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IS DEMOCRACY IN THE HANDS OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

A liberal perspective on populism, social media and the free press

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STAND

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The assault of the Capitol in Washington, D.C on January 6th was watched, commented on, and followed by millions of people around the world through social media. Never before had it been so clear that violence incited in the offline world was linked to the constant spread of misinformation and hate speech of Donald Trump. The events marked the beginning of new debates around social media, freedom of expression, and politics.

Democracies need independent, fact-based journalism to provide a voice for a diverse range of people, investigate corruption in power and keep society reliably informed. Without access to a free press, people are less civically engaged, less tolerant, and less likely to vote based on their rationale and more on what they hear from their family and friends. An informed society is a powerful society because they can make informed, rational choices that will benefit their future.

Nevertheless, keeping people informed is a dangerous activity in many countries. In Mexico, local newspapers and journalists face many more challenges than national mass media. The crisis of violence and insecurity facing the country has led to less investigative journalism due to the increased number of assassinations against local journalists. Thus, many news tend to be descriptive, informing about everyday life instead of creating in-depth analysis. Apart from violence and threats, mass media and journalists worldwide face additional challenges due to the rise of social media. Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Apple business models exacerbate the decline of the traditional business model of local, national, and international media, increasing their vulnerability. These tech giants play a critical role in disseminating information; nevertheless, they lack editorial and ethical codes to promote a free press and democratic communication.

In addition to the changing media ecosystem, the free press is affected by the rise of populism, which undermines democracy, its values, and institutions. When populist leaders use social media to their own ends by inciting disinformation, hate speech, and polarization, they usually also try to discredit professional journalism.

Capitol In Washington, D.C

Donald Trump

“An informed society is a powerful society because they can make informed, rational choices that will benefit their future.”

Populism on the rise, fading democracies, and a moribund free press

The rise of violence in the offline world and polarization in social media occurred in parallel to the rise of populism in countries all over the world. Populism is not new and in democracies, populist leaders use free elections to gain and remain in power and then dismantle democratic institutions. Specific social and economic problems trigger populist movements. For example, the migration crisis of 2015 in Europe led to the rise in popularity of far-right movements such as the Alternative for Germany (AFD) or the National Front under Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership. It allowed Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, to close borders calling for nationalism and Hungarians' values against foreigners. While constant corruption scandals in both Brazil and Mexico gave an advantage to Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, a hope for change under a young leadership gave power to Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Lack of employment or wage stagnation led to the rise of Donald Trump in mostly rural states with high unemployment levels.

Populist leaders, from the right or left, constantly criticize the press and journalists. They are inherently anti-establishment, anti-elites and heavily rely on creating an illusion of democracy and governance of "the people," claiming their legitimacy rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule. Populists propagate anti-pluralism by adopting an 'us versus them' approach to politics; they project politics as an existential battle of friend versus the enemy. In this sense, the press and journalists who question the government are accused of being corrupt or defending the elites' interests.

The rise of populism concurred with social media growth and the pandemic, where most people had to adapt to digital life. The online world and especially social media platforms provide open spaces, which can promote democracy. However, under the influence of a populist, they can also be places that undermine democratic values and institutions. The changing political environment has aided worldwide political polarization instead of promoting democratic values. For example, in both the U.S and India, the mistrust of strangers is a commonality. While in the U.S, Trump accused immigrants from Mexico and Syria of bringing crime to the U.S, in India, Narendra Modi claimed the same with Muslims and Christians. Through social media, both linked the term "immigration" to "terrorism," creating an image of foreigners who would rape and murder women and children. In Trump's case, his media team studied users' behaviors, such as religious conservatives and white Christians. These groups tend to share topics that appeal to terror and confusion because they obtain their information from blogs of their community, not traditional media or professional journalists. In the end, most of these groups voted for Trump because they believed he would protect them from immigrants and terrorism by building a wall at the border with Mexico.

"The rise of violence in the offline world and polarization in social media occurred in parallel to the rise of populism in countries all over the world."

The events of January 6th exposed that even in the U.S, a pioneer nation of democratic values, democracy is fragile, governments are vulnerable to populism, and citizens fall prey to disinformation campaigns. The undermining of professional journalism and traditional media by Trump as President reinforced many Americans' lack of trust in mass media. This repeats itself in many other countries with populist leaders who benefit from social media and even show a seemingly "authentic" style that appeals to many people.

