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The Impact of The Media On Politics

The political landscape has changed quite a bit in the last couple of decades. The internet has played a large role in this transformation. Social media, in particular, is now a serious factor in political campaigns and in the way people think about issues. Candidates and their supporters constantly post their views on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Each party has its own pages, from which it broadcasts propaganda and requests for donations. There are some of the leading ways that social media influences politics today. One of the ways that social media has transformed politics is the sheer speed at which news, poll results and rumors are shared. Whereas in the pre-internet days, people had to wait for the next newspaper or TV news show to get the latest information, online news is a 24/7 phenomenon.

While online news is currently a phenomenon available around the clock, social media has taken it a step further. While you can access news on many websites at any hour, most people spend more time on sites such as Facebook and Twitter than they do on serious news or political websites. This means that you get all of the latest trending news stories and opinions shared by your friends whenever you log on. Another place where social media influences politics is in political polls. Political polls are an important part of every campaign. They are often confusing because you can often find multiple polls with contradictory results posted on the very same day. As with other types of political news, the internet has greatly increased the number of poll results we see each day. Social media has accelerated this even more. Not only do social media sites report the results of polls, but you can also actually participate in Facebook polls. Polls results have a big influence on elections. This is true even if they are flawed. When people are posting the latest poll results on social media throughout the day, there is a great deal of pressure on candidates to pull ahead of their opponents.

A number of explanations can be offered for the shift in the quality and quantity of political information. One of these explanations is focus on the nature of the American political environment that has become extremely polarized, prompting the emergence of political agendas that promote rogue politics. A 2017 Pew Research Center¹ study revealed that the gap between Democrats and Republicans on core political values, including the role of government, race, immigration, the social safety net, national security, taxes, and environmental protection, have grown to epic proportions for the modern era. Two-thirds of Americans fall solidly in the liberal or conservative camp, with few holding a mix of ideological positions.

¹ (Pew Research Center, 2017; Kiley, 2017).

Speech on new media reflects these stark political divisions, and frequently devolves into expressions of hostility and ad hominem attacks. President Donald Trump used Twitter to ignite a controversy over NFL players who protested racial oppression during the playing of the national anthem before games. He used a derogatory term to refer to players, who are predominantly African American, and urged team owners to fire those supporting the demonstration. Trump's social media blasts accused the players of disrespecting the flag and the military, which misrepresents the protest agenda and has divided the public along political and racial lines.

Political divisions are reflected in the presence of media "echo chambers," where people select their news and information sources based on their affinity for the politics of other users. Modern day new media echo chambers began to form during the first phase of new media, as conservative talk radio hosts, like Rush Limbaugh², attracted dedicated followers.³ Social media has hastened the development of echo chambers, as they facilitate people's exposure to information shared by likeminded individuals in their personal digital networks, with nearly half of adult Americans getting their news from social media platforms. Even politically disinterested social media users frequently encounter news articles unintentionally as they scan their feed.⁴ The ability of social media to isolate people from exposure to those with differing viewpoints aggravates political polarization.

On the other hand, journalist Susan Glasser⁵ argues that journalism has come to reflect the realities of reporting in post-truth America (2016). Objective facts are subordinate to emotional appeals and personal beliefs in shaping public opinion. The public has difficulty distinguishing relevant news about weighty policy issues from the redundant fuss that permeates the media. The work of investigative journalists has in some ways become more insightful and informed than in the past due to the vast resources available for researching stories, including greater access to government archives and big data analysis. However, well-documented stories are obscured by the constant drone of repetitive, sensationalized trivia-bites that dominate old and new media. Reflecting on coverage of the last American presidential contest, Glasser states, "The media scandal of 2016 is not so much about what reporters fail to tell the American public; it is about what they did report on, and the fact that it did not seem to matter" (2016).

2 Rush Hudson Limbaugh was an American radio personality, conservative political commentator, author, and television show host.

3 (Jamieson and Cappella, 2010).

4 (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016).

5 Susan Glasser is an American journalist and news editor. She has many books in which she criticizes American politics.

Evidence that Glasser's concerns are well-founded can be compiled by examining media content daily. Post-truth media was prominent during the 2016 presidential election. Media accounts of the election were infused with misinformation, baseless rumors, and outright lies. False stories and unverified factoids emanated from fabricated news sites as well as the social media accounts of the candidates and their surrogates. Republican nominee Donald Trump used his Twitter feed to push out sensational, unverified statements that would dominate the news agenda, a practice he maintained after assuming the presidency. He alleged that the father of Ted Cruz, his challenger for the nomination, was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and perpetuated the false claim that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. False news stories infiltrated reports by legacy media organizations as they relied heavily on digital sources for information.

Due to the influence of social media, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish real policy news from fake news on the internet. Social media makes this distinction especially confusing. The constant stream of memes, links and rumors about political leaders and candidates is a mixture of truth, lies, satire and speculation. There are now quite a few fake or satirical news sites that often post stories that sound authentic. For instance, the Onion is the best known of these. Furthermore, political campaigns are also now affected by every story spread on social media, whether it is the truth or not. The most extreme example of the concept of post-truth reporting is the rise of fake news. The definition of fake news has changed over time and continues to be fluid. First, the term fake news refers to news parodies and satires such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report.

Social media does not have a very positive effect on politics. But one of the positive effects that social media has on politics is the opportunity for voters to interact more easily with candidates and elected officials. Traditionally, if you wanted to meet a politician or candidate, you would have to attend a live event. Not everyone is able to do this. With modern technology, it is now possible to attend virtual events where you can participate in live streaming events and interact with politicians and candidates.

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the new media have both expanded and undercut the traditional roles of the press in a democratic society. On the positive side, they have vastly increased the potential for political information to reach even the most disinterested citizens. They enable the creation of digital public squares where opinions can be openly shared. They have created new avenues for engagement that allow the public to connect in new ways with government, and to contribute to the flow of political information.

⁶ Donald Trump mentioned these in his speech in Carson in 2017.

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