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Popular, Accessible, Inclusive: Social Media as an Ideal for Decision-making in a Democracy

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Abstract: Restrictions to participation attract skepticism to ordinary citizens' capacity to be engaged in the political decision-making process in a democratic society. Social media platforms address these skepticisms by outlining features of social media that facilitate discourses, quality civic engagement, and responsibility, necessary in preserving democratic ideals and practice in society. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, including algorithms and artificial intelligence, are regarded as better media to be trusted with political decision-making as they remove constraints of bias, accessibility, discrimination, and power imbalances usually found in precarious settings like face-to-face deliberations and of political representations. Employing analysis of secondary data from peer-reviewed journals and dissertations enabled us to harvest insights needed to substantiate the arguments and conclusions made in this article. This paper demonstrates the arguments for the ubiquity of social media as an ideal for the decision-making process in a democratic space. However, the presence of impediments as provided for by the social media platforms and governments including censorship, regulation, and legitimacy must be recognized for the merit it attaches to quality deliberations through social media. Using the normative ideals of inclusivity and epistemic value of participation, social media indeed is an ideal for decision-making particularly when the conditions under which the biases are developed and explained are held. In the end, accepting social media as an ideal to decision-making in democracy should not be accepted as is, unless theorization of the role of social media and justification of its merits is made. Without such, we may fail to account for what we seek in social media to support democracy.

Keywords: Social Media, Decision-making, Inclusive, Democracy

1. Introduction

Citizen participation is at the heart of democracy, but many are still ambivalent about citizens participating in the government decision-making process. In a democratic society, citizens can express their preferences, political or otherwise, but may also be constrained by elected officials and administrators. By participating through face-to-face interaction or social media, citizens become active in their community, and public officials and institutions alike become more responsive and accountable to their citizens. It is for these reasons that participation is not only desirable but also feasible, more so with the proliferation of social media, a venue for many in which they can access government. A key question that begs to be asked is whether participation in social media, an informal platform, open and unmoderated, is legitimate or valid as inputs to the government decision-making process.

The authors argue that participation in social media has the potential to aid government decision-making, even ideal. The argument centers on the normative ideals of inclusivity, accessibility, and the epistemic value of participation--important conditions of democracy.

Many may think that engaging a lot of people through social media in a political process of decision-making undermines the epistemic value of participation. The authors argue that a more inclusive polity does not necessarily conflict with building epistemic capacities of participation in social media. By epistemic, this refers to the notion that participation tracks truth according to some independent standard such as common good, justice, and empirical truth. Participation recognizes the efforts towards reason-giving are primarily anchored on truth [14]. On the other hand, participation

produces shared reasons among its citizens which endorses a policy that is of public knowledge. At the very least, participation in social media facilitates the validity of arguments and the consensual decisions that come out of it.

In the subsequent paragraphs, the first section argues that social media creates a condition in which citizens can talk, listen and learn from each other and this process engenders a collective social understanding. The second section analyzes the epistemic value of participation where social media is a medium that filters biases and errors endemic in face-to-face participation. The third section argues that social media's value in connecting people justifies its role in the decision-making process. In the final section, the authors appeal to suggest that the epistemic benefits of social media and other technology can be a better alternative to the traditional way of face-to-face participation in the political decision-making process.

Note that all data analyzed in this study are included in this article under the references section.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper analyses secondary data collected from published materials such as journal articles, theses, and dissertations. More materials were gathered via internet sources, including academic and news sites that discuss social media, its potential as an ideal for decision-making in a democratic space, and the epistemic value of participation in this platform.

3. Results

As social media's presence and use expanded, many view it as a one-stop-shop. Others use it to connect, engage and be engaged, get news, gossip, for e-commerce, for e-governance, even politicking, and more importantly, social media appears to give many that safe space to express their views and, in a way, their genuine thoughts and feelings. It changes the way one thinks and absorbs information that triggers reactions and actions.

However, by acknowledging the importance of social media in maintaining a healthy democracy, there are additional considerations that should be met–those citizens and institutions are trustworthy and trusted. Only when these are met can we say that participation in social media has an epistemic value.