In Mexico, there is an interesting phenomenon happening through the Mañaneras, where every day the President invests his time in a press conference to secure citizens' right to remain informed. However, these reunions function rather as spaces of propaganda and criticism against the press, media, intellectuals, and members of the opposition. Since the President is the only speaker and acts as the unique source of reliable information, it is clear that he diminishes the media and journalists' role and strives to control the daily narrative.

Social media platforms have made it easy for political actors, religious leaders, and advocates of human rights to communicate their messages directly to audiences. Populist leader's activity in social media is troubling since they portray themselves as the primary source of information. Populist leaders claim to own the truth and real information; thus, journalists become useless. In this respect, mass media no longer sets the agenda; they are no longer the gatekeepers of information. Political leaders no longer need journalists to get their message out; they produce media content, circulate it through targeted audiences thanks to social media's algorithms, and paid campaigns. Hence, they do not adhere to any ethical media conduct and can easily spread misinformation that can contribute to racism, xenophobia, and sexism.

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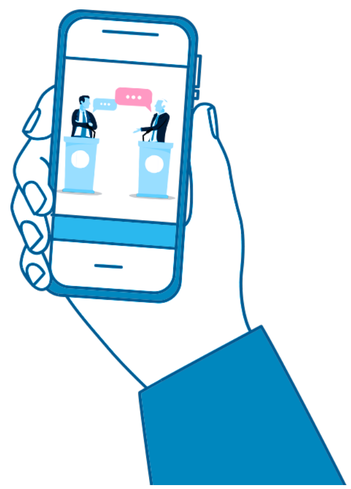


Social media vs. Mass media

The media ecology has changed dramatically: in early 2000, the decline of print newspapers led to change the model towards digital media. Blogs evolved and then social media platforms: Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006. These companies emerged as social networks to connect people, but they have evolved continuously by integrating services for purchases, marketing, and data selling through algorithms.

Through social media, everyone can be a content creator, a reporter, or a journalist. In essence, these platforms provided a connection between people with the same interests and led to new careers and professions. Social media and a free internet offer a space to promote open public channels of communication and debate, which can enhance civic participation and democracies. In Mexico, for example, social media has allowed for the visualization of the femicides. People also unite to support causes such as the #Yosoy132 or #yamecansé movement against corruption cases. Moreover, in Mexico, the National Institute for Transparency and Data Privacy (INAI) has promoted the internet's recognition as a space of data privacy and protection of human rights, which do not end in the physical world.

Social media platforms have become the primary source of information for many people, not the least due to their low cost. Amid the growing lack of trust in the mass media and professional journalists, most people who receive news from family and friends will more likely share it than some traditional media articles. In many countries, such as India, the U.S, and Mexico, there is a shared sense that mainstream media hides the real news – usually triggered by news that clash with people's own ideas. Contrary to many beliefs, according to Professor Shakuntala Banaji from the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, misinformation spreads due to ideology and prejudice rather than illiteracy. Media literacy plays a larger role when forwarding or creating information. The problem is that the media no longer sets the agenda as it used to with gatekeeping under ethical codes of conduct. Instead, social media replaced this process by amalgamating personalized digital activism, enabling networks to rise or distribute new philosophies or conspiracy theories. Thus, social media platforms are spaces where elites and crowds determine what is relevant and change narratives frequently while mass media collides with these processes. Moreover, new actors join the change in narratives to position specific topics: fake accounts, bots, and trolls.

"In Mexico, for example, social media has allowed for the visualization of the femicides. People also unite to support causes"

According to Dr. Darren Linvill, professor at the College of Behavioural Social and Health Sciences of Clemson University, Russia's Internet Research Agency is a privately owned company connected to Russian state media and acts as a marketing company running bots, trolls, websites, and comments on posts all around the world. Forensic social media studies analyse over 3.000 million tweets and separate them into categories. For example, the news feed trolls pretend to be news aggregators. These accounts take real, local news and post them offering a bias on their tweets presenting a divided and polarized world. They make users think that the world is even more divided than it is. Left and right trolls pretend to be real people, for example, average citizens who call for support on certain leaders or movements. Some trolls even run blogs, events, newsletters, and donation pages. With time, it has become more challenging to identify trolls. Trolls are so professional; they do not care what people think of Russia and instead aim to change people's perception of their closest neighbours. Agencies study cultures and societies to know how and what they think in order to improve their services. Thus, currently, these accounts pretend to be highly engaged to a political cause, and they grow exponentially because their content is mainly about group identity and targeting specific audiences.

