Social Media in Elections: What have We Wrought?

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Social Media -- a group of online tools that enable users to create and share content and to participate in social networking — has made citizen participation in determining their future a real possibility.

But in a very short period of time social media, most associated with Facebook and Twitter, has moved from being seen as a "boon" to becoming a "bane" to democracy.

The enthusiasm for social media as a democratising tool can be gleaned in the following post-2008 US Presidential elections commentary:

> "Obama's masterful leveraging of Web 2.0 platforms marks a major E-ruption in electoral politics — in America and elsewhere — as campaigning shifts from old-style political machines toward the horizontal dynamics of online social networks. The Web, a perfect medium for genuine grassroots political movements, is transforming the power dynamics of politics. There are no barriers to entry on sites like Facebook and YouTube. Power is diffused because everybody can participate."[1]

But within a decade, hope for transformation has been replaced by disappointment due to manipulation. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2017 reported that "Online manipulation and disinformation tactics played an important role in elections in at least 18 countries over the past year, including the United States, damaging citizens' ability to choose their leaders based on factual news and authentic debate."[2]

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1 Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta Barack Obama and the Facebook Election US News and World Report, Nov. 19, 2008 https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election
2 Freedom House "New Report - Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy" https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-net-2017-manipulating-social-media-undermine-democracy

What Happened?

A truncated history

The emergence of social media as a tool in elections can be traced back to the 2008 US Presidential Election. It is widely accepted that Barack Obama changed electoral politics by using social media to reach out to voters, raise funds, and mobilise supporters.

Of course, Obama did not rely solely on social media to win elections. But, as noted by an observer: "The Obama campaign understood the power of complementing offline work with an online campaign. They systematically linked the online community to offline activities such as fundraising and volunteer mobilisation."[3]

Social media also helped Donald Trump win the 2016 US Presidential Elections. In the words of the Trump Campaign Digital Director, "Twitter is how [Trump] talked to the people, Facebook was going to be how he won."[4]

The Trump campaign deployed social media primarily for interacting with supporters and starting new conversations.[5] They also used social media for micro-targeting — "a marketing strategy that uses consumer data and demographics to identify the interests of specific individuals, or very small groups of like-minded individuals, and influence their thoughts or actions."[6]

Social media also plays an important role in elections where connectivity is poor and uneven and users are generally young urban voters.

In Indonesia, social media was first successfully used in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial race.[7] Twitter and Facebook were used by candidates, parties, supporters, and the electorate. Jokoko Widowo (Jokowi) used social media innovatively to help him win the election. For instance, he used Twitter in the campaign to urge Jakarta residents to come up with humorous ways of combining his name with popular song titles.

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3   Robin Effing, Jos van Hillegersberg and Theo Huibers "Social Media and Political Participation: Are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube Democratizing Our Political Systems?" https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-642-23333-3_3.pdf

4   Lois Becket "Trump digital director says Facebook helped win the White House" The Guardian 9 Oct 2017 in https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/08/trump-digital-director-brad-par-scale-facebook-advertising

5   https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/

6   http://searchcio.techtarget.com/definition/microtargeting

7   Anders C. Johansson "Social Media and Politics in Indonesia" Stockholm School of Economics Asia Working Paper No. 42 December 2016 https://swopec.hhs.se/hascer/papers/hascer2016-042.pdf

In the 2014 Indonesian national elections, social media was used in official campaigns, political commentaries, voter information, election observation, and election reporting.[8] All political parties were active on social media. Jokowi — the social media savvy governor of Jakarta who had over 1.3 million Twitter followers (twice more than any other candidate) — was elected president.

Narendra Modi's victory in India's 2014 election has been attributed to his skilful use of social media. His campaign included a website (www. narendramodi.in), a Facebook page, Twitter, a Pinterest board, a YouTube channel, and profiles on Google+, LinkedIn, Tumbler, Instagram and a mobile app called India272+ to pass messages and organise volunteers.[9]

Towards the end of the 2014 election campaign, Modi wrote in a blog post: "This is the first election where social media has assumed an important role and the importance of this medium will only increase in the years to come."[10]

But how exactly has social media changed elections?

