Social Media and Democracy: Is Something Missing?

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Much has been written about the impact of social media on democracy, especially in recent years. In part, this explosion of commentary on the role of social media came about as the result of several very high-profile elections, among them the presidential election in the United States, that some analysts believe were very heavily influenced— possibly even decided — because of efforts by foreign powers to sway popular opinion via social media channels.[1] Bhutanese policy makers, like everyone else, should be concerned about these very real forces that have come to influence more and more elections globally.

I must warn the reader that this article is written by an American expatriate grateful to be living in Bhutan. The article is heavily coloured by my own sombre view of what has happened to the United States' political culture over the past decade(s), juxtaposed with what I find to be a fairly healthy policy-making environment in Bhutan.

Furthermore, I am writing as someone who has never found much entertainment value in the various social media outlets that have increasingly come to define our communications landscape. I must therefore admit that this makes it a great deal easier for me to remain agnostic about a communication medium that, for a great many of my respected peers and colleagues, has become an important tool for their everyday work, socialising, and information gathering.

Fourteen years ago, the United States was immersed in a highly contentious election campaign. George W. Bush was running for re-election against a veteran politician from the opposition party, Senator John Kerry. Much of the election would revolve around issues of national security.

The 2004 election was held barely three years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and at a time when the US had begun to feel the pain and cognitive dissonance of having launched two costly, deadly, and highly controversial wars.

In 2002, the US opened the Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre, which many international lawyers still consider to be illegal. In April of that year,

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1   Matt Apuzzo and Sharon LaFraniere, "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," New York Times (The), February 16, 2018.

news reports revealed that the US had been engaging in systematic torture of prisoners at its prison facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Large parts of the American population were grappling with the cognitive dissonance of wanting at once to support American troops fighting wars in faraway lands, while also feeling increasingly uncomfortable with those same wars that seemed to throw doubt on America's self-perception as a law-abiding and just international actor.

Given this context, Senator Kerry seemed to be a formidable political challenger. Prior to his political career, Senator Kerry served with distinction as a soldier in Vietnam before returning to the United States to engage in the anti-war movement, openly criticising American human rights abuses in Vietnam in the 1970s.

Meanwhile, concurrently, questions arose as to whether President George W. Bush might have failed even to fulfil his very limited service requirements as an air national guard reservist in Texas, spared from active duty in Vietnam.

One of the great ironies of the 2004 election was that a small group of President George W. Bush's supporters managed to turn what might have seemed to be Senator Kerry's greatest political strength into a weakness.

A group called the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth began to relentlessly attack Senator Kerry's military record, arguing that the several awards for bravery and injuries sustained as a captain of a so-called "swift boat" operating in hostile territory in Vietnam were undeserved. The group was funded by wealthy Republican donors and organised specifically to influence the election. It included among its members only one individual who had served with Senator Kerry during the Vietnam war. All other living members of Senator Kerry's unit, as well as key eyewitnesses at the time and publicly available military records, all supported the integrity of the Senator's actions.

The furore that erupted in response to the "swift boat" attack advertisements seemed only to further polarise the debate. The irony lies in the observation that there is no easy way to counter such an attack making conscious use of falsehoods. Ignore it and the myth grows to resemble an accepted truth; rebut it too vigorously and the debate persists, only to be drawn out and reinforced time and time again by those promoting the falsehood.

The episode entered the English lexicon and is today known as "swiftboating", namely to "target (a politician or political figure) with a campaign of personal attacks."[2]

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2   Oxford Living Dictionaries, "swift-boat," *last accessed* February 17, 2018

Since that time "swiftboating" has remained a constant in American political discourse. Some of the same donors behind the 2004 swift-boat advertisements funded a similar attack campaign in 2008 accusing President Obama of having close ties to a radical underground group in Chicago.[3]

Later advertisements during the run-up to the 2012 elections alleged — again, contrary to all available evidence — that President Obama was not born in the United States (and thus not eligible to serve as President), or that he was a practicing Muslim.

The "swiftboating" continued in 2016, famously alleging that Secretary Hillary Clinton did nothing to prevent the attack by radical Islamists on the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and the persistent allegations that Secretary Clinton had consciously sought to subvert the law by using a private email address for official business.