Beyond the lack of trust, an additional challenge to the mass media stems from the fact that social media platforms contain algorithms, which are made to replace random content, leading users to tailor-made interests. In an effort to enhance users' experience on purchases online, in politics, many academics agree that what we are experiencing now is a lack of cross-cutting of opinions. There is no connection, rather a separation of networks. When the algorithm understands how the user interacts online, it grows to fit its interests creating the so-called alienation bubble. In this logic, when one enters a community, there is a sense of recognition and integration of feeling like belonging to something greater. Thus, it is difficult to interact with other users who might have opposite opinions.

In this field of a constant diminishment of the mass media, populism concurs with the evolution of social media algorithms, leading to more polarization. When populist leaders use social media to promote disinformation and hate speech, the expected outcomes in the online world can result in what we are currently experiencing; social polarization, violence, extremism, racism, and sexism.

"There is no connection, rather a separation of networks."

A future for democracy and human rights

There is no way back: social media is part of our lives and politics. Amid the pandemic, many people worldwide were forced to be part of the digital world because it was the only way to work, study and socialize. In many developing countries, the middle class is growing, and so is consumption online, travel and shopping. Currently, tech companies are adapting to these trends by enhancing algorithms. However, there is little research and understanding of social media and digital rights. Simplistic solutions that focus on eradicating bots, trolls, and algorithms are doomed to fail because there are low costs of being caught as a troll and no cyber-crimes typification. Moreover, algorithms help small businesses grow online.

Censorship is not a correct answer since these platforms are private-owned, and they were created as free spaces of expression out of the state's control. Political leaders will keep undermining institutions because there are no higher costs than a suspended account. Populism will always be a threat to democracy and its institutions. Many claim for regulations since, for example, Facebook is also a news media company and should be regulated as such. Hence, media corporations should be more responsible and accountable for how political actors use the platforms. They should make political advertising transparent, follow journalistic ethics, take the editorial responsibility for the content allowed, and promote more open channels for research and transparency in resources.

Social media is one of the most significant policy challenges of the century, and debates around it cannot revolve around any regulations. This would not allow the space to remain free. The digital space is complex due to the number of different communities that interact on it, so debates about social media, which introduce states' responsibility in regulation, are problematic since most law initiatives will probably end in censorship. According to Vladimir Cortés, officer of the Digital Rights program of Article 19, in Mexico, such reforms to laws end up promoting more censorship instead of encouraging freedom of expression. Instead of falling into these traps, more institutions and organisations, such as Article 19, need to be created to act as checks and balances of the state and social media platforms. Experts who can analyse manipulations, unilateral content removal, or accounts suspension to promote freedom of expression and an open debate could be a starting point for multisector policies.

"Political leaders will keep undermining institutions because there are no higher costs than a suspended account."

Tech companies are focusing on moderating content and suspending accounts, but blocking has a bias and does not allow these spaces to remain free. The decision to suspend accounts cannot be in any government's hands either. Tech giants have a responsibility in providing information on the removal of content and suspended accounts to users. Likewise, users should have a right to appeal to content removal decisions or suspension of accounts. The more transparent the rules and the tech giants' decision-making procedures, the more platforms can remain free and accountable.

It is a fact that democracies need an independent press and media to survive. Freedom of expression is not above any other human right; however, it is crucial for democracies. Thus, we must promote journalists' crucial role and understand that digital literacy is not enough; without human rights literacy, there is no way to break the prejudice cycles. Social media must work together with human rights organizations and journalists to educate themselves on human rights and the mechanisms to protect and promote them. They should also identify hate speech, disinformation and apply ethical conduct—the more education in human rights, the more pluralism in the online world.

