Popular, Accessible, Inclusive:
Social Media as an Ideal for Decision-making in a Democracy

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誰もがスマートフォンを持ち、何らかのSNS（ソーシャルメディア）を使っている今の時代、これを政治的な意思決定に活用すればオンラインで真に参加型の民主主義を実現できるかもしれない。その可能性と問題を検証した。

Abstract

Limitations on citizen participation in a democracy lead to skepticism about the ability of ordinary citizens to participate in political decision-making. These skepticisms are addressed by social media platforms by defining features that can facilitate responsible civic engagement and participation, crucial to preserving democracy. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google, which include algorithms and AI, are considered to be better mediums with which to make political decisions than precarious settings such as face-to-face deliberations or political representations because they remove bias, access, and power imbalances. Additionally, technological interventions are used to promote consensus and unbiased content. As the role of technology in decision-making is yet to be examined, assertions on the effectiveness of social media in a democratic society require an examination of the cognitive and normative ideals for decision-making. An analysis of the arguments for the ubiquity of social media as a tool for democracy and a discussion of technological advancements for enabling online participation in political processes is presented in this paper.

Introduction

Democracy is built on citizen participation, but many citizens are still ambivalent about taking part in government decisions. In a democratic society, citizens are free to express their preferences, political or otherwise, but may also be constrained by elected officials and administrators. Citizens who participate in face-to-face interactions or through social media become more involved in their community, and officials and institutions alike become more responsive and accountable to their citizens. In these circumstances, participation is not only desirable but also practical, especially with the proliferation of social media, a facility through which many can access the government. A key question to ask is whether participating in social media, a form of informal, open, and unmoderated communication, is legitimate or valid as input into decision-making processes in government.

It is argued by the authors that participation in social media can be beneficial to government decision-making, even ideal. In the argument, the focus is on normative ideals of inclusivity and accessibility, as well as the epistemic value of participation as an important condition of democratic participation.

The idea that many people can take part in a political process by using social media undermines the value of participation from an epistemic perspective. The authors contend that building epistemic capacities for participation in social media does not conflict with a more inclusive polity. By epistemic, this signifies the idea that participation traces the truth according to some

independent standard such as the common good, justice, and empirical reality. In participation, efforts toward reasoning are rooted primarily in truth (Cohen, 1997). In contrast, participation produces shared values among citizens and endorses public policy. At the very least, participation in social media contributes to the validity of arguments and the consensus decisions that result from discussion.

In the paragraphs following, the first section argues that social media make it possible for citizens to speak with one another, listen to one another, and learn from each other, leading to a better collective social understanding. The second section looks at the epistemic value of participation through social media, which filters out biases and errors inherent in face-to-face participation. In the third section, the authors argue that social media's value in connecting people justifies its importance in making decisions. Finally, the authors argue that the benefits of social media and other technology can offer an alternative to the traditional way of facilitating face-to-face participation in political decision-making. In this article, all data analyzed in this study are cited in the references section.

Social media: an inclusive communication platform

According to the Global Social Media Stats of 2021 (Kemp, 2021), there were 4.2 billion social media users worldwide in January 2021, of which Facebook (FB) remained the top platform with 2.74 billion active users. Then came YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger. An increase of 490M users was seen in the last 12 months, seeing a demographic change in the process. Once dominated by millennials, Facebook's fastest-growing audience consisted of both men and women over 65, living outside of major metropolitan areas. As social media users increase, they facilitate information spread, making them a major source of information and communication.

Globally, the internet and social media have been widely used in political protests, social movements, and election campaigns. Arab springs and the #MeToo Movement all gained momentum with the help of the internet and social media. However, social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp may have been singled out for spreading misinformation, and perpetrating political manipulation, violence, and hate crimes (Pew Research Center, 2019). The occurrence of internet blocks in many countries as well as platform restrictions may indicate that the internet and social media platforms have been politicized (Kemp, 2021). This is not surprising, given the previous finding that activists resort to social media for collective action, according to Storck (2011).