Social media has the potential ideal to aid decision-making in a democratic society, but this space is expanding and evolving, thus, more possible studies can be made in the future.

4. Discussion

4.1. Social Media: An Inclusive Communication Platform

Global Social Media Stats of 2021 reports that in January 2021, there are 4.2 billion social media users around the globe, where Facebook (FB) remains the preferred social media platform with 2.74 billion active users [24]. This was followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook messenger. An increase of 490M users was seen in the last 12 months, seeing a demographic change in the process. Where users were once dominated by the millennials, in the urban setting, users above 65 accounted for FB's fastest-growing audience, of both sexes, residing even outside of the metropolitan area. The increasing number of social media users facilitates information spread which makes them a major source of information and communication.

Around the globe, the internet and social media have been widely used in political protests, social movements, and election campaigns. Events from Arab springs to the #MeToo movement were all aided by the internet and social media. However, social media platforms like FB and WhatsApp may have been singled out to have spread misinformation, facilitating political manipulation, violence, and hate crimes [46]. Likewise, incidences of internet blocks in many countries as well as platform restrictions may be inferred that the internet and the social media platforms may have been politicized [32]. This is not surprising, given the previous finding that activists resort to social media for collective action [56].

The interactive nature of social media plays a major role in transforming citizens from passive observers to active participants [4]. Social media platforms, inherently open, get to change even the message, thereby changing the dynamics of politics, values, and feeding on conflicts or understanding. Adding to this, users improve their knowledge of politics and even spur political engagement and participation [48]. In the US alone, 39% of adults use social media for civic and political purposes. Research reveals that online social ties enhance political interactions, whereby online social contacts foster offline participation [23]. Further, there are claims that people use social media as a tool for political change whereby providing information in social media feeds on political education as well as mobilization of the citizens to engage in politics [2]. FB, the most popular social media platform, has been found to play an important role in political efficacy [1]. A study on the cognitive engagement and political participation of the youth in Malaysia and Nigeria using FB revealed that the increased political involvement and trust in young people is positively correlated with their online political participation [1]. The interactive dimension of FB enables such.

Social media stimulates communication that fosters not only diversity but also unity. A study has presented that social media unites people within political parties and has the potential to embrace those who may not be [10]. It allows people to connect to whoever, wherever, whenever. Social media allows one to express their opinions with limited censorship and restrain, and also allows them to share their thoughts, criticize others, lend their voices, and even change minds [18].

Social media creates a venue where information can reach a multitude of audiences in such a short period. Through social media, global conflict, diplomacy around the world, and

politics have become accessible and sensitive to public perception [53].

Social media empowers people. When one participates in social media, one becomes a content creator, thus empowering the users to be engaged in political discourses [6, 31]. Even the disenfranchised citizens can now actively participate, giving them access and even perhaps influence political information. This is referred to as the phenomenon of new media populism which may revitalize democracy [44].

In contrast to mainstream media which is often characterized by a centralized and top-down approach, not to mention one-way information dissemination, social media provides the users the capacity to challenge existing political hierarchy as they are given the power to dictate content [3]. Insofar as content preference is concerned, voters use social media to influence constituent perceptions and that voters react positively to the politician's content as compared to their professional information [28].

In the shift of control over the content of the users in social media, there appears to be a redistribution of control and power. The producer becomes now a regulator and not the main actor. Borrowing from the words of Karl Marx – "the tools and the means of production are now in the hands of the workers."

However, while many proponents think that social media heralded the entry of participatory democracy, survey data reveal that social media users are largely passive and content participation is dominated by a few yet popular users who post comments and create new inputs [41]. Additionally, participation in social media has been found to differ per country, with domestic political structures playing a powerful role in determining citizen participation in political processes [19].

An extreme argument would even say that social media destroys democracy [8]:

"The world of social media is more conducive to the extreme, emotionally charged and divisive types of content than it is to calm, principled consideration of competing or complex narratives [17]."

A counter argument on the above claims that that social media is for democracy as it opens possibilities to informing people, amplifying their voices, allowing for understanding to realize, dissipating apathy, and furthering trust in the institutions [30].