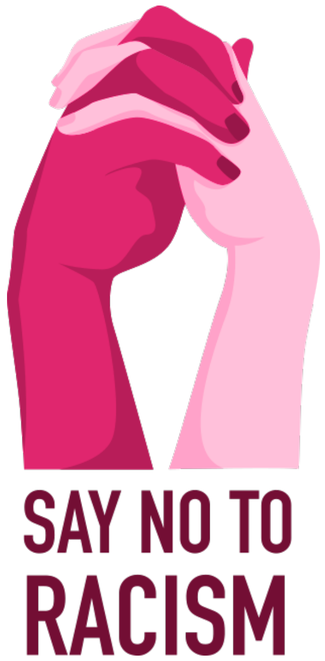
Users, tech companies, and organizations need to understand that media literacy goes beyond being critical to all information sources. People need to learn how to evaluate the information they receive, the process of research, and sources, whom to trust and whom not to trust. More importantly, people need to recognize the role of journalists and academics and the rigor of their research. In this sense, journalists and content creators should also recognize biases and dangers of law enforcement to minorities and recognize what incites hate speech and how language works in their narratives. For democracies to thrive, journalists must stay committed to accurate, independent reporting and investigative journalism, which means an open critique of racism, xenophobia, hate speech, corruption, and sexism. Tech giants play a role in promoting the protection of journalists.

As we have witnessed recently with the Black Lives Matter Movement, social media can change the perspectives and give voice to movements. When supporting liberal values, social media can help promote democracy and open societies by changing the narrative. Users cannot rely on social media companies to change; they can start practicing tolerance by exposing themselves and understanding the mindset of other people with opposite views. It does not mean we all need to agree, but be mindful and treat social media as the offline world. Digital civility is about understanding social media and not so much of being polite.

"we must promote journalists' crucial role and understand that digital literacy is not enough; without human rights literacy, there is no way to break the prejudice cycles."

The riots at the Capitol in Washington D.C exposed the overlap between the digital and the offline world. It showed that the power to arbitrate the public sphere relies on a few tech giants' hands. It exposed the damage populist narratives can inflict on democracy. Indeed, we are living in historic and decisive times that are continually shaping the digital future. There are still many issues to understand, but policy makers, tech companies, journalists, the civil society and users can start acting now to promote democracy and liberal values online. We have compiled recommendations for each group to take into consideration and encourage digital rights and the free press.

"As we have witnessed recently with the Black Lives Matter Movement, social media can change the perspectives and give voice to movements."



Recommendations

For Policy Makers

1. Policies will be complex and cannot fall on simple eradications of algorithms or of regulation of content and accounts
2. Censorship will only hinder the freedom of expression and the nature of social media and the internet to remain free
3. The state must not have any responsibility in the regulation of content or suspension of accounts
4. Create organisms and autonomous institutions to act as checks and balances of the state and the social media platforms.
5. Promote the role of investigative journalism and mass media as a pillar of democracy

For Social Media Platforms

1. Provide transparent information on the decision process behind content removal and suspension of accounts
2. Allow for open research from academia and civil society organizations on how the platforms work.
3. Work together with human rights organizations and journalists to educate themselves and teams on human rights and the mechanisms to protect and promote them online.
4. Promote the critical role of journalists for democracies and their protection

For Journalists and Civil Society Organizations

1. Understand digital literacy is not enough; without human rights literacy, there is no way to break the prejudice cycles.
2. Work together with tech companies to educate them on human rights and the mechanisms to protect and promote them.
3. Create alliances with tech companies to promote human rights while learning to identify hate speech, disinformation and apply ethical conduct.
4. Recognize biases and dangers of law enforcement to minorities; identify what incites hate speech and how language works in their narratives.
5. Stay committed to accurate, independent reporting and investigative journalism, which means an open critique of racism, xenophobia, hate speech, corruption, and sexism.

For users

1. Promote rights to appeal for content removal decisions or suspension of accounts
2. Learn processes of fact-checking and media literacy to trust the information received, its process of research, and sources.
3. Recognize the role of journalists and academics and the rigor of their research.
4. Practice tolerance when on social media or the internet: follow people with opposite opinions and try to understand their mindset
5. Treat social media as the offline world.

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