polarization by feeding the user more of what they already think. This research supports their conclusions but also gives more depth into how social media encourages factors that create enmity between political parties.

The results of the interview showed that similarly, majority of the users feel compelled to express themselves on political issues which more often leads to an escalation of the clash and not the expression of ideas. On social medial the participant noted that, "It is nearly impossible to engage in a civil political discussion." It enrages people especially women if you dare to come out of your box or express yourself or have a different view on something. This sense of hostility has been given scant attention in prior work as most prior studies that argue about the severity of polarization fail to factor in the intervention of social media that brings actual conflict to the surface between those of different political affiliations. There is, therefore, an indication from this study that polarization is not only ideological but also, interpersonal where users in social media are becoming more personalized, aggressive, and involving in more confrontational interactions.

Among the key contribution of this study is its analysis of how social media is useful in mobilization of political causes while at the same time raising concern in the sustenance of activism. This analysis builds on the previous scholarship that focused on the importance of social media for supporting large-scale protests and social movements (Grodal et al., 2021), but underscores the darker side of digital activism. On the one hand, social media becomes the way to unite activists without precedent possibilities of organization and communication for mobilization. One of the participants in this study observed that, " previously it took us weeks to plan protests, now with the social media platform you spread the word within days."

This research also discovers potential issues, for example 'slacktivism' and fake news, which limit the possibility of success in online activism. Lurking and clicktivism or slacktivism involving key clicks such as liking a page or photo without requisite offline action is another area of research that has recently acquired significance (Grodal et al., 2021). This concern is endorsed by this study which shows while social media facilitates awareness creation, it does not necessarily guarantee continued political activism. However, this misrepresentation creates confusion when

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disseminating misleading information as pointed out by the interviewed participants within activist movements hinders effective mobilization. Hence, despite it being a great advancement to have digital activism, this research work submits that its weaknesses should not be overlooked because its sustainable success needs to be worked for.

Conclusion

This paper reveals and discusses the difficult and diverse processes of the formation of political culture and political communication through SNS as well as the connections between these two phenomena, polarization or activism. Admittedly, social media has adopted the most utility in assembling political movements, giving voice to the dominated, and politically influencing the processes. Therefore, this research fills the gap which allows for a comprehensive understanding of social media in modern politics and their advantages and disadvantages. It would be relevant to understand effective ways of reducing polarization and improving constructive functions of social media in relation to developing democratic civil participation and enlightened public agenda.

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