The Good

Tom Murse identified 10 ways that social media has changed political campaigns. Social media:

1. Enables candidates' direct contact with voters

2. Provides advertising without paying for it

3. Allows campaigns go viral

4. Permits tailoring the message to different segments of the electorate

5. Facilitates fundraising

6. Creates potential for controversy (by allowing a politician to send out unfiltered Tweets or Facebook posts that have landed many a candidate in embarrassing situations

7. Allows feedback from the electorate

8. Permits weighing of public opinion

8   Andrew Thornley "Indonesia's Social Media Elections" In Asia April 2, 2014 https://asiafoundation. org/2014/04/02/indonesias-social-media-elections/

9   Joyojeet Pal "Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet" http://ai2-s2-pdfs.s3.ama-zonaws.com/acf0/a7a6291e11ab73b5bc1d55d39f6db13a9168.pdf

10   Avantika Chilkoti "Narendra Modi to be India's first social media prime minister" Financial Times May 23, 2014 https://www.ft.com/content/e347de5c-e088-11e3-9534-00144feabdc0

9. Engages young voters, and

10. Enables "The Power of Many" (by leveraging their numbers against the influence of powerful lobbyists and moneyed special interests).11

In the succeeding sections, we will focus on social media as a tool for marketing or selling the candidate, fundraising and mobilising supporters.

Marketing/Selling Candidate

As an election tool, social media's advantage over traditional media includes the following:

a. Allows politicians to communicate faster and reach voters in a more targeted manner without intermediaries, such as the mass media

b. Generates online reactions, feedback, conversations and debates

c. Provides support and participation for offline events, and

d. Extends audience reach when messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared.[12]

Social media is also celebrated for levelling the playing field between well-funded and "independent" candidates.

Social media helped Jaime Rodriguez ("El Bronco") become Mexico's first independent candidate to become state governor in 2015.[13] Subsequently, two other independent candidates — Pedro Kumamoto in Jalisco and Manuel Clouthier in Sonoma — successfully used social media to get elected.

In developing countries, where the state tightly regulates mass media, social media provides access to the electorate.

In India, political parties resorted to social media because traditional mass media is tightly regulated by the country's election body. In Cambodia's 2013 elections, social media "allowed the opposition to bring up issues of interest to young voters — human rights, social justice, corruption, education, and

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11 Tom Murse "How Social Media Has Changed Politics: 10 Ways Twitter and Facebook Have Altered Campaigns" *ThoughtCo* August 16, 2017 https://www.thoughtco.com/how-social-media-has-changed-politics-3367534

12 The Role Played By Social Media In Political Participation And Electoral Campaigns https://epthink-tank.eu/2014/02/12/the-role-played-by-social-media-in-political-participation-and-electoral-campaigns/

13 Cesar Fabian Garcia Jimenez "Impact of Social Media in Latin America" Linkedin.com September 21, 2015 https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/impact-social-media-latin-america-cesar-fabian-garcia-jimenez

unemployment."[14] During this election, social media "created a nascent and more pluralistic online political environment where Cambodians exchange different political viewpoints freely."[15]

Fundraising

Social media has also been used for political fundraising, particularly in developed countries. Its advantage is that it makes donating to a political campaign easy — all one needs to do is to click on the donate buttons on the relevant Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts.[16]

In 2008, as well as in 2012, skilful use of social media allowed the Obama campaign to raise millions of dollars from small contributors. For instance, in 2012, the Obama campaign was able to raise USD 6.5 Million (M) from 3 M donors.[17]

It was not only in US presidential elections where we see the power of social media as fundraiser. A study of the use of Twitter in raising campaign contributions for politicians who ran for the US Congress showed that "using Twitter more informatively is associated with a greater increase in donations received..."[18] The study concludes that the adoption and use of social media offer a relatively cost-effective alternative technology to communicate with the electorate, and reduce the gap in fundraising opportunities between new and experienced politicians, which, in turn, reduce barriers to entry to national politics and increase political competition.[19]

Mobilisation

Another critical role of social media in electoral campaigns is in animating and mobilising campaign volunteers and staff.

