Social media and political breakdown: the effect of emergent social media network...

Technology, Internet

The various social media tools that have risen from Web 2. 0 technologies are arguably some of the most powerful new tools of the century. Social media allows an unprecedented amount of connection between individuals, companies, groups, and any combination thereof. One of the major things that social media offers the individual is immediate access to information regarding nearly any subject; anything that happens in the world is immediately posted on social media outlets. Indeed, news can even be found more readily on social media sites than from traditional news outlets in some cases.

However, there are drawbacks to this readily-accessible information as well. These tools have evolved so quickly that there has been a change in the way the average citizen searches for and absorbs information. This change has also affected the way people obtain news and information in general around the globe. The Internet and social media are very powerful tools, but they can cause political breakdown and turmoil when they are used inappropriately or in a less-than-ideal manner.

Regardless of whether or the researcher agrees with the rise of social media, most researchers into this field agree that the rise of social media has wrought great democratization on the world of information-sharing. No longer are individuals restricted by what professional sources are willing to publish; today, anyone can be an author, blogger, photographer or journalist (Sayed). It is this very democratization that experts in the field of social media expansion argue about: to what end has the democratization of information via social media risen? The constant influx of information has caused humanity and society as a whole a different set of issues than the

dearth of information has in the past (Sayed).

One of the first important issues to consider when discussing the political aspects of social media is a good working definition of social media. Not all Web 2. 0 sites are social media sites, nor are all social media sites impactful on the political processes of the United States. Storck (2011) discusses social media with a very specific subset of technical vocabulary:

For the purpose of this discussion, social media networks (SMNs) will be defined as ' online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration.' Additionally, social media tools are websites that ' interact with the users, while giving them information.' (Storck, 2011)

This definition is particularly helpful for the discussion of social media as it pertains to political issues because political issues are, by and large, driven by two things: voter turnout and political inclination (Lomberg, 2011). Both voter turnout and political inclination have been affected by social media in very interesting ways in recent years, particularly in the 2012 presidential election in the United States (Lomberg, 2011). The ways in which social media give individuals information-- and the ways in which social media allows individuals to share information between themselves-- is incredibly important when considering the role of social media in political breakdown, both in the United States political system and abroad, in other types of political systems.

The issues posed by social media are complex and important to consider, especially in the context of political discourse and organization. In the United States, politics are rife with half-truths and " spin;" many people are taken in

by these manipulations of information and, as a result, are not fully informed about issues that are of importance to American politics. Social media has a tendency to exacerbate this phenomenon, for a wide variety of different reasons.

The first, and potentially most important problem with the rise of social media is the problem of the quality of information provided by social media. In his text The Cult of the Amateur (2007), Keen argues that: " what the Web 2. 0 revolution is really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment." He continues by stating that today, when anyone can act as a journalist or analyst, the voices of the true experts are often lost in the commotion (Keen, 2007).

Experts, Keen believes, are getting lost in the noise of Web 2. 0: when so many people are producing content for free, it becomes problematic for experts to make a living producing paid content in a world of free services (Keen, 2007). When a professional political analyst examines the presidential race in the United States, for instance, he or she may be published on a news site or within a journal, but his or her voice is often drowned out by the vast amount of opinion-- educated or no-- from the average citizen with access to a Facebook or Twitter account (Lomberg, 2011). Keen writes, " As an ideology, it [Web 2. 0] is based upon a series of ethical assumptions about media, culture, and technology. It worships the creative amateur: the self-taught filmmaker, the dorm-room musician, the unpublished writer. It suggests that everyone--even the most poorly educated and inarticulate amongst us--can and should use digital media to express and realize

themselvesThe enemy of Web 2. 0 is " elitist" traditional media" (Keen, 2007). Keen (2007) is particularly worried that social media has encouraged the spread of bad or incorrect information, and perhaps rightfully so-- the number of new social media accounts created daily continues to rise with no sign of slowing (Lomberg, 2011).

Some political pundits discuss the perplexing rise of the " amateur" on Capitol Hill with a bemused air of grandparents discussing the new fads that their grandchildren are participating in, but given the rising ideal of democratization on the Internet, it seems to be natural that the " expert" or " elite" have been shunted aside in politics for the " good-ol'-boy" or the " average Joe" (Keen, 2007). When society comes to idolize the average, the truly elite and truly extraordinary get shunted to the side.

According to the Pew Institute, " Internet users under 50 are particularly likely to use a social networking site of any kind, and those 18-29 are the most likely of any demographic cohort to do so (83%). Women are more likely than men to be on these sites. Those living in urban settings are also significantly more likely than rural internet users to use social networking" (Pew Research Institute, 2013). These numbers may seem inconsequential in regards to political activity, but in reality, the large number of people that have been using social media sites on a daily basis has changed the way information spreads from person to person in today's society.

