

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE INFORMATION IN US

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Abstract

Social media and our relationship to it has become a complex topic since its inception. The aim of this literature review is to review, quantify, and qualify the issues therein that are being brought to light by authors researching social media's impacts both individually and globally.

Keywords: literature review, communication, social media, relationship, quality, quantification

Gone are the days where the internet and chat rooms were a stationary place, perhaps in your room or at the library. The internet and social media now live in our hands and our pockets, going with us wherever we go. This paper will reflect on and review analyses from peer-reviewed articles whose authors deconstruct the issue of social media. The articles reviewed in this literary analysis differ in range of impact but work together to create a complete picture of the issue of social media through the empirical data analysis. The nature of social media and its relationship with society (and vice versa) are examined through social media's effects on traditional media, the user, and communities at large, as well as issues regarding data and information sharing. These articles agree that the issue of social media requires attention because it can be utilized as a weapon. These articles also push for rectification through policies, social, and personal responsibility.

Issues

The issues regarding social media can be defined and qualified by several factors which range in severity. The articles referenced are organized in order of this severity, ranging from the personal scale to the global scale. Firstly, according to Hailey Roos (2020), polarization culture has driven a wedge in groups that support celebrities or engage in discourse and manifests as: “marginalizing those who do not immediately align with a dominant ideology” (p. 2). Roos (2020) explained that while cancellations and cancel culture was originally meant to impose justice against figures who have done wrong in the public eye, this has led to constant critical skepticism of which public figures cannot escape. Such a volatile arena in which social media actors must conduct themselves has begun to interfere with true social activism, and thus affects social media users’ perception of the world at large (Roos, 2020).

Concurrently, according to a chapter written by Vivian Roese (2018) in a book called *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, social media has not only changed the way we interact with each other, but it has changed the way we interact with traditional media resulting in, “classical news media attempting to reach their audience thus have to adapt to the rules of social media outlets, and therefore to their algorithm and aspects of shareability” (Roese, 2018, p. 313). This drives the production of clickable media to farm engagement causing news of quality to be driven down and replaced with news of a shareable nature. Roese employs the use of a story about hype (a meme) she witnessed gain traction in Germany called the “flower bucket hype.” This phenomenon was an otherwise unremarkable story; it was simply a social media post that went viral. Yet, this viral story made its way up the chain from said social media post to a traditional media outlet and procured staying power for days. This story demonstrates how social media now guides traditional media in its news making process to ensure marketability (Roese, 2018).

In order to ensure this marketability, media platforms have begun to engage data mining to employ the use of algorithms and control the intake of media for users with regard to what they may find is most palatable. According to a journal article written by Beata Bialy (2017), data mining has driven competition between traditional media sources and social media while garnering increased profits. The profits thus resulted in mass collection of personal information, “geo-targeting,” and online operatives that distribute sometimes fatally false news to interfere with the stock markets. Bialy (2017) cites a hack of the Associated Press’s (AP’s) twitter account that resulted in a tweet announcing an explosion at the White House that injured the President. While false, this caused the Dow Jones to drop dramatically (Bialy, 2017).

The more apparent the escalation of the impact of social media becomes, the more this impact can be qualified on a global scale. As far as information dissemination and understanding goes, according to a journal article by Dietram Scheufele and Nicole Krause (2019), scientific discourse has grown.

Disconnects between public opinion in the United States and the scientific consensus on topics such as vaccine safety, evolution, or climate change have existed for a long time. More recently, however, increasingly polarized political environments and fundamental changes in how information is shared by media and audiences have given new urgency to the problem (Scheufele & Krause, 2019).

Beyond this, Jarred Prior (2017) reports that ‘according to a 2011 study on social media, a trending topic “will capture the attention of a large audience for a short time” and thus “contributes to agenda setting mechanisms” (p. 52). This means that the algorithm can be weaponized by larger entities to engage in information warfare.

