The Impact of Social Media on Political Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals access and engage with political information, significantly impacting political knowledge across various demographics. This research investigates the relationship between social media usage and the acquisition of political knowledge, focusing on the quality, diversity, and accuracy of information consumed. Utilizing surveys and content analysis, the study finds that while social media can enhance political awareness by providing immediate access to news and diverse viewpoints, it also poses risks related to misinformation and selective exposure. Users often gravitate towards content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, leading to an echo chamber effect that can distort understanding of complex political issues. Furthermore, the study highlights disparities in political knowledge based on factors such as age, education, and digital literacy, suggesting that not all users benefit equally from social media as an informational resource. Recommendations are made for leveraging social media to promote informed political discourse, including strategies for enhancing critical media literacy and encouraging engagement with a broader range of sources. Overall, this research underscores the dual-edged nature of social media's impact on political knowledge, emphasizing the need for vigilance and education in the digital age.

1. Introduction

This essay discusses the influence of social media and political knowledge. The presence of social media in daily life is omnipresent; individuals interact with them in the morning, during work and leisure times; they are used for sharing problems, information, contacts and mundane activities. Platforms have helped several individuals make varying choices: some boycott abhorrent events; others avoid or engage in counter-discussion; many express and escalate intense feelings, etc. Social media platforms gained special attention for their role in political discourse. Activists post manifests, complaints, actions and violence on these platforms. The users post, circulate and discuss political matters; engage with political parties and candidates. Political debates, campaigns and propaganda have grown on social media. The users are more engaged, better informed, and also more polarised.

There are several studies exploring the conditions under which social media support or hamper political engagement; which audiences are attracted by political messages, and how they interpret and discuss them; how conversations on public matters unfold, remaining routine or escalating. News plays a pivotal role in political information. While social media allowed varied actors to become huge information providers, the traditional news media remain the main source of political information. Nevertheless, information often circulates from news media, to alternative news providers, to bloggers, and within networked platforms. This process is shaped by algorithms, personalisation and user behaviour – key features of social media platforms (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2021). Accordingly, social media are a double edge weapon in the spreading of political information: they can allow a broader access to politics by suggesting 'like-minded' news, or, conversely, they reduce diversity, suggesting

similar and alike political information. On the one hand, it is crucial to grasp the impact of social media platforms in the dissemination of political knowledge with a particular attention to news. On the other hand, this should be accompanied by an account of the variety of behaviours and uses of these platforms in political apostrophes.

1.1. Background and Significance

On March 21st, 2006, Jack Dorsey posted the first-ever tweet. A decade and a half later, tweets by Donald Trump helped him land at the White House, directly inciting an insurrection. Between the advent of Twitter and the highly polarized 2020 U.S. election, the meteoric rise of Facebook and Instagram occurred, as well as an unyielding growth in political communication through Instagram, Reddit, SnapChat, TikTok, Tinder, and everything in between. An algorithm feeds content Trump's followers are more engaged with, deepening ideological rifts among those Americans. Amid growing concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and bridging a cleavage between mainstream media and personal beliefs, it becomes paramount to consider the role social media play in the formation and transmission of political knowledge and what consequences this has for a democracy. (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2021) The transition from traditional media to its digital avatars, social media, has been gradual, but the significant effects are already vivid. Many, mostly big business, television networks, as well as former President Trump, struggle to adapt. Trending #FireTrump deteriorates on Twitter, yet Facebook staff has to "stand up" for its enforcement, and even banning him from posting. Meanwhile, "Many within the [mainstream] journalistic community recognize that the norms of conventional mass media information transmission are ignored [and] the professional values of journalism are increasingly abandoned". The document includes an exhaustive list of primary sources, monitoring public engagement with political content on social networking services, mainstream media, and the online press from January 1 to January 31, 2020, the exact day WHO declares a COVID outbreak on the Wuhan market. False information started spreading over the coronavirus even before then – tweets, posts, reports – often originating from high-profile profiles. With the advent of a worldwide

