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The Modern Online Democracy: An Evaluation of Social Media's Ability to Facilitate Political Discourse

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Abstract. In an ideal democracy, the opinions of individuals form the basis of societal decision-making as they exercise critical thinking and take part in political discourse to form opinions they take to the voting booths. This formation of opinions, however, is increasingly being affected by social media platforms that provide features that affect with who and in what way people interact with each other. This study will evaluate these effects that social media can have on the formation of political opinions by examining the two representative platforms Facebook and Twitter. These platforms will be evaluated for their abilities to allow freedom of expression, expose users to diverse opinions, and promote user engagement in civil political discussion. Overall, the effects are mixed due to a number of factors, and taking these conclusions into account the study also provides policy suggestions for humanity's future intertwined with social media.

Keywords. social media, echo-chamber, political discourse, civil discussion, homophily, opinion formation, Facebook, Twitter

1. Introduction

Social media in the 21st century have quickly become the de facto platform for people to interact. These online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Reddit now offer unprecedented connectivity for people across the world, enabling a person to find and forge new connections with someone else regardless of distance, nationality, and soon even income level as technology becomes increasingly affordable. Along with this meteoric rise in social media connectivity in the past decade has come an increase in its usage for sharing opinions and spreading influence. This has been facilitated by the release of more features that have been refined overtime to allow people to find communities, amplify their voice, and respond to others.

Although each Social Networking Service (SNS) platform does have its own unique set of rules and properties that alter the way discussions are conducted on them, one commonality between every platform is that the new landscape of the Internet has significantly changed political discourse. The matter has also become increasingly relevant as more social movements, presidential campaigns, and political discussions in general are based in and fomented by social media. The rise in digital fluency and the Internet access are sure to make this impact greater over time. As a result, an evaluation of social media's effect on political discourse is necessary.

This evaluation will focus on the two primary platforms of Facebook and Twitter for reasons which will be outlined in the following section, and try to answer the question “To what extent do social media facilitate political discourse?” The platforms will be evaluated for their ability to facilitate “productive” political discourse. Of course, what constitutes productive discourse varies from person to person; People pursue politics for different ends, meaning their concepts of what makes something productive will be different. However, I have identified three common factors past studies have used to operationalize the facilitation of political discourse on social media.

Referring to this existing literature, I define productive political discourse as having the following qualities. First, it allows for free expression of one’s opinions (Kushin 2009), in that individuals do not feel coercion of any kind that dissuades them from voicing their political beliefs. These coercions may be systematic, but they can also be socio psychological. Second, it involves individuals being exposed to a variety of opinions (Wojcieszak, Magdalena, and Mutz 2009) by interacting with a wide range of people and hearing their political opinions. Third, individuals can actively and civilly engage in political topics, meaning users criticize ideologies rather than individuals. This can also contribute to allowing for greater freedom of expression (Kushin 2009). Once these representative platforms have been evaluated for their creation of freedom, exposure, and civil discussion, the implications of these qualities will be discussed for politics in the future.

2. The Advent of New Media

Traditional media before the rise of SNS primarily consisted of print newspapers and magazines, television, and radio. However as of 2020, up to 59% of the world’s entire population has Internet access, and Facebook alone had over 2 billion users in 2018 (Clement 2020a). This rapid increase can also be seen Figure 1 depicting the number of people using social media platforms from 2004 to 2018 (Ortiz-Ospina 2019). The sheer accessibility and global reach of the Internet has by extension boosted the prominence of social media as a substitute for these older mediums.

