

Social media contributes to greater division

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Abstract. Social media was used widely by the global user, becoming a vital media tool in recent years. As the giants of social media, sites such as Twitter and YouTube have a staggering number of users. As the influence of social media increases, more and more scholars are studying the influence of social media on people's ideology. It is worth emphasizing that the influence of social media in political, racial and class discourse is significant. As more and more politicians use social media as a tool for their political advocacy, people are increasingly engaging in political dialogue through social media. In terms of race, due to the nature of social media, Internet users of different races do not receive equal access to information. Thus, it is important to study how social media causes social division through information. In this paper, how social media enhances polarization is examined through an analysis of three aspects of discourse: political, racial, and class on social media.

Keywords: social media; social division; echo chamber; digital divide.

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, the traditional way people get information has progressively changed. People's definitions and perceptions of various groups in society have also begun to change because of using social media. Social media was once considered to be a platform that enabled users to access more diverse information and people to speak more freely on social media. It was also seen as a platform that facilitated communication between people of different groups, thus promoting equity among social groups.

As a result, the growing importance of communication in social media has meant a fundamental change in traditional public communication, which is usually initiated and managed by specific actors, such as politicians. However, recent research has found that social media has done the opposite of what was expected. On social media, extreme statements and conflicts occurred frequently, and people's opinions and exchanges do not seem to proceed smoothly.

Social media is a term that refers to the digital technologies where users perform interaction, communication to achieve information exchange (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Comparing to the traditional media, the gatekeeping of social media is relatively weaker. This is the result of the features of social media. In order to encourage users to create content, social media would use notification technology, algorithms, and identity grouping to manage user profiles. Particularly, according to Harold Innis's theory, social media possess the characteristic of space biased media, which information could reach a wider audience group but aging for a shorter period. Besides, social media compresses the time and space difference, saving the communicating cost on time and commute. This article analyzes how social media reinforces social divisions by analyzing the characteristics of social media: selective exposure, echo chambers, and the concept of the digital divide, combined with examples in the social contexts of political, hierarchical, and ethnic groups, respectively.

2. Social media and political division

With the dramatic change of social media, they are playing a more significant role in spreading political context. Various political institutions as well as citizens around the world are actively engaged in political discussions and political propaganda on social media. In this regard, social media to some extent could effectively reflect the public opinion on policies, which provide an ideal vehicle for political offices to measure public opinion and positions (Zeng et al. 2010). Therefore, to draw users' political attention on their constituents, politicians have widely adopted social media for

building a platform to create direct communication with citizens. furthermore, it has been observed social media could also disseminate political opinions from political institutions (Stieglitz, S. & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

However, despite social media provide a platform to perform political communication, it has been found that it still serves as a portal for elite speaker to convey their political contents. According to Conver (2011), based on the tweets from the period of 2010 US congressional midterm elections, they have found that the amount of connection between left-leaning users and right-leaning users are extremely small. Similarly, it has been found that twitter users are willingly to communicate with like-minded users to reinforce their political group affiliation (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). This segregated phenomenon reflects the echo chamber that exist in every ideological group under the political discourse content, which could amplify the existing belief. The rebuttal information may be blocked by this close system, and the diverse political information on social media could be limited by these closed systems (Barberá et al., 2015).

A study has examined 12 political and nonpolitical issues that concern social context, in which political issue communication showed a significant leaning on resembles an “echo chamber”. Despite the initial communicating may be a dynamic process with the change of period, it would eventually transform to the structure of two polarized sides (Barberá, 2015).

To gain a sense of group belonging online, people will send messages with the same sense in the echo chamber that has been formed to gain the approval of other members in the group. When people are tightly connected to a group, they will show an increase trust for other group members. It can say that it could create a “virtuous circle” inside the group, which could enhance their existing political ideology and in-group affiliation (Zhang et al., 2010).

