

# Impact of social media on politics and engagement



## Introduction

For policymakers and academics, the 1990s appeared to be an era of media empowerment (Robinson, 2005). After the cold war ended anti-communist sentiment expanded the power news media had. Globalization of news media made the public aware of humanitarian crises such as Iraq in 1991, Somalia in 1992, Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999 and now Syria in 2017 (Robinson, 2005). As these broadcasting mediums developed into new media, ever changing the communication universe, it can almost be described as a part of natural evolution. Media has evolved from print to broadcast and now social media or new media. In many ways, social media is challenging and changing the way traditional mediums such as print and broadcast operate, however they are not replacing them (Gasher et. al 2012). The evolution of media from print to social has allowed a phenomenon known as citizen journalism to occur. In this new upcoming form of journalism in social media, individuals can play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating content hence, eventually impacting political action. In this new era, people tend to rely more on Internet portals and news websites than traditional broadcasting or print services such as televisions, newspapers, and radios. A study performed by Neyazi, Kumar, and Semetko conducted surveys across India and found increased online engagement resulted in increased political involvement within individuals (Neyazi et. al, 2016). This study clearly indicates a new participatory form of journalism that is mobilizing the influence of citizens on politics. These profound developments brought forward by social media can be seen in the examples such as the Syrian

refugee crisis impacting the result of a Canadian federal election, the embarkation of the Egyptian revolution and finally the 2016 United States presidential election. These examples portray the role social media plays in both positive and negative light. Whereas overthrowing of authoritarian regimes due to the involvement of social media is positive, the abundance of falsehoods impacting political decisions of citizens is precarious. Social media has created a public sphere where citizens can become content producers and consumers while engaging in discourse. Hence digitization has profoundly impacted politics by mobilizing political action and public discourse, increased partisanship and decreased the threat of authoritarian regimes.

## Social media

The Internet is a collection of computers that are connected and they can exchange information (SFU CMPT 165 Distance Education Guide). Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2010). It allows individuals to create networks where they can share photos, thoughts, videos and more. For instance, as of January 2018, Facebook obtained over 2.167 billion users (Osno, 2018). In addition, Facebook also owns Instagram which consists of over 800 million users. This has caused a huge controversy because Facebook consists of a third of the entire human population (Osno, 2018). Hence, resulting in several problems such as Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, the <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-social-media-on-politics-and-engagement/>

circulation of fake news and false information and more. Facebook has time and time again found itself in many controversies and it is evident that one individual being responsible for the discourse of over two billion people is highly problematic. The monetization of these mediums of public discourse is in themselves controversial because it allows room for extreme biases in a public sphere which can eventually influence politics in a major way.

### Social Media and Public Discourse

In September 2015 an image of a young Syrian boy named Alan Kurdi whose body has washed ashore on a Turkish beach after failing to seek asylum in Greece shocked people all across the globe as it circulated social media sites (UNHCR). In 2015 over 1.2 million people applied for refugee status seeking asylum from the European Union. This was a defining moment for the European Union because it initiated a sense of urgency for the Syrian refugee crisis. The media coverage and public outcry specifically on social media pressurized institutions and nations to implicate policy changes in order to accommodate asylum seekers. The differential role of social media compared to other Internet-based applications relies on the development of migrants' social networks and the possibility of users to consume, produce and share content and opinions within and across networks (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p. 411). Shortly after the image circulates, the UK announced that 20,000 Syrians would now be resettled and Alan Kurdi's picture was referenced and mentioned by politicians (BBC). In addition, as a result of the image, thousands of Canadians flooded charities, faith groups and legal advocates with offers of support and money (Newton, 2015).

Furthermore, Canada took in over 25,000 Syrian refugees and Germany  
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loosened its borders as well. This devastating photo led to a public outcry which initiated citizens all across the globe to get involved. The photo had an impact on the Canadian federal election as well. The promise to bring in 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015 became a key component of the Liberal party's platform in the federal election that year (Macleans, 2016). This photo highlights the need for urgency to take action which was created by discourse occurring on social media. This photo was taken outside the scope of the Canadian border, on a Turkish beach, of a Syrian boy, immensely influenced the Canadian election, which shows the profound impact social media has had on the globalization of political issues. It is astounding that a photo taken thousands of miles away can have such a massive influence on the Canadian election. Social media allows the globalization of issues such as the European refugee crisis in 2015 forcing nations across the globe to take action. The current wave of globalization due to social media has many unprecedented characteristics and has significantly impacted political action. Jihadists in Indonesia can now share their operational plans with like-minded extremists in the middle east, while Vietnamese artists can sell their wares in European markets. Globalization can be defined by ongoing relations between regions and people, generated by capital, trade, human mobility, and technology. It is widening, deepening and speeding up worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life (Naím, 2009).

