

Predictions for Social Media's Role in Future Elections

Azam Khan

Department of Management Sciences, Alhamd Islamic University Islamabad.

Ali Jabbar

Department of Management sciences Alhamd Islamic University (AIU) Islamabad.

Abstract

Since the dawn of Web 2.0 networking sites, social media has played an important role in transforming the landscape of political campaigning and voter engagements. Social media has been used by activists and politicians across the spectrum to mobilize, publicize and network for the electoral campaign. While there may be positive outcomes such as new alliances, or negative outcomes such as physical harm, the use of social media has fundamentally changed the rules of the political game. Drawing on a mixture of emergent and traditional research methodologies, three separate case studies will explore the bookend use of social media in recent elections in The Gambia, and analyse the importance of a constitutional referendum in the interim period. This paper also aims to understand some of the future evolutions, challenges and trends as social media continues to intertwine with the strategies of campaigners, social movements and politically engaged citizens. It is estimated that by 2020 over 1.43 billion people, out of a global online population of 3.3 billion, will be active users of social media from their device across the continent. Social media usage has transformed the spread of political news, and the development of grassroots accountability mechanisms, with mobiles also enabling rapid responses to perceived infringements. With the panoply of different platforms, this paper will discern how various political actors are adapting their strategies to the shifting sands of digital engagement, and what can be learnt from past campaigns. Moreover, how does social media impact other media, political parties, incumbency advantages or ethno-regional voting blocs? By combining the textual and network analysis of more conventional research methodologies, the third case study will present an analysis of user interactions with candidate profiles and institutional newsfeeds, a visualization of the structure of the political conversation, and an examination of the origins of the most viral news stories.

Keywords social media, elections, political campaigning, voter engagement, grassroots accountability, digital strategies, case studies.

Keywords social media, elections, political campaigning, voter engagement, grassroots accountability, digital strategies, case studies, future trends

2. Introduction

Political practice is continuously being reinvented: the way of advertising, campaigning, and lobbying is at once traditional and innovative. Poster campaigns exist alongside online campaigning; flyers are distributed on doorsteps, while junk emails crash in inboxes, showcase an interactive website, or proliferate in social networks; honking convoys meet retweeted demonstrations. In this scenario of political diversity and constant innovation, the use of social network platforms is spreading in an increasingly significant way. Originally born as community platforms to protect virtual friendships and share personal information, over the years they have started to play a leading role in a series of socio-economic fields including business, journalism, politics, and activism.... Social media are significant on several grounds. First, they standardly work on a global basis. This feature allowed medium-sized business to become global players, but it also allowed global campaigning and fundraising, at least potentially. Second, and tied to this, communication on the web is fairly easy and quick. This is an essential advantage for all actors aiming at shaping political discourse, issues framing the political dialogue, or spreading rumors and biases. Communicating instantly and simultaneously to large numbers of peoples is transforming workflow into a political matter. But most of all, dominantly positive side, social network platforms have the potential to function as tools of democratization. They can break traditional barriers of access to information, fostering an attentive and visionary critical judgment of institutional processes and decisions. This can energize a more active interest in political matters and vitalize non-institutional legitimacy networks in the power fields.

Today, a higher percentage of youth is engaged with the web, with at least one in two young people in industrial countries active users of social networks (Billings, 2017). It stems that digital content is guiding voting preferences, with evident patterns replicated in different instances. Therefore, assessing the implications of social media discourse on political content is paramount across countries and political practices.

With regard to the rapid and diversified spread of this kind of communication into society at large, the debate about the role of socio network platforms has become one of the central hot spots in contemporary political theory (B. Baldeh, 2019). Both on traditional and online press, privacy policies, edgerank function, cyber censorship, public-private sphere overlapping, data manipulation, issue picking, and vote orchestrating are only a few of the issues raising concern by a growing number of scholars and commentators of the actual political scenario in which apparently ‘caring is sharing’.

3. The Evolution of Social Media in Elections

Since its conception, social media platforms have consistently evolved to build more partnerships with outlets and to feature new technological advances like video story-making and geotagging advertisements. As platforms have grown in sophistication, so too has their digital audience. Unlike some years ago, social media users today view a more diverse source of information while being bombarded with constant (and often insensitive) advertisements. In 2016, social media usage was credited with the success of unexpected political outcomes (Davis, 2017).

