

Katelyn May  
CMST 3410  
*Social Media + Politics*

## Increase of Social Media Means A Loss of Democracy

In today's society, social media has become omnipresent. Not only does the average American spend 153 minutes on social media per day, but politicians have transitioned from strictly political advertising to promoting themselves on personal social media accounts. One prime example of this is our current President Donald Trump. Because of the increased use of social media I firmly believe it has cost us our democracy in American politics. Due to the influence of personal politicians' social media accounts, the power that comes with the bully pulpit and the ability to agenda set I believe our democracy has become less and less apparent within American politics.

One of the main ideas I wish to argue is how influential politicians can be on social media. Throughout history politicians have only been able to communicate with constituents through organized television appearances or through other forms of communication like radio. There was never this sense of being in constant communication with their followers. From many different articles it is apparent that social media has created a platform for politicians to connect with their supporters and strongly influence them. Not only are they able to contact followers, but they are also able to communicate with journalists on a more open platform. "Besides being a new, potentially rich, source of information for journalists, social media becomes a space where they can publicly address politicians directly and indirectly in real-time" (Ekman & Widholm,

83). The increased use of social media has created a new dialogue between both politicians and constituents as well as politicians and journalists.

Specifically, the use of Twitter has had implications on our vision of democracy. “The situational and communicative aspects of political tweeting seem to increase the entertainment aspects of political news reporting” (Ekman & Widholm, 87). This new form of ‘entertainment’ establishes a view of politics less centered around issues and more about who can cause the most drama. Donald Trump is constantly creating a spectacle through his Twitter account claiming things are ‘fake news’ or talking about other politicians negatively in his tweets. Aside from creating the drama and the popularity that goes along with it, social media also gives voters insight into the personal lives of politicians. It is through this content that voters establish a sense of trust between them and the politicians. “The study of politicians’ tweets as news source discloses that Twitter unquestionably contributes to the ongoing process of increased personalization of politics, foremost by mediating the personal and private realm of politicians’ lives” (Ekman & Widholm, 87). This reduces our sense of democracy because now more than ever it has become essential that politicians use social media to connect with voters. If politicians fail to use social media platforms they are unable to compete with other candidates. Furthermore, politicians are able to use social media to create a false sense of self on various platforms.

Additionally, we live in a post-truth society that has implications on our democratic system. Because of the mass amounts of information available on social media it can be difficult for constituents to decipher what information is actually true. According to the Political Studies Association “Susana Salgado argued that although post-truth is not a new phenomenon and lies by politicians are nothing new, people are bombarded by fake information online leading the

distinction between facts and fiction to become increasingly blurred as blogs, social media, citizen journalism, etc are awarded similar credibility to other information sources” (Aromeeva). Social media allows for anyone to contribute to an open conversation about political issues. Although this may seem productive for informing citizens, it is apparent that alternative news sources like social media and personal sites are gaining the same credibility as real news sources. This is problematic because political information becomes less accurate and voters are less correctly informed. This damages our democratic system because false political news sources are able to have a strong influence on vulnerable voters by feeding them fake news.

Social media affects democracy in other indirect ways. Social media also allows for politicians to mass communicate. This allows for politicians to set the agenda of what issues are talked about. “The agenda setting ability of the mass media is what grants them a powerful role: they promote social consensus around the configuration of an agenda and create a ‘sense of community’ (Arguete, 45). As much as the President has extreme power through the bully pulpit, social media additionally has the power to bring specific issues to light. Additionally news sources are often powerful conglomerates that are able to control the news featured on multiple platforms. “Mainstream media generate a great deal of the online information from which agendas are forged...the major news sites are owned by a handful of media companies; these sites generally do not produce their own news but repackage news gathered by mainstream news outlets” (Perloff, 544). One example of this is a case study regarding America’s leading breast cancer advocacy organization and its choice to no longer fund Planned Parenthood. Ultimately protests occurred on different social media sites such as Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook. After these protests occurred the cancer group reversed their decision and opted to still fund Planned

Parenthood (Perloff, 546). “Either solely because of the activists’ online investigations or, in all likelihood, in combination with the mainstream media coverage, the issue seemed to have emerged as an important agenda item” (Perloff, 546). From this example it is evident that social media can have a direct impact on those issues that become important in the news.

The most powerful form of media, may be the power that comes with the bully pulpit. Presidents are able to communicate with the public whenever they please and discuss whichever issues they wish. It is clear that getting an issue on the national agenda can be very difficult for advocates. For presidents, however, the power of the bully pulpit allows them to bring whatever issues they deem important to the attention of the nation. “Yet, presidents may be uniquely positioned to influence the national agenda without considerable effort. Thus, modern presidents may go public more often to influence the content of the national news agenda” (Miles, 67). The power that goes along with presidency allows presidents to shape the national agenda to focus on issues they are passionate about. “As the national representative, the president is not only uniquely positioned to place items on the national agenda but also to *displace* items on the national agenda” (Miles, 71). In this sense the president is not only able to discuss what they want to talk about, they are also able to draw attention away from issues they dislike. This can be extremely powerful because they are able to conceal prevalent issues within our country to uphold their own reputation.

Social media also poses threats to our democratic process in a variety of other ways. It is evident that Russian hacking interfered with our democratic process in the 2016 Presidential election. Before social media existed something like this would have failed to affect the outcome of an election. However, there were several ways that social media allowed for the election

results to be chosen by select individuals. “The key figure is Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA)...which has displayed mastery of postmodern disinformation techniques for fomenting polarisation, distrust and confusion in target populations of social media users” (Naughton).