Another example of social media initiating public discourse is the 2011 revolution in Egypt and is also known as the " Facebook Revolution" or " Web 2.0 Revolution". In January 2011, an activist in Egypt called for an

uprising against poverty, unemployment, government corruption and the injustices implicated by the president Hosni Mubarak. A specific event that initiated the revolution was the brutal beating resulting in the murder of Khaled Said by the police after he shared a video on YouTube exposing corrupt police officers sharing drugs after a raid. As a result, a Facebook page titled “ We are ae Khaled Said” was set up, which shared images of Said’s beaten up body. It also invited its 400, 000 plus followers to protest at Tahrir Square in Cairo on January 25. This Facebook group resulted in millions of Egyptians protesting on January 25, 2011, and further beginning a hashtag “#Jan25” which solidified the cause further via the use of Twitter and Facebook. As a result of this astounding revolution that had begun, the Egyptian government blocked internet access of the nation for five days. This revolution is a remarkable example of the momentous impact social media can have on politics and political discourse. Social media creates a sense of community and a public sphere where citizens with no political power or status can voice their opinions and show their opposition against oppressive regimes. This Facebook Revolution has the impact of social media embedded in its name and is a clear example of how social media mobilization efforts can be used to start revolutions and overthrow dictators.

The examples of Alan Kuradi and the Facebook Revolution are key precedents of how social media profoundly impacts politics by mobilizing political action and decrease the threat of authoritarian regimes. The photo of Alan Kuradi mobilized political action in Canada and resulted in one of the key platforms of the Liberal party which followed their win in 2015. Hence, depicting social media’s impact on mobilizing political action. The examples

of the Egyptian revolution further depicts how political action can be mobilized to overthrow authoritarian regimes through the use of social media. These examples bring forth the positive impact social media has had and is continuing to have. Regular people have become more engaged and created a global public sphere where discourse can take place.

### Social Media, Partisanship and Fake News

Social media has a profound impact on political action that results in the overthrowing of authoritarian regimes. However, it also increases partisanship. Social media has a democratic function in providing an alternative platform for minorities and marginalized to defy mainstream discourses in the public sphere. However, social media have also been found to be detrimental to democracy in our “ post-truth” era in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public appeals to emotion and personal belief (Lee & Chan, 2018). There is an abundance of false information on the internet. There is a spread of political misinformation and propaganda which is amplifying partisanship in communities of like-minded individuals, where they go unchallenged (Lee & Chan, 2018). An example of social media negatively impacting politics is the articulation of fake news during the US 2016 presidential election. Allcott and Gentzkow discussed that evidence shows that 62% of US adults get their news via social media and the majority of them believe the fake news reports they see shared on Facebook specifically. In addition, research also found that the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). This is evidently problematic due to the fact that individuals are not able to distinguish between false and accurate

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information. Hence, they are inclined to favor their political support for a candidate they may not agree with. Fake news can be defined as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead leaders and are often shared online (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213).

There are two motivations for the circulation of fake news. First is monetary, fake news articles that are shared online and go viral are able to draw a significant amount of traffic when a user clicks on the article and goes to the original site. The second motivation is ideological, which indicates the desire to advance the candidate one favors by spreading fake news articles defaming the opponent (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 217). These ideas of motivation are highly problematic in our globalized, new media world. The monetary motivation is problematic because the sources of these fake news articles are not concerned with the spread of false information. Their main concern is to increase traffic, hence they are able to articulate utterly inaccurate articles and headlines, such as “ FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leads found dead in apparent murder-suicide” or “ Donald Trump removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from Oval Office”. The goal of creating headlines in order to increase traffic is highly problematic because as seen in research many US citizens believed the fake news stories that were circulated prior to the election. A headline such as “ FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leads found dead in apparent murder-suicide” if believed by an individual can influence the way the vote of that individual. As a result, this can be detrimental to democracy due to the increased partisanship caused by fake news stories that are believed to be true.



Partisanship makes individuals inclined to seek out stories that justify their pre-existing biases despite being true or not (Taub, 2017). During this era, social media has become extremely ubiquitous and so has the circulation of false information. It is crucial for individuals to be aware of credible and noncredible sources in order to make an educated nonpartisan decision when it comes to making political decisions such as deciding on who to vote for. Partisanship is an integral moderator in social media news dynamic for two reasons. First, partisans are more active than non-partisans across all ranges of civic behaviors (Weeks and Holbert, 2013). They are more likely to share news content and opinions, which can result in the sharing of fake news being circulated that is articulated for ideological reasons. In addition, these partisans are more likely to see content that favors their political view despite its accuracy due to the filtrations and algorithms set up via services such as Facebook and Twitter (Weeks and Holbert, 2013). For instance, in the era of print media, two individuals would read a news story and form opinions, however, in the era of digital media, two individuals can have entirely different feeds and be exposed to different the same news story in highly partisan ways. This can evidentially be a problem due to the lack of objectivity being portrayed in the news stories. Despite social media increasing globalization and increasing public discourse, it is necessary to acknowledge that social media can also contain highly misleading information. This example of fake news and falsehoods being circulated highlights the key adversity posed by social media.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has created a public sphere where citizens can become content producers and consumers while engaging in discourse. Hence, profoundly impacting politics by mobilizing political action, increasing partisanship and decreasing the threat of authoritarian regimes. As seen in the examples provided, social media can initiate political action by circulating images that appeal to the emotional capacities of citizens of the world and further policies such as opening borders for refugees. Furthermore, social media can be used to mobilize political action such as revolutions in order to overthrow authoritarian regimes. Regardless of the benefits of content consumers being able to produce content, it also has many drawbacks. For instance, these content producers can produce misleading content such as the phenomenon known as “fake news” in order to gain monetary benefits or promote their ideological beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of the credible and non-credible sources and be aware of partisanship created by our algorithms on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more.

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