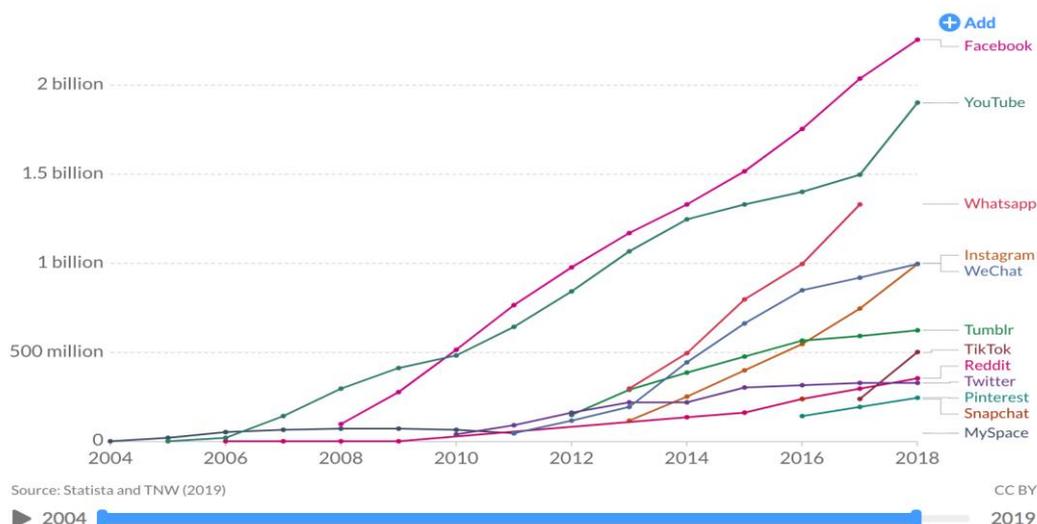


Figure 1: Number of People Using Social Media Platforms

But other than accessibility and reach, what other traits of social media can account for this rise? First, social media allow for more targeted sharing of information. Nobody needs to tune

into a specific channel at a specific time or subscribe to a newspaper for just the Sunday comics. Instead, people can now subscribe to Youtube channels, join Facebook groups, follow Twitter accounts, and join sub-communities on Reddit all at the press of a button (or click of a mouse). Corporations can also target certain demographic groups and regions with their advertising, and digital algorithms are helping to provide each user with tailor-made social media feeds without television or radio-based needs like flipping through channels or memorizing channel numbers (Lawlor 2018).

Social media are also much more immediate. Someone who just experienced a funny moment at work or caught their friend doing something funny on video can immediately upload it to social media for everyone to see, with very few steps in between. There are no TV crews, editors, or distributors who add their own framing to the piece, since all of the distribution of information happens automatically.

Social media pieces are also more dynamic. Television and print media have a degree of finality to them, in that audiences have limited options to provide input or give their reactions. Most feedback comes from ratings and sales, in which audience opinions are reduced to mere statistics. Most social media platforms, on the other hand, give anyone the ability to comment on posts, videos, and articles in a way that makes for more dynamic interactions. People can express themselves however they want and to whoever they want, a degree of freedom that caters well to the basic human tendency for social interaction.

In short, social media are more direct, expedient, dynamic, and open than traditional media forms. Under the criteria set above of freedom, exposure and engagement, it appears that these new platforms may facilitate productive political discourse. However, there is still a number of additional factors that may alter the extent to which this is true.

2.1 The Attributes of Representative Platforms

Because not all platforms are used equally for political discourse, I chose to look at two representative platforms, Facebook and Twitter. Both are some of the most popular social media platforms in the US, Facebook boasting around 170 million monthly mobile users and Twitter around 81 million users as of September 2019 (Clement 2020b). Although there are other platforms like Instagram that are also just as popular, I chose Facebook and Twitter for the features that make them particularly appealing to those looking for a platform to discuss politics. These qualities are the prominence of bipartisan politics, features that foster community, and the ability to not only create but also react to content.

2.1.1. Bipartisan Political Prominence. Facebook and Twitter are popular platforms amongst politicians who use them to engage in political discussions. This was made evident by their consistent mention in a large number of existing literature analyzing the relationship between social media and politics, the primary reason being their popularity and reach in western democracies like the US, the Netherlands, and Norway. This extensive reach brings with it a reported popularity among politicians for either advertising their campaigns or holding ongoing conversations with the public (Bode 2016; Effing, Hillegersberg, and Huibers 2011; Trottier and Fuchs 2014; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; Enli and Skogerbø 2013).