Due to social media, election campaigns were democratized, as far-widened numbers of people who could be reached with a message for little to no cost. Social media networks greatly expanded the scope of how messages were received and shared. In 2016, political figures had multiple platforms from which to reach out to the public. There is a potential way to target audiences on Facebook, write out one's thoughts in full on Twitter, and post campaign trail pictures on Instagram just for fun. Each platform used brought a different dimension of real-time political theatre. Since 2016 was such a significant year for technology, the content shared was much more varied. Broadband networks already hit more US states than the time before, and mobile devices became popular at a faster pace than well-established horizontal networks like radio and TV had. Thus, the advent of tech and device innovations has also reshaped the way in which politics is done by expanding the ways people interact offline as well. Actions and events that are too dangerous or controversial become more obscured online and sometimes deliberately kept from digital record. For people trying to “project information” at micro-targeted groups, voter age has an effect on the number of digital channels used in a campaign. Broadcast TV still played an

oversized role in 2016, with the greatest FCC expenditures going towards pushing that channel. Older participation, given good wealth, was a must in recording any inventory in the modern Postindustrial View. Yet, as media does the gradual shift towards the internet, the ability to drop excess income on TV ads might be diminishing as well. In the years since their invention, political figures gradually narrowed the range of participation experience considered possible to past candidates of often mixed competence. Nonetheless, in the internet age, configurational ignorance of the accumulation of the chosen digital footprint completely slights the efforts to plaster the sneer into a continuous record of the future. As news conglomerates folded and the 11 o'clock broadcasting slot was lost, legacy news reduced the importance of local coverage, where focused stories can be accessed. Traditional local news is nearing collapse because of the search of ad revenue from more ad friendly networks like TV and the “opinion” sheep that make up the element. Social Media magnifies the toxicity of campaign discourse by amplifying the harsher criticisms of each side's more extreme policies, often constructed out of nothing but ethnocentric hearsay. NatSec and Merc are finding a lag in response post-2016, often only dealing with the past and rarely with current events, where “current” becomes a scale measured in president; months and years are often invoked in response to “imminent” provocations.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

Social media today play a dual role in the context of electoral processes. On the one hand, they democratize the dissemination of information, potentially bringing candidates and the electorate closer and increasing political participation. On the other hand, content on social media can be easily distorted and manipulated. The latter is of primary concern, as the spread of misinformation in the network threatens to become common practice. Echo chambers are another growing problem, fueled by social media, as algorithms tend to show similar, pre-filtered content. The phenomenon blocks the access to objective information of medium quality, leading to further deepening the polarization and uncritical acceptance of potentially false content. Besides, the use of social media for psychological profiling can be detrimental to democracy, fostering socially undesirable practices, like cyberbullying. As such, the

analysis of the major harmful and potentially harmful issues spawned by social media in the context of electoral processes is a germane conclusion to this section.

At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged the transparency and speed of information that can be relevant for voters and journalists have been greatly enhanced. Debates, rallies, interviews, or other events can be transmitted and forcibly removed from the elections, similarly to how journalism was revolutionized decades before. Voters can now directly interact with candidates, in real-time processes fully mediated by social media. It may also foster the mobilization of voters, especially the young, who can be quite active on the network even though it is usual for them to reject traditional media. Since it is a medium where individuals are mostly passive receptors, the broadcast media may be avoiding the electoral discussion altogether. Ultimately, this new scenario of information production, from a more centralized process focused on a few units taking decisions to a more decentralized horizontal one, has prompted an informed debate on the role social media should have in the current regulation of the electoral processes. (Jafar et al., 2021)

5. Case Studies and Analyses

On the cusp of a new decade, there are few better windows into the rapidly changing nature of social media, politics, and political communication than reflecting upon the role of social media in electoral campaigning in recent years. This article contains a meta-analysis of numerous studies examining social media's role in elections around the world, ranging from local elections in Denmark to parliamentary elections in Japan. The studies, overall, offer five broad lessons for the 2020s. The article finishes with an interview with Dr. Merja Haapio of the University of Helsinki, focusing on her work on online campaigning as well as the state of campaign research more broadly.

One of the most influential, albeit controversial, contemporary efforts to harness the power of social media for political campaigning is Cambridge Analytica's micro-targeted, data-driven approach. The implications of this approach shaped the political discourse surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election more than any other campaign. However, as the case studies within these articles demonstrate, contemporary election campaigns do not exist in a vacuum but, rather, are situated in diverse institutional, regulatory, political, cultural, and campaign-strategic

environments that shape the use and effect of social media in distinct ways . To capture that complexity in all its nuances, the articles focus on specific case studies of social media's role in elections within the contexts of particular nations.