From this it is apparent that Russian hacking in the 2016 election had a direct impact by targeting specific users of social media. Further, the Oxford report found:

“IRA activities were designed to polarise the US public and interfere in elections by encouraging African-American voters to boycott elections or follow the wrong voting procedures in 2016, and more recently prompting Mexican-American and Hispanic voters to distrust US institutions; encouraging extreme rightwing voters to be more confrontational; and spreading sensationalist, conspiratorial and other types of junk political news and misinformation to voters across the political spectrum” (Naughton)

It is important to recognize that social media is not just seen now as a useful tool for influencing elections, but something that shapes our everyday discourse. “To put it more succinctly: social media now poses an existential threat to the kind of liberal democracy we like to think we have” (Naughton). Because social media platforms are so prevalent it is essential that users are evaluating their sources and questioning the information they are consuming.

Social media also promotes and creates a space for modern day propaganda. “Propaganda is defined through the application of four interdependent principles: the attempt to influence people’s minds and behavior; the efficient use of mass media; the understanding of the psychological condition of the intended/desired audience; and the exploitation of socially established behavioral patterns” (Poulakidakos, Veneti & Fangonikolopoulos 369). Cambridge Analytica is a perfect example of modern day propaganda affecting American elections. Cambridge Analytica collected data from millions of Facebook users and used this information to target users to influence their political opinions (Meredith). “Cambridge Analytica, a political firm hired by President Trump’s 2016 election campaign, gained access to private information on

more than 50 million Facebook users. The firm offered tools that could identify the personalities of American voters and influence their behavior” (Granville). Not only is social media an ever present source of information, but user data is being compiled to actually sway elections. This is greatly breaking down our democratic process because the results are being altered.

This further explains the value of an individual's social media data. Social media has placed important worth on the personal data of voters. “The real ‘great hack’ isn’t Cambridge’s ill-gotten data or Facebook’s failure to protect it. It’s the entire business model of Silicon Valley, which has incentivized the use of personal data to manipulate human behavior on a massive scale” (Rose). It is essential to recognize how social media sites promote giving out personal information. In turn this allows social media sites to affect our democratic process because they are able to manipulate voters to think a certain way. The importance of private data has become less about fear of identity theft and more about the ability data has to influence the democratic process.

Something worth noting is how social media is the lowest cost way to get information. I argue that this is why it is so extremely prevalent as a news source to today’s society. There is generally little to no fee when reading social media news sources. Millennials specifically find this especially appealing and opt to get their news from social media news sources. The issue with this further involves the accuracy of such news sources. Fake news has become extremely prevalent and is a major concern of our democracy. Furthermore, our current president has deemed news sources that he disagrees with to be fake news. This is problematic because now more than ever individuals that disagree with specific news will determine it to be false. “The phrase ‘fake news’ has been ‘appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news

organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable” (Farhall, 4354). In this sense the term ‘fake news’ can be problematic because of how loosely our current president uses this term to describe information he disagrees with.

It is extremely evident that social media has a profound impact on our democratic process. The social media accounts of politicians allow them to connect with constituents on a perpetual basis. This allows constant communication as well as a view into the private lives of politicians, which typically results in stronger support from followers. The presidential power that comes with the bully pulpit is also a large factor in our democratic process. The president has full power to set the agenda of what issues are talked about and brought to the national agenda. Furthermore, social media pulls personal data from constituents and in return modern-day propaganda organizations are able to influence the results of elections. Social media has the power to keep us connected 24/7, but ultimately at the cost of our national democracy. Because of social media our democratic process has been sacrificed and altered greatly in a negative way.

## Works Cited

- Aromeeva, Elena, et al. "Post-Truth: Its Meaning and Implications for Democracy: The Political Studies Association (PSA)." *Post-Truth: Its Meaning and Implications for Democracy | The Political Studies Association (PSA)*, 17 July 2017.
- Arugete, Natalia. "The Agenda Setting Hypothesis in the New Media Environment." *Communication & Society*, vol. 28, Jan. 2017, pp. 35–58.
- Ekman, Mattias, and Andreas Widholm. "Politicians as Media Producers." *Journalism Practice*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 78–91.
- Farhall, Kate, et al. "Political Elites' Use of Fake News Discourse Across Communications Platforms." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 13, 9 Oct. 2019.
- Granville, Kevin. "Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What You Need to Know as Fallout Widens." *The New York Times*, 19 Mar. 2018.
- Meredith, Sam. "Here's Everything You Need to Know about the Cambridge Analytica Scandal." *CNBC*, CNBC, 23 Mar. 2018.
- Miles, Matthew R. "The Bully Pulpit and Media Coverage: Power without Persuasion." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 19, 2014.
- Naughton, John. "Social Media Is an Existential Threat to Our Idea of Democracy." *The Guardian*, 23 Dec. 2018.
- Perloff, Richard M. "Mass Communication Research at the Crossroads: Definitional Issues and Theoretical Directions for Mass and Political Communication Scholarship in an Age of Online Media." *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 18, 2015.

Poulakidakos, Stamatis, et al. "Post-Truth, Propaganda and the Transformation of the Spiral of Silence." *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2018.

Rose, Janus. "Netflix's 'The Great Hack' Misses The Big Picture." *Vice*, 26 July 2019.