The Obama campaigns demonstrated how social media can be used simultaneously to empower grassroots activities and retain central monitoring and training in order to keep message and campaign discipline.[20]

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14 Sophat Soeung Social Media's Growing Influence on Cambodian Politics Asia Pacific Bulletin July 23, 2013 https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb_222.pdf

15 Ibid

16 https://www.techrepublic.com/article/election-tech-why-social-media-is-more-powerful-than-advertising/

17 https://npengage.com/nonprofit-marketing/social-media-fundraising-2012-presidential-election/

18 Maria Petrova, Ananya Sen, Pinar Yildirim "Social Media and Political Donations: New Technology and Incumbency Advantage in the United States" September 8, 2016 https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/sites/gsb/files/working-paper-faculty-seminar-dmc-soical-media-political-donations.pdf

19 Ibid

20 Rachel K Gibson "Party change, social media and the rise of 'citizen-initiated' campaigning" *Party Politics* 2015, Vol. 21(2) 183–197 http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354068812472575

In the 2008 elections, the My.BarackObama.com social network site allowed supporters to join the campaign using only an email address. Once registered, these supporters, without need for permission from campaign HQ, organised events, set up fundraising sites, and engaged in getting out the vote efforts on behalf of candidate Obama. The site is credited for enabling more than 35,000 local organising groups in all 50 states to host over 200,000 events and make millions of phone calls to neighbours in support of Obama.[21]

The Labour party in the 2017 UK General Elections also deployed social media in mobilising the base. Observers believed that the Labour Party won this election "because the party used Facebook, Twitter and online videos to build and motivate its voter base, rather than to attack the Conservatives".[22] As noted by a social media practitioner:

> "It's about building a movement, and social media can provide the glue for people to bind together. If your strategy is to poke holes in the other side, you don't evoke that emotion of togetherness which is an important factor in getting people to vote."[23]

The use of social media for mobilisation has given rise to "citizen-initiated campaigning" or CIC. CIC is "a new model of web campaigning that generates an additional 'free' pool of labour to carry out core tasks during an election".[24] For Rachel Gibson:

> "The innovative aspect of CIC... lies in the extent of ordinary citizen input that occurs in their initiation and execution via digital media. So while not becoming equal partners in the election enterprise, grassroots casual supporters are given a stronger 'co-producing' role in the campaign than has hitherto been the case."[25]

21   Heather Havenstein "My.BarackObama.com social network stays online after election" *Computerworld* Nov 10, 2008 in https://www.computerworld.com/article/2534052/web-apps/my-barackobama-com-social-network-stays-online-after-election.html
22   Robert Booth and Alex Hern "Labour won social media election, digital strategists say" *The Guardian* June 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/09/digital-strategists-give-victory-to-labour-in-social-media-election-facebook-twitter
23   Ibid. The quote is from Jag Singh, founder of MessageSpace, which buys social media, internet and print advertising and provided services to the Conservative campaign
24   Rachel K Gibson "Party change, social media and the rise of 'citizen-initiated' campaigning" Party Politics 2015, Vol. 21(2) 183–197 http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354068812472575
25   Ibid

The Bad

Twitter bombs, Astroturf, and buying online search ads are among the unscrupulous use of social media in elections.

"Twitter bombs" are unsolicited tweets, purported replies to previous discussions, to get a user's attention to specific causes.[26] For maximum impact, they are deployed through "bots" — software that runs automated tasks.

"Astroturf" is the use of Twitters to create fake grassroots movements.[27] They are created to pressure targeted journalists or influencers by challenging the latter's reporting or views, and/or by informing them that their reporting/views are not appreciated by a "significant" group.