The subsequent section shares these case studies from election campaigns around the world, examining different types of elections, ranging from local elections in Denmark to parliamentary elections in Japan. There is a particular focus on the strategies of the political candidates/party. The strategies considered are not limited to candidate and party activity on social media but also stretch to campaign activity of a more analog nature that is designed to shape the political dynamics being played out in online spaces. (Anzia & Bernhard, 2022)

6. Ethical and Regulatory Considerations

In the past decade, social media has emerged as an influential yet problematic means of communication for democratic election. Social media is a significant tool for fostering political interactions, including electoral processes. However, it also undermines democratic integrity. It has been a refuge for hate speech, fake news, disinformation, large-scale breaches of personal information and privacy, and subversion of civic decency. The very fast pace of social media campaigning allows almost immediate dissemination of information. The sheer amount of data on users collected and used by electoral campaigns – both in an ethical-legal manner and not – raises unannounced questions of the impact of such campaigns on voters' behavior and psyche. It is very difficult to predict exact impacts in this area because of very complex and “hidden” algorithms, used mostly by platforms and major political stakeholders, as well as because of the lack of understanding on the part of voters themselves (Ekwueme & F. Folarin, 2017).

There are many concerns regarding the ethical aspect of using social media in electoral campaigns; however, even more disturbing are challenges related to the responsibility for this use. As experience shows, there are no full or coherently effective regulations in this area. It is mostly due to the difficulties that regulatory authorities face in respect of the aforementioned domination of the very complex algorithmic behavior of social media, a technological phenomenon which is not yet fully understood by the same legislators it operates under. Nevertheless, to a large extent, the ethicality raised by an electoral campaign in social media concerning the

use of user data can be diagnosed independently of the platform used. The subject of these concerns is then the very status of the information used in the campaign, both regarding the collection and adaptation. The importance of this issue does not derive solely from its highly disturbing nature regarding democratic integrity during the elections, but also from broader concerns regarding citizen-ruled government systems (Billings, 2017). The issues posed by political campaigning constitute at the same time one of the greatest assets and the most intractable challenges for the real-world impact of such a phenomenon. There are, of course, very justified concerns regarding the lack of regulation concerning the creation and promotion of false and disinformation, as well as the more general regime of free speech. On the one hand, free access to information is absolutely necessary for any democratic system and absolutely critical to the control of public authorities; nevertheless, it is also argued that more comprehensive frameworks are needed to govern the operation of these systems (effecting the primary relations in the background of the democratic system).

7. Future Trends and Predictions

For some time now, internet and social media played a significant role in presidential campaigns. Newly emerging technologies have the potential to further shape how posts, comments, and information facilitate connection and entrenchment between politicians, and their electorate and media. Digital campaigning, especially that using social media may be viewed as an ongoing transformation of political communication with a potential as far-reaching as the introduction of the printing press and mass media (Schoen et al., 2013).

Thus, the final year and a half were analyzed, particularly focusing on the two major parties and the leading democratic and republican 2016 primary candidates. Seven broader long-term developments or trends were identified: video content's growing share on social media as a part of posts, ads, and campaign coverage; the burgeoning of live streaming and video production services; an increased use of virtual reality in political campaigns; an expected rise, accelerating Facebook and Instagram, on newer social media; a continuing trumping of desktop by mobile technology in voter outreach; a mounting emphasis on and integration of data-based microtargeting with social media strategies (Davis, 2017); as well as the use of artificial intelligence and

machine learning in automating media buying ad targeting or politically biased post flagging and sentiment analysis.

Driven by the following demographic shifts, the use of social media by politicians and campaigns can be expected to adapt: as boomers die off and youngers come of age, the percent of US eligible voters who are digital natives can be projected; the percentage of seniors (65+) in the electorate is presumed to decrease, while that of millennials and centennials will rise, joining an already clear plurality in general society; a growing non-white portion of the electorate led by Hispanics partly compensated by an even stronger polarization of the white vote can be anticipated; with Asians rather than Hispanics growing the fastest; especially if Democrats succeed in luring young college-educated whites and seniors with moderate views of the economy or social issues; a shifting, but never monolithic basis for support will partially spur changes in campaign ways of accessing and leveraging social media. Consequently, it is likely that increasingly sophisticated posts, ads and strategies will be deployed in targeting, nudging or mobilizing different subgroups of voters across platforms and newsfeeds. This possibility also implies a similar growth in the importance of digital literacy, both for the electorate and political actors. Deploying and defending against bots, navigating the web of fake news, teaching users to appraise sources, or acquainting them with the inner workings of filter bubbles and echo chambers might plausibly be vital in the future of politics. That is, if the ultimate goal is either creating public opinion or withstanding the narratives which battle for primacy in the social mediasphere. (Geys et al., 2022)