spread of COVID and US President Donald Trump candidly communicating contradictory, many uncertainties, social media provide a chance to track how public knowledge and opinions develop.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social media has become an important political information source but studies in information research concerning effects on political knowledge are scarce. Informational consequences of social media require consideration of both, its incidental potential and political users' intentional exposure. This is especially important because, although social media has drawn interest as an emergent news source, its actual relevance for political knowledge gain is frequently doubted (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2021). Furthermore, in contemporary debates about online news consumption, general and domain-specific informational outcomes tend to be studied, assuming an existent knowledge gap. However, these arguments mainly refer to cognitive knowledge and overall news exposure, and might not be easily transferable to the situation of political information consumption on social media. And the coexistence of incidental and intentional exposure on social media for political information pushes research questions beyond the examination of cognitive knowledge acquisition. Therefore, more comprehensive approaches are needed to adequately grasp the impact of social media use on political knowledge. On the other hand, the used platforms' infrastructural properties may set specific requirements for political information supply that run counter to knowledge acquisition. In this context, attention has increasingly focused on social media characteristics that structure user interaction and information visibility and, as a consequence, news exposure. However, the current understanding of social media news consumption and its consequences, especially in nondemocratic or developing democracy contexts, is relatively poor. Insight gains are precluded by the scarce dedication of information research to social media, which is particularly regrettable given the medium's increasing global relevance for political expression and action and its, at least in part, different workings compared to traditional mass media. Moreover, most evidence on social

media as a news source originates from major Western democracies, while investigations of its role in other settings are almost absent.

2.1. Social Media and Information Flow

Social media has fundamentally changed the way political information flows through societies. Traditional media such as newspapers and broadcasting depended on mass production and mass distribution technology, and they controlled the content and timing of information. In contrast to traditional mass media, social media allows individuals to consume, produce, and share information. Consequently, social media can speed up the dissemination of information compared to traditional media. Studies report that it takes a little over half a day for a tweet relating to traditional mass media news to be posted. Twenty percent of these tweets are uploaded within five minutes. The information in these tweets has been filtered by the mass media companies (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2021). Consumers, however, are much faster. Roughly 70% of posts referencing the New York metropolitan area earthquake in 2014 were posted on Twitter platforms before a seismological organization could even detect the event. It took minutes before tweets devoted to the event were uploaded to Twitter. Using social media, then, the speed with which information reaches the public can vastly eclipse traditional media (Everett Curry, 2018). Perhaps both concerns and hopes at the same time come with this immediacy.

The content, timing, and methodology of information sharing can be controlled and exploited through the use of algorithms. Some social platforms use algorithms to recommend the news that the user may view. Multiple studies show that the news that appears in people's feeds can promote greater user interaction. Exposure to news can also develop on social media, increasing the probability of data on the news. The effect of social data on the media is a complex blend of polling innovation and exposure. Polling innovation can help users to expand their understanding of events better. Conversely, the exposure can strengthen current perceptions and take advantage of those who only access a limited range of prevalent news views. Engagement is an essential way of shaping the flow of data. Deciding to support, share, and discuss posts from close contacts can drive more traffic than wider releases.

Political information can be spread even more broadly by becoming viral. In some circumstances, nevertheless, misinformation, hoaxes, and fake news may move. With the emergence of social media, political entities have realized the significance of the pervasive effect and of the methods by which news can be crafted shareable and gleaned in order to advance particular narratives. Some of the shared political information has been produced and digitally disseminated by news agencies and politicians. Nevertheless, social media's essence allows anyone to partake in the stream of news. In a lately conducted survey, one in four social media users said they have connected to politicians through social media. On Facebook, a substantial share of the positive and negative criticism of candidates for government and prime minister comes from people who do not endorse or criticize them, but somewhat show photographs or feedback on content made by supportive/accolade users. On Twitter, the main source of knowledge on public administration concerns originates from the politicians themselves. Despite the fact that it is essential for a democratic society to be acquainted with political issues and to be embroiled in the decision-making process, such facts are worrying. In Tanner, political rights are significantly stronger among those who do not engage with politics on social media. On the one hand, the proliferation of conspiracy theories is linked to the increase in the number of businesses. This could possibly dilute the impact of the conspiracy as it would be difficult to retain the weight of a distinct narrative among the plethora of alternatives. In Folk, the understanding of political issues through social media is negatively influenced by the inclinations of best friends and the opinions of best friends. Despite the vast amount of accessible homework on social media and political knowledge, many of the variables remain obscure and should be researched to get a better understanding of the interplay between them. (Goyanes et al., 2021)