2.1.2 Community Features. People can follow certain people or join groups of interest with like-minded users. On Facebook, users can send friend requests to others, accept and decline offers, and unfriend existing connections. Facebook groups can be created by individual users, on which members can post links, media, questions, events, documents, and comments. Public groups can be viewed by anyone, but non-members cannot interact with members unless they join. The content produced in closed groups cannot be viewed by the public unless a member specifically invites another user to join (Nations 2019). Twitter users can follow other people or unfollow them, as well as block or mute certain accounts they want to avoid. A user can also

submit their account for verification to enable a blue checkmark badge to pop up next to their name, which confirms the authenticity of the account (Twitter Help Center 2020).

2.1.3 Creation of and Reaction to Content. SNS allow people to upload text-based posts with the primary purpose of making a statement or some sort of personal update. On Facebook, people can make status updates and text/image/video posts. This content is exposed to other users via a news feed through which these other users are exposed to status changes, posts, and other notices like events and birthdays (Nations 2019). Twitter allows users to “tweet” their opinions in 280-character statements that can include photos, a gif, or a video. Multiple tweets can be strung together into threads that allow users to express themselves with more words. A user can also add a hashtag to their post, which is a keyword that allows the user to group that tweet under a certain topic. Those who search for that topic will then be able to view that tweet in the search results (Twitter Help Center 2020).

People can also comment on and react to these posts. More specifically, if a Facebook user likes a status update, comment, or photo shared by a friend, that content will appear in the feeds of that user’s friends. In addition to the like button are five other reactions that can be chosen, including “Love,” “Haha,” “Wow,” “Sad,” or “Angry” (Nations 2019). Twitter users can like or comment on a tweet, or retweet it to re-share it publicly with their followers to pass along news or opinions (Twitter Help Center 2020).

3. Freedom of Expression

Along with the emergence of social media has come a massive influx of information and opinions, some of which are more innocuous than others. Social media companies are experiencing increasing pressure to moderate the content on their platforms. These pressures include pressure from advertisers, and ideological reasons. These pressures have recently manifested in the form of Trump’s critical social media posts regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. These included tweeting videos of black-on-white violence without context, tweeting doctored videos, citing fringe BLM groups and their inciting remarks, and criticizing the painting of a giant “Black Lives Matter” mural on Fifth Avenue (Liptak and Holmes 2020). In another controversial message he posted on multiple platforms, the president called the protesters “Thugs” and warned, “when the looting starts, the shooting starts,” referring to those exploiting the chaotic environment to steal from local businesses (Hern 2020). Furthermore, his support base has also been criticized by the media for being racist and violent. This contentious political climate has elicited different responses from both Twitter and Facebook.

Twitter responded to the president’s actions by actively undermining his claims. It placed warning labels and fact-checks on multiple tweets for providing misleading information, manipulating video, and inciting violence against an identifiable group. This included the tweet in which Trump referred to the protesters as “Thugs,” which was described as “glorifying violence.” Twitter justified its actions in a public interest exception introduced in June 2019, in response to criticism it received for failing to properly enforce its rules on public figures like the president. To this end, Twitter also stated that its approach of hiding the president’s tweets behind warnings and reducing their reach via the algorithm struck a balance between “enabling free expression, fostering accountability, and reducing the potential harm caused”(Hern 2020). Limiting and undermining the president’s rhetoric on its platform has caused Twitter to go under fire from the White House for being biased and manipulating the flow of information (Lerman 2020).

Facebook has stood out amongst other companies for coming under the most criticism from advertisers and the media for deciding not to moderate its own platform. Trump had posted his looting-shooting message on Facebook as well, but instead of undermining the president’s

message like Twitter Mark Zuckerberg decided not to enforce any censoring action. Zuckerberg received criticism even from his own staffers, who stated they were “disappointed” and “gravely concerned” that Facebook was taking a neutral position on an issue they believed shouldn’t be treated indifferently. Zuckerberg spoke out about his personal reaction to the post, describing how he had a “visceral negative reaction to this kind of divisive and inflammatory rhetoric,” but appeared to place his own values second to what he believed was more important for the platform (Shead 2020). The platform’s adherence to neutrality regarding the president has caused major backlash from advertisers. A boycott was started, called Stop Hate for Profit, which over 40 major brands participated in. Brands like Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Ben & Jerry’s, Denny’s, and many others have agreed to pull their advertising off of Facebook, cutting off one of its revenue streams (Sonnemaker and Naftulin 2020). Zuckerberg, however, remained unperturbed, stating he was not going to change the platform’s policies “because of a threat to a small percent of [the platform’s] revenue” (Clayton 2020).