As social media's presence and use have grown, many view it as a one-stop shop. In addition to its ease of access, social media is used by many for connecting, engaging, and being engaged, in news, gossip, e-commerce, e-government, and even politicking. More importantly, social media appears to be a safe space for many to express their views and, in a way, their genuine thoughts and feelings. It alters how we think and absorbs information, which leads to a range of reactions and actions.

Social media's interactive nature (Ansari and Khan, 2020) plays a major role in transforming citizens from passive observers to active participants. With their inherent openness, social media platforms can change the message, even changing politics and values, and feeding off conflicts and understandings. Rainie, Smith, Scholzman, Brady, and Verba (2012) support this, arguing that users gain knowledge of politics and even become more engaged in politics. In the US alone, 39% of adults use social media to express their political and civic views. Furthermore, Gibson and McAllister (2012) found that online social ties enhance political interactions, while online social contacts increase offline participation. Additionally, Doris (2014, as cited in Ahmad et al, 2019) asserts that people use social media to make political changes by providing information on social media feeds to promote political awareness, as well as mobilizing citizens to take part in politics. FB, the most popular social media platform, has been found to play a crucial role in political efficacy (Abdulrauf, 2016). According to his study, he found that online participation in politics is positively correlated with the cognitive engagement and political involvement of young people

in Malaysia and Nigeria. The interactive nature of Facebook makes this possible.

Through social media, one can build a community that fosters both diversity and unity. Biswas, Ingle, and Roy (2014) found that social media is a powerful tool for bringing people together, whether they come from the same political party or not. It allows people to connect with whomever they want, whenever they want. It allows the expression of opinions with limited censorship and restraint. It allows them to share their opinions, criticize others, lend their voices, and even change their minds (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2015).

Social media creates a venue where information can reach a multitude of audiences in such a short period. Through social media, global conflict, diplomacy around the world, and politics have become accessible and sensitive to public perception (Singer and Brooking, 2018).

Social media empowers people. Barry (2012) explains that when one participates in social media, one becomes a content creator, thus empowering the users (Jay, 2015) to be engaged in political discourses. Even the disenfranchised citizens can now actively participate, giving them access to and even perhaps influence political information. Owen (2017) refers to this phenomenon as the new media populism, which may revitalize democracy.

In contrast to mainstream media which is often characterized by a centralized and top-down approach, not to mention one-way information dissemination (Andrejevic, 2013), social media provides the users with the capacity to challenge existing political hierarchy as users have the power to dictate content. Insofar as content preference is concerned, Hellweg (2011) found out that voters use social media to influence constituent perceptions and that voters react positively to the politician's content as compared to their professional information.

In the shift of control over the content of the users in social media, there appears to be a redistribution of control and power. The producer becomes now a regulator and not the main actor. Borrowing from the words of Karl Marx — "the tools and the means of production are now in the hands of the workers."

However, while many proponents think that social media heralded the entry of participatory democracy, survey data reveal that social media users are largely passive, and content participation is dominated by a few yet popular users who post comments and create new inputs (Newman and Levy, 2013). Additionally, participation in social media has been found to differ per country, with domestic political structures playing a powerful role that social media in determining citizen participation in political processes (Filer and Fredheim, 2016).

Beauchamp (2019) on the extreme argues that others would even say that social media destroys democracy. This was supported by Deibert (2019) saying:

"The world of social media is more conducive to extreme, emotionally charged and divisive types of content than it is to calm, principled consideration of competing or complex narratives."

Ingram (2018) counters Deibert's argument by saying that social media is for democracy as it opens possibilities to informing people, amplifying their voices, allowing for understanding to realize, dissipating apathy, and furthering trust in the institutions.

