

Disrupted Public Sphere: Is Social Media Killing Democracy?

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The design and implementation of social media platforms has put several advanced democracies into a kind of democratic deficit. First, social algorithms allow fake news stories from untrustworthy sources to spread like wildfire over networks of family and friends. Second, social media algorithms provide very real structure to what political scientists often call “elective affinity” or “selective exposure”. We prefer to strengthen our ties to the people and organizations we already know and like. Third, technology companies, including Facebook and Twitter, have been given a moral pass on the normative obligations for democratic discourse that we hold journalists and civil society groups to. Using evidence from the ERC-funded Consolidator Award on Computational Propaganda (COMPROP, www.politicalbots.org), I discuss the ways in which social media platforms have become they key infrastructures for political discourse, identify how these technological affordances have put us into a democratic deficit, and conclude with some ideas about ways in which social media platforms could be a better infrastructure for deliberative democracy.

Social media have to share in the blame for some of the unusual political outcomes of the last year. The results of the Brexit referendum and U.S. presidential election surprised many people, and public confidence in experts, science, and research has diminished in domains in which there has been hard work towards consensus. There is strong scientific consensus that human induced climate change has deleterious consequences for our quality of life. There is decades of research on the connection between tobacco and cancer. And there is consensus among national security experts that Russia deliberately interfered with the US election of 2016. But public confidence in climate science is weak in many countries, public certainty about the connection between smoking and cancer is dwindling in others, and modern news consumers not strong, public life is replete with rumours that obscure the most important national security concerns. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are partly to blame for sending us into a democratic deficit, because fake news, campaigns of misinformation, and hate speech on social media have eroded our ability to deliberate and

make informed decisions. Certainly they don't produce the misinformation. But they do serve it up to citizens.

However, the real sin, on the part of social media firms, has been an act of omission: they failed to contribute the data that democracy needs to thrive. While sitting on immense troves of information on public needs and voter intent, social media firms watched as the nation's pollsters, journalists, politicians and civil society groups made bad projections and poor decisions with the wrong information.

In 2008 many people celebrated the Obama campaign's successful use of social media to organize his successful political campaign. Trump, Clinton, and their supporters used similar tools in this Presidential election. But both Facebook and Twitter also provided the infrastructure for distributing [false information about public life](#), and users couldn't always identify the origins, truths, or purposes of political clickbait. My [own research on computational propaganda](#) demonstrates that Facebook and Twitter can be easily used to poison political conversations, especially when campaigners use highly automated accounts and algorithms, often called "bots", to automate attacks on individuals and propagate lies.

At the same time, our systems for measuring public opinion have broken down. Social scientists flagged the degradation of telephone based-survey methods and the potential for internet-based polling [decades ago](#). With everyone on mobile phones, getting political content from their social networks, it has proven hard to learn about what the public knows and wants. For democracy to work, it needs two kinds of polling systems to be up and running.

First, healthy democracies need nationwide exit polls that provide a check on how well governments are running the election, not just to project winners. Such polls identify egregious mistakes in how elections are run, helping to confirm or refute claims of fraud. The exit polling system has been broken in the United States since 2002 (and 2005 in the UK), when the national coalition of media outlets stopped coordinating a thorough national exit poll. One of the most important features of a democracy is exit polling—independent checks as voters leave polling stations to see if preferences are consistent with ultimate ballot counts.

Second, journalists and pollsters need good data on the public desires. When incorrect polling numbers circulate, politicians can't respond to public opinion. Polling data is needed by a host of civil society groups, lobbyists, government offices, and elected officials to understand civic issues before and after voting day. Ironically, the same infrastructure of mobile phones and internet services that makes Facebook and Twitter successful businesses degrades our ability to think collectively about policy options and then survey what the public wants.

It is easy to revile a political system dominated by pollsters. But understanding what citizens want takes regular surveys and occasional elections. Political scientists have long argued that healthy democracies require reliable exit polling whenever citizens vote, and good public policy polling between referenda and elections. And the latest thinking on deliberation is that small groups of citizens engaging with experts before voting results in better, more democratic decisions, precisely because small juries of people don't get as easily distracted by misinformation, fake news, and hate speech.

Meanwhile social media firms—and Facebook in particular—have been collecting immense troves of high quality data about public opinion. Facebook in particular has demonstrated their capacity to take the pulse of the nation—and almost any nation at that. The company has bragged about using [its news feed](#) to manipulate its users' moods. The company regularly studies the news consumption habits of its users, [producing fine-grained analysis](#) of the causes and consequences of political polarization on its platform.

While journalists, pollsters, and civic groups were all making predictions with bad data, Facebook and Twitter were sitting on better data that they have been collecting from the moment a user signs up for a service. They've [repeatedly demonstrated](#) that they can make some powerful inferences about public opinion, and do interesting experiments on it.

Only Facebook and Twitter know how pervasive fake news stories and misinformation campaigns were during the Brexit referendum and U.S. presidential campaign. They know who clicked on what, how much time was spent reading, where the user was physically, and even how the user voted last time. These platforms know enough about voter attitudes to target misleading political ads at undecided voters, and otherwise served up liberal news to liberals and conservative news to conservatives.

These days, social media firms like Facebook and Twitter are media firms more than technology firms. During critical moments like elections and referenda we need all media outlets to support public conversations by hosting political debates, encouraging voter turnout, reporting on campaign events and polling public opinion. Some would say it is not a technology company's obligation to provide data in the public interest, but we do expect media companies to support democratic conversations, at the very least during elections. And the current structure of their social media services is degrading public life in democracies.

The problem of poor quality public opinion data can be solved by having social media firms, and Facebook in particular, join media organizations in doing more public policy polling. Social platforms could become a means of exit polling on voting day. In the years ahead Facebook may be the place to experiment with small-scale democratic exercises on big policy questions, using deliberative polls or civic juries that have proven to be among the best ways to run public consultations. In other words, they could be an integral part of the process of improving our democratic processes. Simply providing a platform for open political speech has degraded public life. Helping policy makers make better decisions, and serving up high-quality information to users would rescue us from this democratic deficit.

Facebook and Twitter threaten our democratic institutions because they fragment publics, spread misinformation, and have steered clear of the public service we expect of media firms. They watched as journalists and traditional pollsters got public sentiments wrong. Serving up fake news and allowing computational propaganda to target specific voters is a shameful act against democratic values. But hoarding and withholding data about public opinion is the major crime against democracy.

Social media firms manage the platforms over which most citizens in advanced democracies—and in many other countries—now talk about politics. They gather valuable data about public opinion and could strengthen our institutions and get us out of this democratic deficit. We thought social media firms would give us access to lots of different people. Instead they give us access to many people with the same point of view. Some technical redesign and quality control would take a lot of the fake news out of circulation. But the next step is to actively help policy makers, journalists and civil society groups understand the nuances of public opinion.

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