The current picture painted by the above description, combined with the criteria set above, appear to paint Facebook as a staunch proponent of free speech and public discourse, in that it strives to be a platform that does not restrict political content at all, being a place for anyone and everyone to speak their minds. This may be helpful in other areas, but in politics this sheer freedom can also backfire, detracting from meaningful political discussion rather than facilitating it. By allowing complete freedom of spreading information including dangerous fake news, Facebook may be doing more harm than good in its refusal to moderate its content more. Furthermore, Facebook groups have gained infamy for being networks spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about the BLM movement, with conversation topics including the killing of black men and women (Seitz 2020).

It is necessary, however, to remember that benevolent content moderation can become a slippery slope into abuse of power. Civil libertarians have criticized platforms like Twitter for setting precedents for more malicious content moderation in the future, in which the perception of the “public interest” from these third parties could provide risks for American democracy (Bowles 2020). Social media sites today have a huge responsibility of influencing the opinions of the general public, and these platforms must find the right balance between responsible moderation and freedom of speech in order to properly facilitate political discourse.

Yet there is also a different facet to the freedom of expression, not necessarily affected by the moderation of the platforms on which political discourse is held, rather by the effects of inner psychological factors that make up humans as social beings. One such factor is of a phenomenon called the spiral of silence, which theorizes that people’s willingness to speak out on controversial topics is unconsciously affected by social desirability (Petersen 2019). In other words, people are less willing to speak their opinion if they believe this opinion will negatively affect their public image. This effect has been seen to manifest on Facebook, on which individuals avoid expressing opinions that their friends might disapprove of. A survey of 283 Facebook users confirmed its presence, in which users reported their willingness to engage online was affected by self-presentational concern as well as their equation of social approval with self-worth (Liu, Rui, and Cui 2017).

These limiting factors on free speech on SNS platforms can give rise to an issue that will be discussed in the next section; Namely, how people may cope with these obstacles using features on social media.

4. Exposure to Diverse Opinions

Do social media provide exposure and equality of opinions? I investigate the extent to which people’s influence varies due to various factors. In this case, “influence” will be described as

the user's ability to spread his/her ideas to others and receiving some sort of affirmative or confrontational reaction.

When it comes to the topic of social media and exposure of opinions, a word that commonly surfaces is that of the "echo-chamber." An echo-chamber is an environment or social group in which opinions are homogenized, meaning users inside will all share similar opinions, creating biased sharing and discussion of information. SNS platforms have been criticized for creating such spaces within the features they offer.

To put this idea to the test, a study in 2020 studied echo-chambers on Facebook and Twitter. More specifically, it characterized echo-chambers as places with homophily, the preference to interact with like-minded peers. As these like-minded individuals interact with one another, the polarization of views between echo-chambers was also described in this characterization. The influence of each individual was analyzed using social network analysis, which mapped the flow of information between users (Cinelli, et al 2020).

Upon plotting the leanings of individuals and those of their associated networks the study was able to compare these individual leanings with those of their "neighborhoods." For Facebook and Twitter, the study saw a clear positive correlation that showed high densities of users on either side of their respective controversies. A further analysis of people's circles of influence showed that users on Facebook and Twitter were more likely to interact with other users with similar leanings due to the way the platforms spread information. This means that the structures of social media platforms limited the extent to which users could be exposed to others' opinions (Cinelli, et al 2020). This view is also supported by a study of Twitter in 2016, in which researchers used data from a large network of politically active Twitter users and analyzed their opinions and networks based around the 2012 US presidential election. By analyzing these individuals and their networks, the study found that voters on Twitter were disproportionately likely to see like-minded information in their feeds. Furthermore, this information also was seen to reach these users faster than different viewpoints (Halberstam and Knight 2016).