In the past, it was important to teach school-aged children to memorize information, because the amount of information an individual was exposed to on a daily basis was much less than it is today. When people wanted to access new information, research had to be done in a library or other similar

location; books were carefully researched before they were published and edited for mistakes. In short, the barrier for information in the past was access to information and ability to retain information; today, anyone can access nearly any kind of information if they possess access to the Internet. What society lacks today is not access, but the ability to properly collect, codify, and evaluate the vast amounts of information that it is presented with on a daily basis (Keen, 2007).

Without the same barrier for entry that there has been in the past, people can publish anything they want on the Internet, and it is easily found. Without anyone verifying the information that is published on the Internet, people who do not have the ability or the desire to properly evaluate information can easily become misled by bad or poorly researched information (Keen, 2007).

This argument does have merit, but the manner in which Keen presents the argument is somewhat condescending towards the intelligence of the average American individual and his or her ability to verify information. While some people may be overwhelmed by the vast amount of information available, there is no information available that seems to lead to the inevitable conclusion that blogs or Twitter feeds mislead the American public more readily than CNN or Fox News, or other more traditional media outlets (Byrne, 2011).

Another aspect of social media information sharing that Keen overlooks is the under-educated expert. There are, in fact, individuals within society that are not afforded the same opportunities as others; the Internet and Web 2. 0 technologies allow these individuals to create content and share it much

more readily than they would be able to if they were trying to break into the world of academia. This raises the question of whether or not the rise of a few new " elite amateurs" in the world of social media is worth the cost: the rise of many average and sub-par amateurs. Keen (2007) would argue that the rise of some new elite is certainly not worth the toll that the rise of the amateur is taking on American society as a whole.

This discussion also encompasses the viral spread of information, particularly the viral spread of bad information. This is a major concern, particularly within political parties; for example, the rumor that Barack Obama was not, in fact, an American citizen was a complete fabrication, but it continued to circulate on the Internet long after it was disproved in the traditional media and accepted as a false rumor by the public at large (Byrne, 2011).

Another issue that comes up repeatedly in the discussion of politics and social media is the discussion of " attack politics" and the aggressive political climate of today. Keen (2007) would argue that this is a necessary extension of the problems that Web 2. 0 technologies are causing within American culture. Keen (2007) writes:

Another word for narcissism is " personalization." Web 2. 0 technology personalizes culture so that it reflects ourselves rather than the world around us. Blogs personalize media content so that all we read are our own thoughts. Online stores personalize our preferences, thus feeding back to us our own taste. Google personalizes searches so that all we see are advertisements for products and services we already use Instead of Mozart, Van Gogh, or Hitchcock, all we get with the Web 2. 0 revolution is more of ourselves. (Keen, 2007).

When a person's Internet experience is " personalized," as Keen would say, the individual must seek out outside information that will challenge his or her worldview because the information will no longer come to them. Never is he or she presented with an expert opinion that is logically argued and presented in such a way that it will necessarily affect his or her point of view; the individual is able to easily create a type of insular political bubble for him or herself, keeping out any information or discourse that challenges his or her point of view on a particular topic. This allows an individual's beliefs to become heavily entrenched, as the environment that they exist within is an echo chamber that affirms his or her beliefs, choices, or ideals without question.

Perhaps Keen's strongest argument against Web 2. 0 technologies stems from the " popular thought" argument. Keen (2007) argues that popular thought or popular opinion has been, by and large, overtly wrong in the past about a great many things, and it has always fallen to the forward-thinking members of society to ensure that these wrongs are righted, no matter how argumentative the public is regarding their opinions. One of the most compelling cases he cites is the case of slavery and then the subsequent treatment of African-American people in American history; slavery, he says, was supported by the populace, but that support does not and cannot make slavery less wrong (Keen, 2007). It was the actions of the forward-thinking few that righted the wrong and today, social media technologies are drowning out the voices of the forward-thinking few.

One of the problems with Web 2. 0, Keen says, is that the Internet lacks the gatekeepers of information (Keen, 2007). Without gatekeepers, social

discourse cannot be guided in any positive way; it is subject to the whims and trends of the populace-- a populace who, as he previously stated, cannot be trusted to make good decisions as a whole (Keen, 2007).

However, there is a problem with Keen's reasoning in this case: if the populace cannot be trusted to make decisions, then when can be trusted? In American society, education is not a requirement for voting, nor can someone be excluded from the political process for his or her ideas. If American society can and must, necessarily, trust the average citizen to vote for its leaders, what is the purpose of restricting their online discourse, or stating that their online discourse is flawed in some way? The entire American political system of today is built upon the idea of American involvement in the political system. It seems that Keen supports the paternalistic restriction of discourse in American politics at the expense of the common man.

Young people are more likely to use social media outlets regularly in their everyday life, according to most research. Politicians that utilize social media outlets efficiently, therefore, are more likely to reach larger numbers of young voters. According to Lomberg (2012), these numbers are significant:

" The demographics of social media users tend to fall in line more closely with those of today's Democratic voters."