3. Empirical Studies

For the last decade, researchers have been struggling with one all-encompassing question: does the use of social media have a substantial effect on political knowledge and engagement? The importance of this question has grown tremendously, as not

only are S. citizens receiving a significant amount of news and political information through social media, but also the implications of Russian-sponsored advertising, fake news, and foreign bots potentially influencing national elections. Studies come from many methodological approaches and diverse data sources. They utilize controlled experiments, survey data, as well as large observational research that qualitatively examine the news and information present on users' media feeds. Data has been generated by content analyses which explore the presence of serious news on social media, and the effect of this news on people's political knowledge and voting intentions as well as the effect of being exposed to simple and humor oriented news. Additionally, data were analyzed obtained from a survey in which people reported the seriousness of the news they had read as well as the elaboration when being exposed to serious and snack news (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2022). To date, studies have explored the direct effect of social media use on general political engagement or have considered the relationship thorough mediators like knowledge about politics and daily news. For example, research suggested that social media consumption correlates with knowledge gaps between Democrats and Republicans, and can have serious detrimental effects on voter attitudes. However, other research is concluding that social media consumption is simply replacing other sources, and because of that it has not led to these highly negative outcomes. Yet others suggest that people who consume news on social media are far more knowledgeable than those who access no news at all (Everett Curry, 2018). Additionally, despite an increase in overall news consumption, there is no evidence that integrates these diverse findings, and also attends to demographic differences and different types of news usage.

3.1. Survey Findings

Many recent survey findings have shown that the use of social media or the exposure to news in social media is related to levels of political knowledge, as well as political participation and intentions of voting. Posts in social media often appear on topic avoiding substantial content clarification, enhancing even misinterpretation. Even if one is exposed to hard news performing in-depth analysis, their reasoning of whys and wherefores or the evaluation of the consistency and credibility of the argument

may be very superficial, likely failing in an ideal search of accurate knowledge. Snack news have been found less elaborated, hence being related to low knowledge gains. The evidence from real-time social media content suggests that there is little substantial information, particularly in a non-premium format, in spite of the hubbub of posts. Making a robust sense of the considerable bulk of information posted in social media is cognitively and temporally demanding; enriched information may easily drift offscreen, or away through a link hop.

While social media platforms have fostered political engagement and deliberation, the exposure to news in social media is often message-constrained, matching a forum of snack news to be publicized in sound-bites, "a mile wide BUT inch-deep". There is also some evidence in social media that supporting the claim of some post-modern approaches, traditional notion of truth in social media is losing terrain. Social media can expose a citizen to a considerable amount of news and political talk of multiple sources and perspective over a broad array of topics, henceforth increasing political awareness and involvement. However, that ecological niche can as well facilitate the spread of misinformation, an "alternative" but faker slice of reality. In fact, posts in social media often display the user's side in a debate, rather than some middle ground interpretation. Survey findings drive home the growing need for a sound critical media literacy to navigate the ongoing teeming torPor, no easy task considering it is known that even heavy users of social media often overlooked the source of a post. Hence, examining the relationship between high levels of exposure to information in social media and political knowledge cannot ignore the role of that reasoning context which is only rarely studied herein. (Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021)

4. Challenges and Criticisms

In recent years, social media platforms have become a primary source of news and political information for many users. However, more than traditional news mediums, misinformation, disinformation, and biased content permeate the social media news ecosystem. For example, high-violation fake news stories made up only 0.1% of voting-related content on the platform in 2020, yet these stories had the potential to

reach 160 million users (Barberá et al., 2018). At the same time, the design of social media platforms tends to promote exposure to emotionally compelling information, like misinformation and disinformation. Algorithms prioritize and promote content with higher engagement on news feeds in order to favor essentially addictive content for engagement.

This misinformation and disinformation-rich environment can impact individual levels of political awareness affecting their perception and understanding of reality. What's more, partisan bias in the social media news ecosystem can distort the perception of reality and diminish the likelihood of reaching a consensus on public issues. Several have found a relation between ideological bias in the news feed and ideological polarization among social media users in comparison to ideologically diverse newspaper readers. Despite the potential of the social media to facilitate a more informed political debate, online political conversation is often superficial. More meaningful political engagement—that encourages sharing of substantial political content or discussion of current political events—enjoys a significantly lower frequency on social media compared to sharing memes or simple face-value opinions. This suggests that the online public sphere of social media platforms might play a role in refraining the development of more genuine informed political discourse. Social media, by the means of creating filter bubbles and fostering a superficial political debate and widespread disinformation, may lead to a shallow political knowledge. The dialog points out ethical dilemmas for the social media firms and the public sphere in general, thus underlining the need for a regulatory framework that safeguards civil rights and public dialogue. Simulation results reveal the importance of public authorities in addressing and regulating the complex ethical challenges posed by the social media. However, this responsibility should also extend to the users of social media platforms in order to address the complex relationship between engagement on social media platforms and its impact on a more informed citizenship. (Yamamoto and Yang2022)