Others don't believe the echo-chamber effect is as strong as people make it out to be. According to a national survey of adult Internet users in the UK, those who professed an interest in politics tended to avoid echo chambers and consumed diverse media sets. The study critiqued existing notions of echo-chambers for being restricted to single media platforms without taking into account the real-life multiple media environment in which users aren't restricted to only social media. In a regression analysis, the study concluded that a greater interest in politics reduced the likelihood of being caught in an echo chamber (Dubois and Blank 2018). However, this conclusion does not necessarily generalize as well, for a couple of reasons. First, professed political interest is relative, and even those who claim to be uninterested would still have access to the same kind of rhetoric and information spread by social media. Second, just because there are many choices does not mean individuals will necessarily utilize them. As seen above, homophily can be a factor that causes people to seek out the comfort of agreement and commonality, whether consciously or not.

A real-life case of these echo-chambers is Facebook groups. Under the recent quarantine and mask-wearing measures enacted to quell the spread of COVID-19, a network of Facebook groups began to protest these orders. These groups have become places of misinformation and conspiracy theories, consisting of an audience of over 1 million members. The commonality within these groups has also generalized to the political opinions of these people, shifting their focus to mocking the BLM movement and promoting conspiracy theories about the protests (Seitz 2020). By providing means for such users to avoid media that conflict with their own

opinions, Facebook is compromising these users' ability to share their ideas and have their ideas challenged by others.

On the other hand, does exposure to other opinions necessarily allow users to be influenced by these opinions? Not necessarily. In a study of Democrats and Republicans on social media, participants were asked to fill out a survey about their political views before and after consuming media from the opposing party. According to the results, viewing the other party's views actually increased the polarization of opinions: Democrats leaned further left, and Republicans leaned further right (Bail et al. 2018). In other words, exposing people to conflicting political viewpoints may perpetuate a key trait of echo-chambers, polarization of viewpoints. This means that humans also have innate propensities to retreat deeper into their existing ideologies, choosing to clutch their existing beliefs tighter rather than entertaining opposing views. This conclusion supports what was theorized above, that social media facilitate homophily within echo-chambers by exacerbating tribal mentalities while accentuating differences between opposing groups.

In conclusion, in a political landscape laden with controversy and polarized viewpoints fueled by emotion, social media have the ability to perpetuate these polarizations. Facebook and Twitter mainly spread information via feeds that are influenced by the media consumption of friends. This means that the algorithms governing these sites are prone to creating echo chambers in which one's feed is filled with opinions and viewpoints of people that they agree with. In addition, Facebook groups create communities that keep to themselves in terms of media consumption, perpetuating misinformation and giving users a way to satisfy their need for political confirmation, when political discussion thrives on the civil discussion of such ideas. Some research does show that exposure to other views can further polarize one's opinion, but the mere act of hearing other opinions and reaching conclusions about them is better than remaining stagnant in an echo-chamber.

5. Engagement in Civil Discussion

Although social media can perpetuate these echo-chambers, they have also become platforms for users to engage in discussions. For productive political discussion, civility also plays a part in allowing everyone involved to feel open to having their ideas challenged. On this front, however, the situation is slightly more mixed.

Social media have become popular channels for politicians during election campaigns, enabling them to directly reach out to the general public (Stier 2018). A survey of users on Facebook and Twitter showed that Facebook was mostly used by the general public to engage with politicians, and Twitter was mostly used by a smaller fraction of the population for politics. The more engaged with political discussions people were, the more they utilized the features the platforms provided like commenting and sharing to interact with politicians (Kalsnes, Larsson, and Enli 2017). This shows that the features offered by social media are desirable by politicians and the politically interested to interact via comments and sharing. The nature of discussions on social media, however, is more ambivalent.

Critics of social media-based politics blame SNS platforms for creating media consumption practices that are detrimental to proper political discussion. Because social media creates a constant flow of information, it can put users in a literal state of flow, defined as a state in which people remain in a comfort zone of constant passive consumption. This means that the deliberate and mentally intensive nature of political discussion is drowned out in the sea of other attention-seeking things. This rapid and mindless consumption is facilitated by word limits like on Tweets, which prevent politicians from making consistent coherent narratives for people to follow, instead offering instantly gratifying, digestible emotional bites (Bolter 2019).