So it's possible that social media campaigns — which tend to find more receptive ears among youth voters — are merely preaching to the converted.

But considering that young people, as a demographic, have the lowest percentage of registered voters, it's significant that social media efforts

excite them and compel them to vote. (Lomberg, 2012).

Because the Democratic Party commands more of the young vote, it can utilize social media to more easily mobilize its followers, and potentially win elections based on these numbers. Motivating voters to turn out in the United States is an incredibly important part of any political campaign, as the United States has an abysmally low voter turnout rate when compared to other countries that have similar governmental structures (Lomberg, 2012). Keen would worry, perhaps, that the increase in voter turnout as a result of social media utilization is an extension of his " cult of the amateur," and is rather worrisome, as it is amateurism as practiced by elected, high-level officials within government; he may even liken social media pandering to voters as an extension of his issue of " personalization" in Web 2. 0 technologies. By creating a web presence where the voter can see exactly what he or she is interested in seeing, the politicians of the United States are furthering this problematic idea of the democratization of information (Keen, 2007).

The last issue that Keen addresses within his text is more tangentially-related to political breakdown than directly related, but in the economic climate of today, the discussion of the changing face of economics as a result of Internet technologies is very important. Keen's (2007) thesis regarding the free services on the Internet presents a very bleak picture of the future, particularly in terms of the music and media industries and the various offshoots thereof.

Nothing that the average citizen considers as a free service on the Internet is actually free, according to Keen. Keen writes: " This time, however, the

consequences of the digital media revolution are much more profound. Apple and Google and Craigslist really are revolutionizing our cultural habits, our ways of entertaining ourselves, our ways of defining who we are Newspapers are in freefall. Network television, the modern equivalent of the dinosaur, is being shaken by TiVo's overnight annihilation of the 30-second commercial" (Keen, 2007). In a world where the economic climate is a constant problem, discussed at length by experts, amateurs, and politicians alike, the issue of the slow death of the traditional, safe, and secure economy is very worrisome to a logically-minded individual like Keen.

When taken together, the issues that Keen presents in his book are persuasive in some ways, but less than persuasive in others. While there is certainly some truth to his worry that the democratization of information on the Internet has the potential to cause political and even social breakdown if it is not addressed, the situation is not so dire as he makes it seem. Humanity is amazingly adaptive-- the very existence of the Web 2. 0 technologies proves this, as if humanity was not adaptive, the use of these technologies would never have taken off in the general population. Most people feel as though they have something to say, and now the Internet has provided them with a platform from which to say it. It is true that the rise of so many voices has caused problems for the expert, but by no means has the rise of social media " killed" the voice of the expert, or made the expert's opinion any less valid or valued. Indeed, the expert can utilize social media just as effectively as the layperson; perhaps even more effectively, in some cases.

While there are problems that the political world will face when utilizing

social media, social media as a whole will not disappear anytime soon. The best method for dealing with this potential political breakdown is not to halt the use of social media altogether, but instead to look critically at the ways in which social media is used within the political system.

Understanding Keen's thesis regarding the potential for bad information and the difficulties of the democratization of information on the Internet is important for those within the political system, particularly to ensure that they maintain a high level of quality in the content that they produce. Many of the problems that Keen addresses in his text are not insurmountable problems, but they will require time and focus to fix. Educating the public on the problems that social media poses and teaching them how to distinguish good information from bad-- and good services from bad-- is one of the best places to start protecting society against political and social breakdown. Encouraging discourse and providing individuals with good information-- not only information that they want to hear-- is important when it comes to creating a good online forum for political discussion. If more time is spent educating people on how to utilize social media responsibly and effectively, then some of the problems that are presented in Keen's work may be offset. Careful use of social media can slow or even halt the cultural breakdown that Keen fears so intently, but it will take work and careful attention paid by educators and parents.

References

Byrne, D. (2011). The Evolving Use of Social Media for Political Campaigns. [online] Retrieved from: http://socialmediatoday.

com/diarmaid-byrne/338242/evolving-use-social-media-political-campaigns [Accessed: 1 May 2013].

Keen, A. (2007). The cult of the amateur. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Leonard, H. (2013). A Breakdown Of Demographics For The Different Social Media Networks. Business Insider, March 5.

Lomberg, J. (2011). Twitter politics: How social media impacts presidential elections. ECN, September 10.

Pew Research Institute (2013). The Demographics of Social Media Users -- 2012. [online] Retrieved from: http://www. pewinternet. org/Reports/2013/Social-media-users. aspx [Accessed: 1 May 2013].

Safranek, R. (2012). The Emerging Role of Social Media in Political and Regime Change. ProQuest.

Sayed, S. (2013). Social Media and Politics. [online] Retrieved from: http://socialmediainpolitics. blogspot. com/ [Accessed: 1 May 2013].

Storck, M. (2011). The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilisation: a Case Study of the January 2011 Egyptian Uprising. University of Saint Andrews.