The epistemic value of participation in social media

This paper has already shown how social media plays a role in collective learning and how its increased accessibility has made it a central platform for the dissemination of knowledge (Notley, 2009). In this section, we demonstrate how social media create opportunities for community-wide inclusion, which supports a community's capacity to define and address public issues (Quick & Feldman, 2011). It has been said that the more inclusive a community is, the higher the chance of participation, i.e., that the public will emphasize its input on the content of government programs, policy-making, or decision-making.

In recent years, social media has gained a reputation for being an enabler and facilitator of participation because of its ability to alleviate inhibitions common to face-to-face interactions. Particularly, it has contributed to the emergence of a new form of political and social engagement. Nevertheless, some people argue that

participation in an online environment is distinct from participation in the offline environment (Oser et al., 2013) because there is a lack of proximity to the actors, a detachment between actions and their outcomes, and a minimal hierarchy within the online environment (Machackova & Serek, 2017), all of which may impact its epistemic value.

At its core, the traditional meaning of participation is "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992, p.5, as cited in Notley, 2009). Yet, many social and political practices and relationships are now organised and built into online public spaces. According to Notley (2009), when participation takes place online, the physical context of the community "in which one lives" is diminished. However, this does not mean that the impact of participation — and the knowledge it generates — are also diminished. Postmodernists, highly skeptical of universal definitions and explanations, agree with this statement because it encourages looking beyond a dominant discourse (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015).

Though knowledge does not have a clear nor unified definition, it remains an abstract concept, nonetheless, a powerful one as it is generally understood to be a preparation for action (Russell, 1992, as cited in Matthews, 2015). Knowledge evolving from online practice — where anyone can have a say regardless of ideology, credibility, and authenticity — is no different, and in this regard, may pose a conflict with the epistemic value of participation (Torres et al, 2018). Due to the anonymity of the online environment, participants no longer feel ambivalent to participate and can be themselves without inhibition. What it cannot verify, though, is the knowledge source's legitimacy and agenda.

Considering the prevalence of "fake news," defined as false or misleading information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, cited in Torres et al, 2018) with the intent to manipulate (Torres et al, 2018), it is crucial to establish a verification process for online content. It is also suggested that more research be carried out to further understand the role of social media in participation. Matthews (2015) states that these researchers must be combined with philosophy, interaction design, and qualitative methods to arrive at a better understanding of how the platform can serve as a tool for human knowledge. False news is widespread and poses a threat not only to social interactions but also to the epistemic value of participation (Torres et al, 2018).

According to Benkler (2006, as cited in Notley, 2009), there is currently a fundamental shift in how individuals engage in democracy and their role as citizens, resulting in the need for new communication and linkage tools. In this paper, we contend that the growth of virtual networks and the emergence of digital collaboration technology offers citizens the possibility of moving beyond being consumers of information and becoming "participants in a conversation" (Benkler, 2006, p. 272, cited in Notley, 2009) without sacrificing its epistemic value.

Online participation may indeed take away the physical sense of community, but what it brings, on the other hand, is an opportunity for people to participate in debates and decision-making that may have been previously either too intellectual or too restricted. Spinner (2012) evaluated that digital tools, when used properly, can contribute to democracy. She stated that the features of these technologies — speed, cost, and flexibility — can potentially assist and enhance the democratization process. The very nature of social media, for instance, is like the conditions of democracy — popular, accessible, and inclusive — and these outweigh the seeming drawbacks of it being too open, unmoderated, and informal.

Moreover, social media has, in recent years, materialized to be a medium that filters the common biases and errors found in face-to-face deliberations, e.g., feeling of empathy due to proximity with other actors, or control of the flow of information from government agencies. The platform has allowed citizens and governments to be more transparent while engaging in direct dialogue with each other, thereby building public trust and accountability. This is supported by Velasquez and Rojas (2017) who posit that the online setting may be more politically diverse than the traditional offline mode (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Carpini, 2012; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015, as cited in Velasquez and Rojas, 2017) and that it may offer a political venue for marginalized

groups (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013, as cited in Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Robertson (2013) also advanced this by claiming that including the perspectives and interests of the marginalized groups in the construction and generation of knowledge is of epistemic value.