The existence of social media, coupled with the fact that more and more individuals today turn to social media for news and political commentary,[4] unleashed the full potential of "swiftboat" campaigners to influence pre-election political discourse.

No longer did a "swiftboat" campaign require massive start-up investments by wealthy financiers able to sponsor advertisements in traditional media. Anyone today can post "swiftboat" campaigns to any number of news forums, distribute information via anonymous social media accounts, or — for a modest fee — target paid "swiftboat"-style advertisements to a highly targeted audience of social media users.

"Swiftboaters" can easily mask politically motivated content in the form of seemingly legitimate news stories, dispensing with any illusions of transparency and accountability. Finally, *anyone* can act as a "swiftboat" entrepreneur, regardless of age, nationality, or even any particular standing to generate supposed "news" content.

A young man in a town called Veles, Macedonia, for example, recounts how in early 2016 he plagiarised a completely made-up online story about Donald Trump allegedly slapping a man at a campaign rally, re-posted it online, and — much to his astonishment — saw the story shared over 800 times, earning

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3   Dan Morain, "Billionaire behind Swift Boat ads funded anti-Obama spot," Los Angeles Times, Aug. 23, 2008.

4   In late 2017, 67% of Americans reported getting at least some of their news through social media outlets, in particular Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat. Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017," Pew Research Center, (Sept. 7, 2017), available at http://www. journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/,

him over USD 150 in advertising revenue on his website.[5] Six months later, the man (who declined to give his name) had dropped out of high school and was earning an average of USD 4,000 per month (over 10 times the average monthly salary in Macedonia) running two pro-Trump websites.[6]

"These Macedonians on Facebook didn't care if Trump won or lost the White House," a journalist wrote in 2017. "They only wanted pocket money to pay for things— a car, watches, better cell phones, more drinks at the bar."[7]

Moreover, they were able to benefit from "countless alt-right websites in the US, which manufactured white-label falsehoods disguised as news on an industrial scale."[8] Thus, an unwitting alliance emerged between radical fringe groups in the United States — intentionally generating racist falsehoods designed specifically to incite religious or ethnic conflict — and an uncoordinated assortment of young internet entrepreneurs who realised they could make thousands of dollars by strategically re-posting and amplifying those falsehoods.

The first part of that alliance aimed to undermine the political consensus in the United States and legitimate white supremacism. The objective of the second part of that alliance was to recycle those stories and maximise the "clicks" they would receive from American voters.

Is Bhutan immune to this kind of an unholy alliance? There are, of course, those who would seek to slander Bhutan's noteworthy history of sustainable development. As an academic, I run into articles on a weekly basis gleefully insinuating that Gross National Happiness is nothing more than political sloganeering. Most of these authors have never been to Bhutan but seem genuinely outraged that a small Himalayan country would dare turn down international "best practices" in favour of its own vision of development.

When challenged, some make it their life mission to tarnish Bhutan (and countries pursuing alternative development strategies), especially when faced with suggestions that some of these strategies are bearing fruit. I can no longer count how many times I have been challenged to "be more rigorous" after suggesting that there was something the rest of the world could learn from Bhutan, simply because this idea runs counter to the standard narrative that wisdom must flow from the more "developed" Global North to the "developing" Global South.

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5   Samanth Subramanian, "inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex," WIRED (Feb. 15, 2017).
6   Id.
7   Id.
8   Id.

Furthermore, can we be sure that the enterprising and disaffected young man sitting in front of his computer screen in Macedonia might not also currently be looking at Bhutanese news blogs wondering if there might not also be some cash to be made out of the Bhutanese election?

Perhaps the Bhutanese election does not offer the same potential for ad revenue as the 2016 US Presidential elections, but then again, perhaps it would at least be worth a few extra bucks? In an era of global media access, all it takes is a quick google search to know precisely which countries around the world are gearing up to hold a national election and a few additional google searches to know which issues are the most likely to prove contentious.