Causes

Shareability is a major aspect of posts that go viral, according to Roese (2018). While that is true, other factors are at play. Social media is an extremely cheap avenue for which information can be shared, Bialy (2017) wrote:

Low access cost, various target audiences, global reach, and the unprecedented speed of information flow—all these factors encourage different actors to use social media for their purposes. Marketing experts discovered its potential very quickly and placed social media in the heart of their promotion campaigns. (p. 75).

This shareability results in exploitation by users or entities who share any information that benefits their causes or personal confirmation bias, without exorbitant effort.

On the personal scale, knowledge gaps based in education level directly impacts the misinformation an individual may be willing to accept, including conspiracy theories and anti-scientific rhetoric, explains Scheufele and Krause (2019). “The psychological unease or inconvenience of encountering worldview-challenging information can produce a desire to minimize feelings of ‘cognitive dissonance,’ which can lead to biased perception and information processing that complicates the recognition and rejection of falsehoods” (Kull S et al., as cited in Scheufele & Krause, 2019). On a global scale, according to Jarred Prier (2017), sharing on social media is less innocuous than it sounds. Any and all public posts can present when searching for the related topic on a given platform, and in addition to that, “anyone can ‘retweet’ someone else’s tweet, which broadcasts the original to a new audience. Twitter makes real-time ideas and event sharing possible on a global scale” (Prier, 2017, p. 51). The transformation of media and its consumers is expounded by Prier and the impact of audience sizes,

whether small or global.

Consequences

As demonstrated by analysis of stan (extreme fan) culture by Hailey Roos (2020), marginalization of groups as “in” and “out” has led to more rigid groups that are encouraged by filter bubbles and echo chambers crafted by algorithms. These aspects of the social media experience ensure that users’ timelines display things they already know and believe, “and the combination of the two creates a platform that is unknowingly polarized, misguided, and divided by blindness towards others’ opinions” (Roos, 2020, p. 8). This polarization and confirmation bias has additionally led to traditional media losing deemed credibility amongst consumers, while internet media has accrued more relative credibility. This goes to show that if the traditional media outlets are unable to pander to broad audiences (comparatively to desired information the algorithm can display for users), people will begin to lose acceptance of that information, according to Vivian Roese (2018, p. 326).

More insidiously, Bialy (2017) describes “covert” and “overt” ways in which various media actors can create false narratives using bot accounts and/or trolls to heighten the influence of threats and operatives aimed to undermine governments and organizations. Jarred Prier (2017) uses this philosophy to assign consequence to these actions by referencing Russian disinformation tactics in an effort to destabilize the United States through the use propaganda by way of trolls and bot campaigns, which contribute to the creation of false narratives as prescribed by Prier by making a social movement or issue seem larger than it really is.

Solutions

Hailey Roos (2020) suggests that the solution to social media dilemmas is still nebulous and requires additional research to

determine the next steps. Meanwhile, others suggest that just as the impacts of social media are ranging, so are the solutions. On the personal level, it is important for users to be wary on social media and learn to discern credible sources from informational violence (Bialy, 2017). The outcome of social media's takeover has "highlighted the need for a systems approach to the study of science communication—that ... treats science communication as a multilevel problem." (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Beyond future research, personal responsibility, and platform responsibility, it is imperative that organizations and governments impacted by social media trolls and agents take control and respond to these actions deliberately so as to thwart future issues (Prier, 2017, p. 80).

Conclusion

With the evolution of social media since its inception, its impacts have spread across a large spectrum as addressed by the articles reviewed. The consensus of the authors is that social media *is* an issue that must be addressed due to its ability to polarize. Where the differences lie is in the impact of the polarization whether it be on the personal, local, or global scale. This means that social media reaches every part of society. Because of its breadth, it is important to note that for each issue lying within the net of social media, there is a solution ranging from a personal level of responsibility to a governmental level. Addressing the impact of social media can assist in fostering a healthier relationship with it on every level. ■

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