Correspondingly, Ahmad et al (2019) probed how online political activities influence offline political participation and political efficacy. The findings of the study show that most respondents use social media for political awareness and information, specifically, by discussing government happenings with local politicians (something not easily achieved in the traditional context), sharing political content with the online community, and actively campaigning to take part in real-life political engagements. The authors conclude that online political activities trigger participation in offline political activities and that these have a significant relationship with political efficacy.

Setbacks of participating in social media

Atton (2001) states that zines and mixed forms of electronic communication — small-scale media — account for alternative media that aim for social and political action (Atton, 2001, citing Traber, 1985). In addition, Hamilton (2000), posits that any source of information that forgoes "conventional…formulas to advocate programs of social change" can be classified as alternative media.

One of the most common alternative forms of social movement media nowadays is social media; it has facilitated the sharing of ideas and information through online communities. According to Hemsley, et al, (2018), many individuals from different parts of the world have high expectations for the "democratizing force of social media" (Hemsley, et al, 2018). The authors cited Twitter as an example of having served as a stitching mechanism to organize social movements in the case of Occupy Wall Street (Hemsley, et al, 2018, citing Gerbaudo, 2012). However, the rise of false narratives, fake news, and troll farms has shown the dark side of social media.

First, individuals can weave false narratives and misinform the public (Molina, et al, 2019). False narratives,

as Hemsley et al (2018) would stress, are constructed not by a single person but by multiple actors and "slowly emerge as a plausible reality" which makes them dangerous. Second, social media can fabricate fake news, e.g., how headlines are framed, how videos are labeled, or how a partial picture of a whole is presented — which can deceive perceptions and shape opinions. As an example, a YouTube video labeled "European migrant crisis," tended to generate comments aligned with how it is framed: positive or negative towards refugees (Lee and Nerghes, n.d., as cited in Hemsely, et al, 2018). Third, troll farms, defined as "groups of organized online agitators" (Barsotti, 2018), have been emerging, sowing division, and in the process, affecting decision-making. Barsotti (2018) draws attention to the pronouncements that these troll farms are "finding tensions that exist on Facebook or Twitter…and amplify them;" and Lightman (2018, as cited in Barsotti, 2018)), that this could, later on, become a bigger issue since "people… check their News Feed more often than they may check on actual news."

Social media has been changing the way people interact. For instance, crowdsourcing, the term used for obtaining content or services from a large group of people, usually takes place online. The problem now is how to gauge the credibility of these online users knowing that web-savvy individuals and organizations are likely to take advantage of the networked world that allows them to reach a wider audience in a more efficient manner (Paniagua & Korzynski, 2017), without much consideration for authenticity.

Despite the drawbacks, high hopes remain for the epistemic value of participation in social media. Lievrouw (2010) discusses that social media may form venues for scientific communication that brings together the qualities of "immediacy, trust, credibility…and 'communism' with novel forms of documentation." An example shared by academics from Malaysia is the medical case of a 15-year-old patient with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) which was solved in three weeks with the use of an online site that allows users to take part in decoding complex proteins (Ghazali, et al, 2016). This suggests that the utilization

of social media in the knowledge-sharing process and in improving scholarly and research work has bearing.

Also, Godler, et al, 2020, mention that a young philosophical field, "social epistemology," is growing, which sees the participation of society in the knowledge acquisition process as unavoidable. The case of Estonia's "Immigrant Inclusion by e-Participation" project explores how social media can be used for increasing the involvement of minorities in policy-making, to generate information that will serve as the basis for creating policies and regulations concerning their life (Laanpere, et al, 2011).