4.2. The Epistemic Value of Participation in Social Media

The earlier part of this paper has established how social media plays a role in collective learning or social understanding and that its increased accessibility has allowed it to become a central platform for the communication of information [42]. In this section, we highlight how social media removes barriers and provides citizens with opportunities for inclusion--a concept that supports a community with the capacity to define and address public issues [47]. It is said that the more inclusive a community is, the higher is the chance for participation, i.e., for the public to emphasize its input on the content of government programs, in policy-making, or the decision-making process.

Over the years, many have seen social media's potential as an enabler and facilitator of participation as it eases the inhibitions regularly observed in face-to-face interactions. In particular, it has led to the emergence of a new form of social and political involvement. Some would argue, however, that participation in this online environment is distinct from participation in the offline environment on these accounts: lack of proximity to actors, detachment between actions and their outcomes, and minimal hierarchy within the online environment which may affect its epistemic value [43, 38].

At its core, the traditional meaning of participation is "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" [42]. Yet, many current social and political practices and relationships are now being organized and built-in online public spaces. Accordingly, when participation occurs online, the physical context of the community "in which one lives" is diminished [42]. This does not mean, however, that the impact of participation--and the knowledge generated from it--also becomes less important. Postmodernist advocates, highly skeptical of definitions and explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, would connect with this argument as they encourage looking beyond a single dominant discourse [33].

Having no clear nor unified definition, knowledge remains to be an abstract theory, yet a powerful one, since it is generally considered to be a preparation for action [39]. Knowledge evolving from online practice--where anyone can have a say regardless of ideology, credibility, and authenticity--is no different, and in this regard, may pose a conflict to the epistemic value of participation [58]. The online environment's facility for anonymity removes the ambivalence to participate and essentially provides an occasion for participants to be their authentic selves. What it cannot verify, though, is the knowledge source's legitimacy and agenda.

Considering the propagation of "fake news," defined as false and misleading information with the intent to manipulate, instituting a verification process for online content is crucial [58]. It is also suggested that more research be done to further assess the developing role of social media in participation. Researchers must combine philosophy, interaction design, and qualitative methods to arrive at a better understanding of how the platform can serve as a tool for human knowledge [39]. There is a concern that the rampant spread of fake news will not only interfere with societal interactions but will also damage the epistemic value of participation [58].

Conversely, Benkler states that there is currently a fundamental shift in how individuals experience their role as citizens and relate with their democracy, thus, new tools for communication and linkages are imperative [42]. This paper asserts that the presence of virtual networks and the rapid rise of digital collaboration technologies offer citizens the opportunity to move from being consumers of information to "participants in a conversation" without compromising its epistemic value [42].

Online participation may indeed take away the physical

sense of community, but what it brings, on the other hand, is an opportunity for people to participate in debates and decision-making that may have been previously either too intellectual or too restricted. An evaluation of various tools available indicates that digital tools, when used properly, can contribute to democracy [55]. The researcher stated that the features of these technologies--speed, cost, and flexibility--can potentially assist and enhance the democratization process. The very nature of social media, for instance, is like the conditions of democracy--popular, accessible, and inclusive--and these outweigh the seeming drawbacks of it being too open, unmoderated, and informal.

Moreover, social media has, in recent years, materialized to be a medium that filters the common biases and errors found in face-to-face deliberations, e.g., feeling of empathy due to proximity with other actors, or control of the flow of information from government agencies. The platform has allowed citizens and governments to be more transparent while engaging in direct dialogue with each other, thereby building public trust and accountability. This statement is supported by a study indicating that the online setting may be more politically diverse than the traditional offline mode and that it may offer a political venue for marginalized groups [59]. Another study advanced this by claiming that, including the perspectives and interests of the marginalized groups in the construction and generation of knowledge is of epistemic value [49].

Correspondingly, online political activities were probed and they were found to influence offline political participation and political efficacy [2]. The results of the study show that most respondents use social media for political awareness and information, specifically, by discussing government happenings with local politicians (something not easily achieved in the traditional context), sharing political content with the online community, and actively campaigning to take part in real-life political engagements. The authors conclude that online political activities trigger participation in offline political activities and that these have a significant relationship with political efficacy.

