

Social Media's Effect on our Society

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The invention of social media has created a whole new way for information or misinformation to fly with lightning spread around the world. We are now able to reach out and communicate with millions of people without having to leave our house. You can now change the world with your ideas by simply picking up your phone and conveying an idea with someone over the social media public square. When used for good, social media can be a wonderful tool.

However, social media can be used for nefarious means by bad actors wanting to mold and remake the world into their own dystopian nightmare. We have seen this play out in places like Myanmar and even here in the United States. The January 6th insurrection in our nation's capital was inspired by bad actors inside and outside the government and made possible through the assistance of big social media companies like Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram. These bad actors were able to spread the "big lie" of a stolen election and election fraud to garner support for the insurrection effort in DC. Their cognitive dissonance led to hundreds of activists showing up in DC and storming the Capital Building complex with the purpose of stopping the electoral votes from being counted (Pg.452). The powers that inspired this mob to act this way used a common tactic known as the Foot-in-the-Door Technique to inspire them to come to Washington DC and then to storm the capital as the next step (Pg. 458). Social media was a huge tool in this process to inspire them with a constant drip of misinformation that led them to carry out acts of violence. By using the President to whip the crowd into a frenzy of obedience to an authority figure, like we saw in the Stanley Milgram Experiment, these people were willing to commit murder if necessary to stop an imaginary theft of the election (Pg. 462). We are now hearing as these people are brought before the court, that many of them were influenced by the effects of Groupthink (Pg.463). Through what they heard on social media, witnessed on January 6th in

person, and the wave of people around them swelling toward the Capital Complex with angry cries and vengeful intentions, they say that they were caught up in the moment and only followed the crowd. "They paint a portrait of a young man swept up by events. "In many ways, he is less of an 'adult' than many teenagers," the motion said. "He has never lived away from his parents. He has lived his entire life in the area immediately surrounding Atlanta"" (Sund, 2021).

For me, I need only walk around the campus of USCA to see how polarized and divided we have become as a society. Many of the youth on campus are so addicted to social media that they cannot stop looking at their phones long enough to walk from one class to another. I have been run into or completely mowed down by students so wrapped up in their phone that they were not paying attention to where they were going. And despite my best efforts to stay out of their zombie-like stagger, I was unsuccessful. Conversations in the cafeteria tend to revolve around the latest video on "Insta" or TikTok. Little conversation outside of the world of social media happens anymore. Many of these youth are either completely unaware of the political world or they are pushed by social media into more and more radical positions. The movie *The Social Dilemma* shows us the "rabbit hole" that social media companies lead us down when we allow them to. On campus, I encounter these deep political divides when students in classes discuss the great political questions of our day. Some students are convinced the election of 2020 was stolen from President Trump. These same individuals are also convinced that the COVID-19 vaccine is a government plot by President Biden to track us with hidden microchips. They are the same people likely to take horse de-wormer on the word of people who are not doctors to protect themselves from the "fake" COVID-19 virus. I even find myself pulled to the extreme sometimes. I have found myself removing friends and family from my "social circle" because of

their political views or their views on vaccines. I have allowed the divide that has been made bigger through involvement in social media to end too many relationships.

Social media has led to the deep seeded political divide that has crushed many people and threatens to kill our democracies. “In France, for example, the anti-immigrant National Front has amassed a legion of far-right cyber activists and dutiful far-right trolls, who fought, though ultimately failed, to bring Marine Le Pen to power in 2017. The National Front would have been too scattered and weak even for this limited political success, however, were it not for social media, which enabled otherwise isolated xenophobes and right-wing populists to gather online and build a sense of ultra-nationalist solidarity” (Hannan, 2018). The power these small groups of dissidents amass online gives them the advantage to attack our political system and to drag down our elections.

Elections are not the only thing to suffer from the explosion of social media. Our relationships with one another have suffered greatly as well. “It is no secret that law enforcement has been using digital media to surveil members of marginalized communities, which poses a range of ethical and analytical challenges including but not limited to issues of representativeness, interpretation, and inference. Most consequentially, algorithms mining social media data generated by the members of marginalized communities rarely integrate the kind of “local knowledge” that offers contextualized interpretation and understanding” (Chen & Quan-Haase, 2018). This ongoing surveillance of marginalized communities, in my opinion, has led to a distrust on both the side of law enforcement and the community which leads to the deadly encounters in the streets we see as common place today. It creates an us versus them mentality that leads far to often to another dead unarmed person-of-color lying in the streets of our communities.

Overall, I believe that social media has damaged our society, our ability to communicate rationally with one another, and leads to devastating consequences in our communities. The only way we can correct this issue is by requiring social media companies to have firm ethical boundaries on what information they collect from users, how they sell that information to advertisers and how they use that information to guide users to echo chambers that radicalize them. Then and only then will we begin to see a real change in our political, social, and economic system in our nation.

References

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