Furthermore, a study by Chan, et al, (2014), examined if there is a promotion of epistemic cognition when people are placed in social contexts, and if online interactions mediate social epistemic cognition. Their findings introduced a fresh construct of social epistemic cognition which points out that epistemic cognition can be fostered in online social environments as facilitated by online interactions. The authors indicate that social interactions among community members — including those of netizens on online platforms — can aid knowledge construction (Chan, et al, 2014).

Justifying the use of social media in democracy

The potential for social media to be a technology for communication, learning, and liberation, specifically in a democratic setup, is evident. It cannot be denied that the platform has made it easier for people to have a voice in government; nowadays, many are channeling their political energy online to discuss current events, organize causes, and hold leaders responsible. And those in government also observe and interact.

A series of interviews done by Harbath (2018) covered the topic of social media and democracy. Sunstein, Professor at Harvard Law School, said that a fundamental requirement for people to govern themselves is for them to have information and for this information to be transferred to others. This is supported by Vromen, a Professor at the University of Sydney, who asserted that social media enables collective social action but that it needs to have content moderation. Ilves, Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, echoed this concern. He likened the power of social media to the power of companies supplying utilities such as energy and water during the Industrial Revolution — they are so vital that they need to be regulated. Chakrabarti, Facebook's Product Manager for Civic Engagement, meanwhile, says that the convergence of social media and democracy is a new frontier and that the search for answers continues. One basic truth about social media, according to him, is that intensifies human intent, both good and bad. He also believes that ultimately, "a more connected world can be a more democratic one."

As said, inclusion aids political participation and discussion of issues, including the unacceptable conditions in society that require intervention, commonly referred to as public problems. According to Kraft and Furlong (2015), what politicians choose to do to address these public problems should be an extension of the citizens they represent, many of which can be solved by large-scale collective action. In this age and time, there is no better tool to gather social input and create public knowledge than social media. It is an effective, efficient, equitable, socially acceptable, and technically feasible means for decision-making. It could be a good alternative to the traditional mode of face-to-face participation in public affairs.

A healthy democratic society can flourish when citizens participate and engage in a rational debate, in a space where one can express ideas as equals, as suggested by Juergen Habermas. This translates to the need for free speech, accessible platforms, and some extent free press — characteristics offered not only by face-to-face deliberations but also by social media like Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and the likes. In effect and theory, social media may be considered an enabler of democracy.

Participation of citizens in political processes is one measure of democracy and in doing so, can influence decision making that has the potential to change individual and group behavior. Research has shown the benefits of face-to-face deliberations, including those of being exposed to other perspectives (Min, 2007) but whether online deliberations through social media are

equally beneficial, remains to be seen.

Conversely, Sunstein (2001) has already countered and suggested that online public spheres are not the most ideal, even inferior to face-to-face deliberations. There have been many arguments in both cases and this paper, we go one extra step and posit that participation of the public in debates on social media may be a good alternative to aid decisions in an ailing democracy. Bulmer and DiMauro (2010) mentioned that decision-making is accelerated by participating in online discussions, noting that reading social media posts, sharing, and retweeting, provides the information necessary to facilitate decision making. However, by acknowledging the importance of social media in maintaining a healthy democracy, there are additional considerations that should be met –those citizens and institutions are trustworthy and trusted. In both cases, we need to examine whether social media like FB, Twitter, Instagram, Linkedin, among others possess those characteristics or at least provide mechanisms in place to protect and promote information flow, privacy, safety, and security, and perhaps, truth.

Social media platforms have changed the way how information is made available and presented to the world. It has provided opportunities that stimulate trust as well as distrust threatening legitimacy, fostering inequality, and instigating protests (Bekmagambetova et al., 2018). A case in point would be evidence that Twitter played in 2012 in the revolution of Egypt (Fuchs, 2014).