In addition to these built-in limits to engagement, social media are criticized for facilitating incivility. According to some, their mere presence on Twitter compels them to start fights and seek arguments with other strangers online. Some users lament how members of both the right and left used to be able to sit around the same dinner table for a respectful discussion, but with the advent of social media discussions have become more hostile (Garsd 2019). Word limits on tweets appear to have contributed to this incivility. A study headed by Professor Yphtach Lelkes at the University of Pennsylvania found that civility of conversations on Twitter directly correlated with the word count limit on tweets (Jaidka, Zhou, and Lelkes 2019). Perhaps the need to condense one's speech into a limited space prompts people to use more emphatic language and informal slang to get their message across.

A study on Facebook, however, shows a different reality (which may speak to differences between the way both platforms function). It analyzed the content of discussions on politically sensitive topics on two different platforms; First was the Washington Post Facebook page, on which users would be identifiable and accountable for what content they produce. Second was the Washington Post website, where users have a higher level of anonymity. Results showed that political discussion on the website was far more likely to be uncivil, with derogatory comments made toward other participants in the discussion. The Facebook page, on the other hand, suffered less from this issue.

It seems that, although both Facebook and Twitter provide the tools necessary for meaningful discussion, these tools may or may not be used for civil discussion. Along with issues with engagement in an age where information is more passively consumed, the topic of civility on social media is also being debated. In general, it seems that accountability can play a part in facilitating civil discussion, something that can be addressed. What cannot be addressed, however, is the issue of engagement, which is further exacerbated by the echo-chamber effects described in the previous section.

6. Implications for the Future

6.1. Freedom of Expression

Basic human socio psychological compulsion means the spiral of silence will likely continue to dissuade some individuals from voicing their truthful opinions online. On the other hand, anonymous accounts that do not contain any of the user's personal information will remain unfettered. As technological capabilities in video/photo manipulation and general Internet trolling culture evolve, social media will likely suffer more from individuals finding enjoyment in spreading misinformation and discord. As seen by the actions taken by Twitter against Trump's misinformation, this will likely prompt more intervention from both social media companies themselves and government regulatory bodies to moderate their content. It is noteworthy that in August, 2020, a US congressional committee called in four CEOs of top technology companies to testify before them. Amongst the many issues that were covered in that congressional meeting, the regulation of misinformation and fake news on their platforms took center stage (Euronews 2020).

Although the elimination of misinformation promotes political discourse by creating a better-informed public, it must be remembered that such moderation is a slippery slope. Some freedoms do need to be curtailed, like the freedoms of those who actively seek to undermine political processes through their actions. However, this well-intentioned moderation can just as easily devolve into content moderation for selfish political or ideological ends. The phrase "general public interest" that has been used to justify this moderation is vague, reflecting the weaknesses of paternalistic leadership; social media companies' views of public interest are fallible and subjective. Moderation policies by these social media companies must remain under

careful scrutiny going forward. Although the need to cut out fake news appears to be universal, the public must keep an eye out for potential abuses of power on the platforms they use in the foreseeable future.

6.2 Exposure to Diverse Opinions

Homophily is unfortunately an integral part of human socialization, a propensity deeply embedded in our psyche. Social media add fuel to this compulsion by providing spaces for like-minded communities and letting users block others they do not want to hear from. Yet the problem will not be solved simply by removing these features. No matter what social media platforms do, people will probably find other ways to gravitate towards like-minded individuals regardless. In addition, forcefully trying to expose people to opposing ideologies may lead to further polarization, as seen in Bail et al.'s 2018 Twitter study. No matter what social media companies try to do, people will naturally relapse into tribal mentalities and create widening rifts between ingroups and outgroups. Worse, trying to force exposure could further accelerate political polarization.

The newsfeed method of consuming information from friends and followers will also create what is called a news-finds-me method of consumption. Here, individuals consume what is known as “ambient news,” ubiquitous news that reaches individuals via social networks and word-of-mouth rather than official news outlets (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). This increase in passive media consumption without the drive to dive deeper into usually nuanced political issues means users are at risk of being even more limited in their political knowledge.

Rather than trying to dissuade people from following their natural desires, governments and social media companies must take an active role in raising awareness about such psychological phenomena. Knowing about the existence of echo-chambers and the deleterious effects of passive media consumption can better motivate individuals to broaden their media diets and better self-diagnose the echo-chambers they may be in.