Online political affiliation strongly influences offline political participation, thus strengthening the political division. Levendusky (2013) suggests that through the extreme oppositional presentation online, the media sharpen the viewer's partisanship, leading to polarization of perceptions and emotions offline. In this context, politician has applied this phenomenon to real-life political event. The political participation of citizen is viewed as capital consequences on the study of Zhang (2010), who argues that civic and their participation could be a vital positive prediction to the political event, and the affiliation from them could increase social capital. The in-group discussion could to some extent contributes to more votes for the political party, enhance offline political dispositions.

American politicians are said to have taken the lead, most notably Barack Obama successfully use social media in his final campaign in 2008 presidential election. During the election period, it has been reported that more than three-quarters of the social media users went online to participate in the election campaign. Obama's online supporters participate in a broader range of online political activities. for instance, they post their ideas and opinions about the election online, and widely using email and text to proceed political information engagement (Smith, 2009). Such a high interaction rate is due to Obama's successful use of the interactive features of social media. He bypassed the traditional media and gained direct contact with his supporter base on social media. by using Twitter, YouTube, and other social media website, he managed to attract more than thousand supporters to voluntarily produce and share his relevant social content.

Besides the in-group information circle that reinforce people's political ideology, politicians make advantage through mainstream political coverage on social media. News coverage often shows a strong leaning on political stands, which has become an effective channel for party propaganda to some extent. Even though social media merely play the role of megaphones in political propaganda, users are still affected by the content. Relatedly, when users attach to the information from two polarized sides, they show a tendency on believing more on their like-minded information. Therefore, even social media could provide the portal for the users to expose to the argument from out-group parties, users are more likely to stuck on their initial argument (Tucker, 2018).

3. Class division and digital divide

With the popularity of the Internet, more and more people are able to gain access to it. And the use of the Internet is gradually becoming a necessary technology, as society also changes with the renewal of technology. It can be said that the ability to master this technology has become the key to determining the economic development of an individual or community. Some scholars even argue that individuals must learn to use this new technology in order to have a chance to succeed in the emerging knowledge economy (Wilson et al., 2003). In an effort to reduce social disparities, various governments have introduced policies and subsidies to enable more people to have access to computers at home.

However, different groups in society have varying levels of access to the Internet. Therefore, scholars use the term digital divide to describe the gap between those who benefit from this new technology and those who do not. The digital divide is therefore used to describe the gap between those who benefit from this new technology and those who do not. In the earlier study, digital divide was suggested as the gap between those who cannot physically get the access to the internet and those who can. However, in recent studies, it has been argued that in the second level of digital divide, it exists the gap between those who equipped with mature skill to use the internet and communicate through and those who possess different level of skills. Because these physical access and usage skills are closely related to economic level and education, the digital divide also typically appears between classes.

According to Knowledge gap hypothesis, the higher social status people in, the more rapid they acquire knowledge (Tichenor et al., 1970). A case has mirrored during the COVID-19 pandemic period. In 2020, Home quarantine orders have been issued in most parts of the world, and people can only communicate with others and access information through the Internet. Mandatory or recommended lockdowns, curfews, and quarantines in more than 90 countries or territories. This means that more than half of the world's population has access to information and sources of knowledge only through the use of media. With people unable to commute, schools also have no choice but to conduct educational activities through online instruction. However, not every group in all areas has access to a computer or connection to an online classroom, and those who do not have this ability are at the bottom of the social ladder. This could reinforce the social inequality that already exists in the society, that the educational resources every social class can absorb differ.

Another gap is showed in the different medical resource they have. The world governments have published "health code", where people registered their health conditioned online to get the passcode in order to access public space. In China, the hospital often require patient to show their digital route history and health passcode, and those who cannot show these are not allowed to go to the hospital. Therefore, these medical resources will not be able to flow to the people at the bottom, which enhance the class divide that already existed.

Yet, the impact of the digital divide is magnified in the context of the pandemic. In life, the social divisions due to the digital divides have always existed. However, the impact of the digital divide is magnified in the context of the pandemic. The social divide created by these digital divides has been present in life. And it is the existing social stratification that leads to the emergence of the digital divide. With the increasing role of social media in social participation, a large portion of social resources are then allocated by social media. The use of social media, in turn, strongly requires users to have certain online skills, and the learning of these skills is allocated with social class. As a result, resources on social media are allocated according to the original social stratification, thus strengthening the social class division.