Further, with almost four billion users of social media, the security risks associated with it include identity theft, malware, and damage to public service reputation (Senthil Kumar, et al., 2016). To address these concerns, serious efforts are being made by governments and social media companies to regulate and void the publishing of misleading information through social media. For example, in Germany, they have launched the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG law) in 2017, which obliges social media platforms to send suspected criminal content to Federal police, directly upon a report of a user. Such provisions of the law would like to address the rising right-wing extremism and hate crimes and the spreading misinformation of fake news, which can undermine democracy. Another interesting practice in regulating social media platforms includes Indias's assertion that allows the government to remove content where they deemed it objectionable and also conducts internet shutdowns. A similar practice is also seen in Kenya and Ethiopia. Meanwhile, countries like Saudi Arabia, Russia, China have been found to have the most restrictive social media. China bans western social media platforms and Chinese social media platforms equivalent are likewise closely monitored by its government. In Saudi Arabia, online discourses are extensively manipulated by Monarchy (Siripurapu and Merrow, 2021).

On another note, social media giants like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Linked in are largely self-regulated but they have put in place some content moderation policies. These policies would include barring posts that contain hate speech or that encourage hate speech, sexually explicit posts. They have also taken steps to limit disinformation including fact-checking posts, labeling the accounts of state-run media, and banning political ads (Siripurarpu and Merrow, 2021).

Additionally, these platforms are compliant with the laws of the countries where they operate, which can restrict speech and use even further. These policies are implemented by social media companies by employing thousands specifically to screen posts for violations and by the use of moderation software that is powered by artificial intelligence.

Meanwhile, fake news continues to proliferate on social media content and they have been considered a potential threat not only to press freedom but o democracy in general.

Fake news has been recognized to have existed since 1439 when the printing press was first introduced (Klyuev, 2019). It gained prominence during the Presidential election in 2016 in the US (Gereme & Zhu, 2019; Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Zhou & Zafarani, 2018).

Fake news, according to Lazer et al (2018) is "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent." Fake news comes in many forms including hoaxes, clickbait,

propaganda, satire and parody, and others. Among the fake news, hoaxes are considered cause the most damage to their victim, usually aiming at public figures (Rubin et al., 2015).

In characterizing these different forms of fake news, we recognize the potential damage they will cause in misleading people of the truth but let us not overlook the discerning capacity of those who engage in debates on social media and that while disinformation may be spreading fast, such is not impossible to extricate (Groebler, 2017; (Kraft et al., 2015) Further, Sunstein (1996) mentioned that finding just enough common middle ground based on "incomplete theorized agreements" may be enough to move forward in deciding as it is rare to find where a group completely agrees on all fronts. The important this is people who participate, whether on social media or face to face ground their beliefs and attitudes and adjust their political judgments based on one hand — the merit of the case and on the other, heuristics — not perfect but helpful in guiding political decisions.

Some mechanisms that have been employed include those that have been initiated by the government and the social media giants. Further, the spread of information literacy (Bluemle, 2018) as a political literacy and agency has seen a continuing rise and appreciation when one engages in political discourses. Examples would include civic education on varying topics including election reforms, tax forum intellectual freedom among the youth, working class, college students, and the like. At the heart of this civic education is the notion that critical information literacy is key to countering the effects of fake news (Cooke, 2017).

If a healthy democracy requires participation, then certainly social media provides that mileage for inclusion and access, so discounting the benefits of social media as a useful tool for decision-making will have to be looked at differently. After all and we support, that democracy does not ask that discourses in public spaces be devoid of distortions or concealment, but rather to have these spaces where mechanisms for addressing such distortions are addressed (Buschman, 2019).

Conclusion

When democracy spelled out in terms of access, inclusivity, validity, and participation are prized, considering political decision-making through social media can have its merits with impediments in terms of censorship, regulation, and legitimacy. Using the normative ideals of inclusivity and epistemic value of participation to justify the use of social media is a biased argument, particularly when the conditions under which the biases are developed and explained are held. In the end, accepting social media as an ideal for decision-making in democracy should not be accepted as is, unless theorization of the role of social media and justification of its merits is made. Without such, we may fail to account for what we seek in social media to support democracy.

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