Buying online search ads is an expensive, but equally effective, way to spam voters.[28] Buying these ads allows one's page to appear at the top of the search results in queries about a political opponent. Another advertising tool that is used is "promoted trends" in Twitter.

"Hashtag poisoning" is another egregious use of social media in politics. Here bots are used to flood anti-government hashtags with irrelevant posts in order to bury any useful information. In Mexico, "penabots" first appeared in its 2012 election in support of the candidacy of Enrique Peña. They have since evolved and are now deployed to combat protests and attack critics of the Mexican government.[29] This development does not auger well for Mexican politics because, as pointed out by a commentator:

> "…social media is the new public square. Mexicans are relying on these networks to get their news out to the world and to communicate with each other… When these networks are manipulated, it is extremely damaging to Mexican society and free speech."[30]

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26 Panagiotis T. Metaxas, Eni Mustafaraj "Social Media and the Elections" *Science* 26 Oct 2012 Vol. 338, Issue 6106, pp. 472-473 http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6106/472.full

27 Ibid

28 Ibid.

29 Klint Finley "Pro-Government Twitter Bots Try To Hush Mexican Activists" *Wired* https://www.wired.com/2015/08/pro-government-twitter-bots-try-hush-mexican-activists/

30 https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/z4maww/how-mexican-twitter-bots-shut-down-dissent

Fake News

Fake news has also been deployed in elections. Claire Wardle believes that the term "fake news" does not capture the full breadth of misinformation (the inadvertent sharing of false information) and disinformation (the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false) being deployed for partisan political purposes.[31] For her, there are seven different types of mis- and disinformation that are currently being used: Satire/parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content.

But whether we call it fake news, misinformation or disinformation, it is also clear that social media can be easily used to spread them. For instance, Facebook's targeted advertising — "the ability to target ads based on hundreds of parameters, to get their messages in front of exactly who they want, for a relatively small sum" — may be good for business but it can also be used for propaganda.[32]

According to Freedom House, fake news was deployed during elections or referendums to influence outcomes in at least 16 of 65 countries.[33]

In the Philippines, a "keyboard army" — whose members earned USD 10 per day operating fake social media accounts that supported Rodrigo Duterte or attacked his detractors — was deployed in the run-up to the May 2016 presidential election;

Venezuelan government agents regularly used manipulated footage to disseminate lies about opposition protesters on social media, creating confusion and undermining the credibility of the opposition movement ahead of elections;

In Kenya, users readily shared fake news articles and videos bearing the logos of generally trusted outlets such as CNN, the BBC, and NTV Kenya on social media and messaging apps during the August 2017 election campaigns.[34]

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31 Claire Wardle, "Fake news. It's complicated." *First Draft* February 16, 2017 https://firstdraftnews.org/fake-news-complicated/
32 John McDuling "How fake news spreads on Facebook, and why it's so difficult to stop" *The Sydney Morning Herald* Oct 20 2017 http://www.smh.com.au/business/innovation/how-fake-news-spreads-on-facebook-and-why-its-so-difficult-to-stop-20171017-gz31v1.html
33 Freedom House *Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy* https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017
34 Ibid.

At least three conditions helped in the rise of fake news. Firstly, there is the growing distrust in traditional mass media, and/or perception of media control by powerful interests. Secondly, in the case of FB, the algorithm that determines which stories come out of one's news feed, "tended to promote viral or provocative articles that generate clicks, regardless of the veracity of their content".[35]

Thirdly, "people who get news from Facebook (or other social media) are less likely to receive evidence about the true state of the world that would counter an ideologically aligned but false story."[36]

But do fake news help sell candidates? To properly understand the role of fake news in elections, we must consider three points.