This scenario does not even contemplate the potential for a much more sophisticated and well-financed effort by governments to influence elections in other countries. On February 16, for example, news broke in the United States that the US authorities had indicted 13 Russian citizens for running a "sophisticated network designed to subvert the 2016 election and to support the Trump campaign".[9]

Their intent, according to a high-ranking Justice Department official overseeing the investigation, was to "promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy."[10] One Russian computer campaigner who had been hired as part of a large-scale "swiftboat" operation boasted how she had "created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people."[11]

The US is not alone in this regard. Similar fears of foreign meddling in a national election have arisen in the context of the United Kingdom's "Brexit" vote (2016),[12] France's parliamentary elections (2017),[13] and Germany's national parliamentary elections (2017).[14]

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9   Apuzzo, supra, note 1.
10   Id., quoting Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein, who oversees the special investigation.
11   Id.
12   Adam, Karla and William Booth, "Rising Alarm in Britain Over Russian Meddling in Brexit Vote," Washington Post (The), November 17, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/rising-alarm-in-britain-over-russian-meddling-in-brexit-vote/2017/11/17/2e987a30-cb34-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5_story.html?utm_term=.36ac7eca504b.
13   Farand, Chloe, "French Social Media Awash with Fake News Stories from Sources 'Exposed to Russian Influence' Ahead of Presidential Election," Independent, April 22, 2017, available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-voters-deluge-fake-news-stories-facebook-twitter-russian-influence-days-before-election-a7696506.html.
14   Stelzenmüller, Constanze, "The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections: Testimony," June 28, 2017, available at https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/.

In each of these cases, speculation arose of a sophisticated effort, allegedly underwritten directly by Russia, to use social media strategies to destabilise the Euro-Atlantic alliance and foment support for anti-establishment parties in other countries. Other reports found similar social media strategies increasingly playing a role in national politics.

Freedom House, for example, found that 30 countries in 2017 were known to employ professional cadres of media activists tasked with promoting and defending "officially sanctioned" government narratives and policies via social media.[15] Those social media propagandists rely not only on their own persuasive power, but also on a host of powerful and difficult-to-detect strategies to amplify their messages, including "google bombs," "twitter bombs," fake grassroots movements often referred to as "astroturf," targeted advertising, social media "bots" ("fake social media profiles that appear to be connected to human users, but are really driven by algorithms"),[16] hacking known activists' accounts to spread disinformation or other compromising material, denial of service attacks on websites they seek to censor, etc.[17]

In response, some social media companies, notably Facebook, announced policy changes in response to the growing popular backlash against social media companies for enabling such "swiftboat" campaigns, claiming that these changes would make it more difficult to use social media to influence an election.[18]

And yet, as Sandy Parakilas, who led Facebook's efforts to fix privacy problems in 2012, described Facebook's approach to consumer protection issues: Their policy is often no better than to "react when the press or regulators make something an issue and avoid any changes that would hurt the business of collecting and selling data."[19]

One solution, of course, would be to simply stop relying on social media as a source of anything but *social* news — news about friends, vacations, babies, changed relationships, among many.

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15   Kelly, Sanja, et. al., "Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy: Freedom on the Net 2017," Freedom House, November 2017, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2017_Final.pdf.

16   Kupferschmidt, Kai, "Social Media 'Bots' Tried to Influence the U.S. Election. Germany may be Next." Science. September 13, 2017, available at http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/09/social-media-bots-tried-influence-us-election-germany-may-be-next.

17   Metaxas, Panagiotis T. and Eni Mustafaraj, "Social Media and the Elections," Science, October 26, 2012, available at http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6106/472.full.

18   Isaac, Mike, "Facebook Overhauls News Feed to Focus on What Friends and Family Share," New York Times (The), Jan. 11, 2018, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/technology/facebook-news-feed.html?smid=tw-share.

19   Parakilas, Sandy, "We Can't Trust Facebook to Regulate Itself," New York Times (The), November 19, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/19/opinion/facebook-regulation-incentive.html.

Evidence suggests that those individuals who get their news from traditional news sources, including online news sites such as www.kuenselonline.com, or www.thebhutanese.bt, or www.businessbhutan.bt, are more likely to trust political institutions whereas those individuals who get their news from social media are less likely to trust politics.[20]

Explaining their findings, the authors of one such study note that "traditional media outlets give coverage to political scandals, raising an alarm for the sake of restoring stability… Therefore, beside criticism, they also broadcast the attempts made by democratic political systems to reform themselves. Conversely, in the social media environment, such positive voices seem more hidden. Users become much more demanding of political institutions and this perpetuates distrust without generating a virtuous circle."[21]

But such a solution increasingly seems naïve, especially when many traditional news outlets and governments have realised that the tide has turned in favour of social media.[22] But even if we are comfortable with, or perhaps resigned to, the reality that social media will continue to function as an important source of news for growing numbers of citizens, we must realise that the social media companies themselves are designed — first and foremost — to generate record profits for themselves. They do so by commercialising our user data and by continually incentivising us to give them that data, primarily by rewarding us for putting as much of our private lives onto their platforms as possible.