4. Social media and ethnical division

The homogenization of social media can also have an enhancing effect on the divisions between races. And social media has become an important communication platform for minority groups. In the past few years, many racial affirmative action movements have taken place on the Internet, such

as Black Lives Matter campaign. Gradually, social media platforms social media platforms have become a venue for racial political participation and social activism. Black social media users in the Pew Research Center survey were particularly likely to say that social media sites are valuable personally because they can engage with issues they care about or find like-minded people. Social media activity, online racial justice campaign, and communication or engagement with posts from individuals of different racial groups may increase people's access to racially biased information. More particularly, greater use of social media on viewing and sharing news and posts related to racial justice may make minority groups more vulnerable to racial discrimination (Tao & Fisher, 2022). In their study, they have examined the differences in the use of social media by blacks and whites among adolescents to view and post-race-related content. They found that when using social media to view content about the black community, black teens spent an average of 4.5 hours more per week on it than American teens. And according to the survey, social media tends to recommend content about racial minorities to black users, while white users view less content in comparison. According to the selective exposure theory, people will tend to select specific aspects of the exposed information and incorporate them into their thought patterns. People are more inclined to analyze the strong evidence they see than to absorb the unfavorable evidence. This behavior can lead to cognitive imbalance and influence the choices people make on social platforms (Tsang, 2019).

An example from the period of COVID-19 pandemic reflect how people's perception on ethnic group could change through the content on social media. in 2020, the US president Trumps twitter to express his political ideology frequently. To gain the support of some political groups in the United States, he referred to the coronavirus as the "China virus", and Trump's administration use words disrespectful to China in many of the subsequent speeches (Gao & Liu, 2021). The Chinese American based on the US rapidly against by many white people in the area, and in many public places, innocent Asian people would be attacked by others without reason, and their social status was gradually declining. Worse, since COVID-19 has been lasting for a relatively long period, the consequence of the anti-Chinese discrimination may worsen and continue decline the status of relative ethnic group. This event has reflected how people could easily affected by the online opinion elite, and how their ideology on a certain ethnic group could easily change.

This shows that there are information gap between racial groups in sharing and receiving information on social media.. Unlike traditional media, social media requires users to give basic information about their identity, and this can be an influential factor in the content that algorithms use to analyze user's preferences. different from traditional media, social media requires users to give basic information about their identity to the system, and this can be an influential factor in the content that algorithms use to recommend. In order to increase the frequency of use, social media will push information related to their racial groups; conversely, people who are relatively insensitive to racial topics (e.g., white people) will receive relatively less information about ethnical controversial topics. People who are less sensitive to racial topics (e.g., white people) may receive fewer topics about racial controversies. In addition, in order to take advantage of appealing messages, social media prioritizes topics that benefit the racial group, which are often not conducive to reducing racial division. Thus, social media does not reduce racial division and may even increase it.

5. Conclusion

As many previous studies have shown, social media has a contributing role in social division. In terms of political stratification, social media enables political institutions to communicate directly with the masses and citizens to participate directly in political discussions. However, the platform provided by social media limits the diversity of communication by grouping people with similar views together. Therefore, it does not facilitate people with different political preferences to learn more about politics, but rather reinforces the divisions among them. In terms of social class, the distribution of social resources is not changed by social media due to the digital divide, but rather enhances social inequality. And in terms of racial polarization, studies show that the information

presented by social media is unequal due to the phenomenon of selective exposure among different racial groups. This can also further strengthen the divide between races. With the understanding that social media can severely polarize society, subsequent research should focus on discussing how to change the situation. As one of the most frequently used media today, social media can largely influence people's ideology. Therefore, this article can provide some background reference in this area of research. Although only three aspects of the role of social media have been studied, I hope that this will be useful for subsequent research. In addition, the ethical issues of social media among groups are also worth studying to help users get better results in using it.

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