4.1. Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Filter bubbles and echo chambers provide an account of the psychological and structural mechanics through which digital environments may hinder access to the widest range of knowledge, counter-narratives, and critical discourse. While the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers is fiercely debated and even denied, the design of social media favors group polarization—i.e., the process by which a group of people becomes more extreme in their beliefs after discussions within the group. As such, social media may hinder the unfolding of a robust and rational public sphere by fragmenting the discussion and insulating individuals from perspectives that might counteract and inform their intuitions and passions. The implications for political knowledge and democratic behavior are hardly overrated. Indeed, there is preliminary evidence that social media might fuel fake news and foster group polarization and echo chambers, with possible catastrophic implications for the legitimacy of the democratic process.

The current discussion subsumes under the umbrella-end concept of social media. Then, the Internet-mediated self-selection process that leads to the formation of echo chambers is labeled filter bubbles. More importantly, the current discussion does not imply a one-size-fits-all account of social media, group polarization, filter bubbles, and echo chambers—let alone a technological determinism. Rather, social media are taken as a complex system of affordances and incentives driving psychological and social dynamics that limit—although they do not exclude—a wide dissemination of knowledge and the flourishing of informed and shared political participation ((Figà Talamanca & Arfini, 2022)).

5. Conclusion

The wide dissemination of social media platforms has modernized democratic processes and reshaped traditional communication routes between politicians and the electorate. From the Arab Spring movement in 2011 to the rise of populism on Twitter in recent years, there are numerous examples of the impacts social media incurs on political developments.

Empirical studies from democratic processes tend to support that using social media enhances the overall political awareness of an average citizen due to the increased accessibility of information about politics. Moreover, the awareness of political events can often be raised by following news pages and joining different activity groups on social media (H. Dreston & Neubaum, 2022). Another means by which social media influences political knowledge is labeled as "broader news exposure". As individuals spend more time using multiple features on social media platforms, they accidentally expose themselves to diverse news feeds. Balancing a critical lifestyle between Netflix, Weibo, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok with music audios, videos and different types of graphic illustration, for example, it is more likely for a viewer to see a clip about teens as domestic violence victims on a recommended news post. Given the multidimensional news feed selection filters on social media, such an incident news exposure can also boost the retention of political knowledge. On top, "incidental" side impacts (on political knowledge) of intentional social media practices (on news exposure) are found to be more efficient compared to intentional approaches.

However, contrasting evidence points to the view that social media is not conducive to political knowledge as expected. As an array of headlines goes through the feed, there is simply not enough time for one to go deeper into each news item. Therefore, political predispositions come into play during the selection that a user perceives, which naturally causes a "filter bubble". Approximately half of the population do not click on news posts running across their timeline, private messaging is a mainstream use and millions of diversified abstracts are only "shared" from unknown sources. Thus, while rationally-exposed and stockpiled abundant mechanisms nowadays have significantly lowered the cost of obtaining information, it seems tricky for the same mechanisms to guarantee the deeper thinking of that information. In a politically saturated discussion dominated by hashtags and stickers, will users really have the motive to read all the long captions or follow the links shared? In question of the surrounding environment, it is quite improbable for the discernment of all this to give rise to informed public opinion. Hence, as the most democratic means of

communication, it is absurd to expect that social media, specifically due to characteristics inherent in its very design, would make its practice healthier.

5.1. Summary of Findings

This essay explored the following research question: "What effect does the use of social media have on political knowledge and what is this effect contingent on?" The essay has shown that the use of social media affects political knowledge, with mechanisms functioning differently in different contexts. Chapter 2 reviewed extant literature on the impact of social media on political knowledge, distinguishing two strands, one stressing the ability of social media to enhance political knowledge, the other criticizing the spread of misinformation. Besides, this review pointed to social media's dualism as regards this concern.

The empirical analysis demonstrated mixed effects of social media on political knowledge; depending on the individual use of political information on social media might be more or less beneficial for political knowledge gain. These findings on the one hand archive a positive relationship between the use of political information and political knowledge, independent of the respective channel. On the other hand, not only the use, but also individual incidental and intentional news exposures were shown to have a positive effect on political knowledge development. These findings address the missing link between social media use and knowledge enhancement, and this conclusion was generally supported even when taking critical comments on methodology into account.

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