6.3 Engagement in Civil Discussion

The limited word count on social media and the need for conciseness in spreading one's message will likely continue to compromise civility online. Worse, as seen in the NPR piece on incivility online, it doesn't appear to matter whether an account is anonymous or not. Individuals online find themselves acting uncharacteristically uncivil anyway (Garsd 2019). Anonymity would probably worsen this phenomenon. When the problem with polarization between echo-chambers is already pressing, such incivility between both sides can turn things even worse as it furthers stereotypes and taints perceptions of opposing parties. Bipartisan politics will only work if both sides can learn to put aside their differences, and a rise in incivility will continue to preclude such action if not remedied.

Similar to the challenges of exposing users to diverse opinions, attempts to force engagement in civil political discussion online will probably end up being counterproductive and overly restrictive. Completely eliminating anonymity on the Internet would not only be extremely difficult, but would also eliminate some of the freedom associated with this anonymity. If everyone is required to reflect their real-world selves in all of their online interactions, it will only raise psychological barriers to free expression. In an age where people are going online at younger and younger ages, it is important to make sure people are instead properly educated about the importance of civility in all aspects of life (not just SNS) and about the effects social media have on the way they absorb information (Carufel 2019).

7. Conclusion

This investigation reviewed literature evaluating the two primary social media platforms Facebook and Twitter in relation to their ability to create productive political discourse on their platforms. Both platforms were evaluated based on three criteria: freedom of expressing opinions, exposure to other opinions, and the level of engagement in civil discussion on politically sensitive issues.

On the freedom of expressing opinions, social media theoretically offer no barriers to entry for users and allow anyone anywhere to voice their opinion. However, the implementation of this trait in real life shows that this is not exactly the case. Social media companies are facing increasing pressure to moderate content on their websites, causing some to undermine views of certain groups and interfere in the spread of their opinions. This comes with risks, but it is also important to note that complete unfettered sharing of opinions on social media may not be beneficial to politics either, and a balancing act between moderation and freedom appears to be necessary. There are also psychological factors like the spiral of silence theory, which may psychologically hinder users from expressing their opinions.

On the exposure to other opinions, I examined and confirmed the prominence of echo-chambers, which are facilitated by the way SNS platforms spread information and the features they provide. The ability of Facebook and Twitter to perpetuate homophily through their algorithms can create situations where users consume content they already agree with. Facebook groups also contribute to this effect by giving users the ability to satisfy their homophily, restricting themselves to a comfortable echo-chamber in which their views are no longer challenged. Social media appear to lack the most in this area, as the features and functionalities that enable such a phenomenon are a fundamental part of how they work.

On the level of engagement in civil discussion, although social media are becoming a place for politicians to easily engage with the public, the passive consumption of media is also encouraged by social media. This passive consumption is antithetical to meaningful political discussion, and additional restrictions like word limits on Tweets can further restrict users' ability to properly communicate their thoughts. Civility is also an issue that can hinder meaningful political discussion, but it appears to be remedied by improving the accountability of users. The spiral of silence theory may also apply here, in which social desirability restricts the free sharing of opinions but also may discourage incivility.

In response to these limitations of social media and their implications for political discourse, I provided two main solutions for the future: extensive education of the public on the effects of social media on political discourse and civility, and continued scrutiny of social media companies and their content moderation practices. Without context, these recommendations may seem insufficient and impotent. Furthermore, social media provide a more comfortable alternative for users, reducing incentives to change the patterns of media content they consume; they allow users to easily find others who agree with them, block those whose opinions they don't want to hear, or hide behind anonymity to personally attack people they do not like. Yet the effects of social media are tangled and nebulous, and encouraging social media companies to wield the power they have over many millions of user interactions will more likely than not make the situation worse. The recommendations I conclude with instead place trust in the public that awareness of social media's limitations will lead to bottom-up changes as more people take on the responsibility they must shoulder as political beings. With sufficient educational measures and the resulting shift in attitudes to politics online, I believe we will be able to see a slow but steady improvement in the status quo.

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