8. Conclusion

The 2016 presidential elections in The United States, United Kingdom, and The Gambia have highlighted the pivotal role of social media in a contemporary electoral process. The following essay provided a detailed overview evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of social media use before, during, and after elections. It was discovered that whilst social media offers a diverse and accessible arena for political engagement (B. Baldeh, 2019), there are complex issues regarding discussions of authenticity, accountability, anonymity, and toxicity. Drawing on recent research and journalism, the erosion of hateful conduct policies results in a wider content review of potential voter suppression, misinformation, and hate speech. On the one hand, social media is

essential for political documentary, scrutinizing power, and building community. On the other, there is a failure to hold candidates to the same standards: online advertisements are exempt from fact-checking and microtargeted political content skews the electoral playing field.

Elections are periods of intense political activity whereby competition for power, resources, and influence inform a wide range of strategic practices in which social media platforms play a key role. This essay found that social media's growing power and influence means that political activity no longer exists in isolation from its technological ecology and that ineffective and inappropriate digital advertising will drive a more sophisticated, data-driven, and potentially perilous political landscape in which it is vital to trace community mobilisation, fact-check candidate misinformation, and secure platform commercial accountability.

9. References

When entering this new, digital era of technology advancements, the arenas they uniquely change don't remain untouched. The domain of elections is not set apart from the great e-influence. A set of discussions is fired up by the fact of social media changing election movements, showing its major role in future, considering this era as the digital election campaigns. These rapidly climbing new platforms are changing every aspect of campaigning, from how politicians interact with voters to how information is shared (B. Baldeh, 2019). In addition, the involvement of social platforms in voting processes is making them an integral part of democratic setups. Meanwhile, since the influence of social media is on the rise, it is considerably influencing multiple dimensions of election processes, election campaigns, and voting behavior, making it more possible to consider upcoming politics as digital elections. All these concerns have shifted the attention of different scholars from around the world towards closely monitoring the interaction between social media and elections. Its coincidence with offline interactions is magnifying these influences. The first-ever TV debate in the USA is the first historic example of elections being significantly influenced by a newly introduced medium. Now, social media plays the same role, driving the electoral process to its new horizon. Political setup is being considerably derailed by the activities on online platforms, making less bordered, unmeasured, and uncontrollable impacts with widespread spreading of false information. Social media

allows false information to outspread 70% more quickly. Therefore, this wide spreading of misinformation is making their recipient lay the wrong decisions. Official presence on social forums allows the politicians a much faster pace of interaction with the potential voters ultimately leading to election success (Billings, 2017). Meanwhile, the concerned scholars have found that the young and inexperienced leaders are more likely to be influenced by these platforms, forming a threat to the democratic arrangements.

References:

- Anzia, S. F. & Bernhard, R. (2022). Gender stereotyping and the electoral success of women candidates: New evidence from local elections in the United States. *British Journal of Political Science*. [cambridge.org](https://www.cambridge.org)
- B. Baldeh, Y. (2019). The Influence of Social Media on Political Consciousness: Presidential Election of The Gambia 2016. [\[PDF\]](#)
- Billings, J. (2017). An Agent of Democracy: Evaluating the Role of Social Media in Modern Presidential Elections. [\[PDF\]](#)
- Davis, J. (2017). Presidential Campaigns and Social Networks: How Clinton and Trump Used Facebook and Twitter During the 2016 Election. [\[PDF\]](#)
- Ekwueme, M. & F. Folarin, S. (2017). ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONEERING: THE CASE OF THE NIGERIAN 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. [\[PDF\]](#)
- Geys, B., Heggedal, T. R., & Sørensen, R. J. (2022). Age and vote choice: Is there a conservative shift among older voters?. *Electoral Studies*. [sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com)
- Jafar, U., Aziz, M. J. A., & Shukur, Z. (2021). Blockchain for electronic voting system—review and open research challenges. *Sensors*. [mdpi.com](https://www.mdpi.com)
- Schoen, H., Gayo-Avello, D., Takis Metaxas, P., Mustafaraj, E., Strohmaier, M., & Gloor, P. (2013). The Power of Prediction with Social Media. [\[PDF\]](#)