Firstly, while social media has become an important source of political news and information, television remains the more important source. Secondly, a new study on fake news consumption during the 2016 US presidential campaign shows that, while a significant number of Americans have been exposed to fake news, only a small percentage of Americans are heavy consumer of fake news:

> "One in four Americans visited a fake news website from October 7 - November 14, 2016. Trump supporters visited the most fake news websites, which were overwhelmingly pro-Trump. However, fake news consumption was heavily concentrated among a small group — almost 6 in 10 visits to fake news websites came from the 10 percent of people with the most conservative online information diets."[37]

Thirdly, a fake news article is as persuasive as a TV campaign advertisement. As noted by Allcott and Gentzkow:

> "…exposing voters to one additional television campaign ad changes vote shares by approximately 0.02 percentage points. This suggests that if one fake news article were about as persuasive as one TV campaign ad, the fake news in our database would have changed vote shares by an amount on the order of hundredths of a percentage point."[38]

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35 Ibid.

36 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Spring 2017 in https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf

37 Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, January 9, 2018 https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf

38 Allcott and Gentzkow "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election"

While these studies are US-centric, they do not support the view that fake news help gain new voters. Rather, it supports the hypothesis that fake news is more useful in energising the candidates' supporter base. Another troubling development in the use of social media in elections is its utilisation by external/foreign powers to influence the popular vote.

A report prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA) disclosed that Russia launched an operation to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election.[39] The objectives were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, harm the electability of Hilary Clinton, and help elect Donald Trump.

The report also divulged that "Moscow's influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations — such as cyber activity — with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or trolls".[40] Furthermore, the US intelligence community believes that "Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes".[41]

The Future

As social media becomes more mainstream, its role in elections, for better or worse, will continue to grow.

A good development is that Facebook has responded to public pressure and has agreed to change its algorithm. In January 2018, FB founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised to prioritise posts from family and friends and ensure that the public content seen in newsfeeds will be those that encourage meaningful interactions between people. Whether the trolls and their masters can find new ways to game the new algorithm for partisan political purposes remains to be seen.

If Facebook fails to control the spread of fake news and other efforts to use the platform to promote mis- and dis-information, more government regulation of Facebook, particularly during elections, will be forthcoming.

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39 Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections ICA 2017-01D January 6, 2017, p. ii
    https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf
40 Ibid
41 Ibid, p. iii

Already, Bhutan's Election Commission:

1. Mandates that "any tweet, comment or opinion of a candidate or political party or their authorised representative must be in conformity with the Election Code of Conduct"

2. Prohibits the upload of "new materials in the 48-hour period of no campaign restrictions duration," and,

3. Asks all "to refrain either from use of Social Media under anonymous identity or fake addresses or carry out activity or post content that may adversely affect or unduly benefit the electoral prospects of a Candidate or Party".[42]

Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron announced plans for a new law, or tougher rules for online content during elections.[43] The future will also see increased use of analytics on social media data. Analytics "is the discovery, interpretation, and communication of meaningful patterns in data".[44] When applied to social media data (generated from the campaigns' interactions with voters) analytics will enable the campaign "to directly micro-target potential voters and donors with tailored messages".[45]

Conclusion

In is not unreasonable to think that social media, regardless of actions taken by social media platforms and/or government regulations, will be the future of elections.

However, it is also important to remember that social media is not a silver bullet. It cannot win with un-winnable candidates. As noted by James Gomez about the use of Social Media in Malaysian elections:

> "Yet, in spite of the time and resources dedicated by (the dominant political party and its leader) in improving their online presence in time for the 2013 general election, they still could not arrest the erosion of support from Malaysian voters."[46]

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42 Election Commission of Bhutan "Notification On Social Media" 09/04/2013 http://www.ecb.bt/?p=137
43 Emmanuel Macron: French president announces 'fake news' law *BBC News* 3 January 2018 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42560688
44 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytics
45 George Shen "Big data, analytics and elections" *Analytics* January/February 2013 http://analytics-magazine.org/big-data-analytics-and-elections/
46 James Gomez Malaysia's 13th General Election: Social Media and its Political Impact https://mediamalaysia.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GE13_Social_Media_James_Gomez-090913.pdf