In light of that realisation, it is us — we ourselves — who are collectively responsible for making social media a more reliable source of political discourse. As one US commentator noted in the wake of revelations that Russia manipulated the 2016 US presidential election: "Facebook and Twitter are just a mirror, reflecting us. They reveal a society that is painfully divided, gullible to misinformation, dazzled by sensationalism, and willing to spread lies and promote hate. We don't like this reflection, so we blame the mirror, painting ourselves as victims of Silicon Valley manipulation."[23] Instead, it would seem, we need to accept what the mirror is really showing us, and take a good hard look at how we as individuals interact via social media.

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20   Andrea Ceron (2015), "Internet, News, and Political Trust: The Difference Between Social Media and Online Media Outlets," 20 J. of Computer-Mediated Communic'n 487.

21   Id.

22   *See e.g.,* Department of Information and Media, Ministry of Information and Communication, "Social Media Policy for the Government of Bhutan," Feb. 19, 2016, and Peter Ho, "Opinion: Is Balance of Trust Shifting from Political to Social?" *Straits Times (The),* Feb. 13, 2018.

23   Parker, Emily, "Silicon Valley Can't Destroy Democracy Without Our Help," New York Times, (The), November 2, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/opinion/silicon-valley-democracy-russia.html.

Where should we look, then, to find that personal sense of ethics as consumers, generators, or re-publishers of social media news content?

For one, we might derive inspiration from Bhutan's Constitution, which articulates both rights *and* responsibilities for Bhutanese citizens. Bhutanese citizens enjoy the right to freedom of speech (Article 7.2), the right to information (Article 7.3), the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 7.4), and freedom of press (Article 7.5).

So yes, the Constitution clearly opens the doors for all of us to express ourselves in the social media. At the same time, all Bhutanese citizens have, among other duties, the obligation to "foster tolerance, mutual respect and spirit of brotherhood amongst all the people of Bhutan transcending religious, linguistic, regional or sectional diversities," (Article 8.3).[24]

This second half of the Bhutanese Constitutional equation — namely, that individuals themselves carry significant responsibilities to keep Bhutan's democracy vibrant — is of supreme importance if Bhutan is to tame social media's propensity to facilitate "swiftboating," political polarisation, and attempts to manipulate political perceptions.

We might also draw inspiration from the numerous journalist codes of conduct drafted by media professionals seeking to balance their own rights as journalists with their responsibility to contribute positively to society.

The Code of Ethics for Journalists, for example, published by the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA), mandates that journalists "provide independent and accurate news and information with integrity, remain accountable for their actions, neutral in their position and keep the national interest foremost in their minds at all times" (Article 6, Code of Ethics).

The Code then sets forth 10 principles which journalists are encouraged to observe both in letter and spirit. These principles include "Social Responsibility: A journalist shall [...] provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions." (Article 6.2.d), "Non-discrimination: A journalist shall [...] resist those who would seek to buy or politically influence news contents…" (Article 6.4.1.d), and "Sensationalism: A Journalist shall avoid sensationalism in the reporting of events and take all possible precautions to ensure that anything published by him does not have the effect of inciting people into violence or other illegal acts." (Article 6.5.1).

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24   The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, July 18, 2008.

To the extent we consider ourselves to be "citizen journalists" operating in social media, we should also take to heart those professional standards designed to protect the integrity of that vocation. And to the extent that we consume news over social media, we should never forget to demand those same high standards from those whom we trust as reliable sources of information.

Most importantly, perhaps, we should let ourselves constantly be reminded that politics work best when they respond to the "real-world" political community, the one that includes not just us and our like-minded friends, but also our neighbours, colleagues, classmates, friends, detractors, and all other sentient beings. If we do not find ways of communicating with integrity in that offline world, we risk the very soul of a democracy.