4.3. Setbacks of Participating in Social Media

Zines and mixed forms of electronic communication--small-scale media--account for alternative media that aim for social and political action [5]. In addition, any source of information that forgoes "conventional…formulas to advocate programs of social change" can be classified as alternative media [26].

One of the most common alternative forms of social movement media nowadays is social media; it has facilitated the sharing of ideas and information through online communities. A team of authors offered that many individuals from different parts of the world have high expectations for the "democratizing force of social media" [29]. They cited Twitter as an example for having served as a stitching mechanism to organize social movements in the case of Occupy Wall Street [29]. However, the rise of false narratives, fake news, and troll farms have shown the dark side of social media.

First, individuals can weave false narratives and misinform the public [40]. False narratives are constructed not by a single person but by multiple actors and "slowly emerge as a plausible reality" which makes it dangerous [29]. Second, social media can fabricate fake news, e.g., how headlines are framed, how videos are labeled, or how a partial picture of a whole is presented--which can deceive perceptions and shape opinions. As an example, a YouTube video labeled as "European migrant crisis," tended to generate comments aligned with how it is framed: positive or negative towards refugees [29]. Third, troll farms, defined as "groups of organized online agitators," have been emerging, sowing division, and in the process, affecting decision-making [7]. An an interview done by Barsotti drew attention to the pronouncements of Mendelson, that these troll farms locate tensions on social media and intensify them, and of Lightman, that this could, later on, become a bigger issue since people check their social media news feeds more than the actual news [7].

Social media has been changing the way people interact. For instance, crowdsourcing, the term used for obtaining content or services from a large group of people, usually takes place online. The problem now is how to gauge the credibility of these online users knowing that web-savvy individuals and organizations are likely to take advantage of the networked world that allows them to reach a wider audience more efficiently, without much consideration for authenticity [45].

Despite the drawbacks, high hopes remain on the epistemic value of participation in social media. Social media may form venues for scientific communication that brings together the qualities of "immediacy, trust, credibility…and 'communism' with novel forms of documentation" [37]. An example shared by academics from Malaysia is the medical case of a 15-year-old patient with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) which was solved in three weeks with the use of an online site that allows users to take part in decoding complex proteins [22]. This suggests that the utilization of social media in the knowledge sharing process and in improving scholarly and research work has bearing.

Also, "social epistemology," a young philosophical field, is growing, which sees the participation of society in the knowledge acquisition process as unavoidable [25]. The case of Estonia's "Immigrant Inclusion by e-Participation" project explores how social media can be used for increasing the involvement of minorities in policy-making, to generate information that will serve as the basis for creating policies and regulations concerning their life [36].

Furthermore, a study examined if there is a promotion of epistemic cognition when people are placed in social contexts, and if online interactions mediate social epistemic cognition [13]. The findings of the study introduced a fresh construct of social epistemic cognition which points that epistemic cognition can be fostered in online social environments as facilitated by online interactions. The authors indicate that social interactions among community members--including those of netizens in online platforms--can aid knowledge

construction [13].

4.4. Justifying the Use of Social Media in Democracy

The potential for social media to be a technology for communication, learning, and liberation, specifically in a democratic setup, is evident. It cannot be denied that the platform has made it easier for people to have a voice in government; nowadays, many are channeling their political energy online to discuss current events, organize causes, and hold leaders responsible. And those in government also observe and interact.

A series of interviews conducted by Harbath covered the topic of social media and democracy [27]. Sunstein, Professor at Harvard Law School, said that a fundamental requirement for people to govern themselves is for them to have information and for this information to be transferred to others. This is supported by Vromen, Professor at the University of Sydney, who asserted that social media enables collective social action but that it needs to have content moderation. Ilves, Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, echoed this concern. He likened the power of social media to the power of companies supplying utilities such as energy and water during the Industrial Revolution--they are so vital that they need to be regulated. Chakrabarti, Facebook's Product Manager for Civic Engagement, meanwhile, says that the convergence of social media and democracy is a new frontier and that the search for answers continues. One basic truth about social media, according to him, is that intensifies human intent, both good and bad. He also believes that ultimately, "a more connected world can be a more democratic one" [27].

As said, inclusion aids political participation and discussion of issues, including the unacceptable conditions in society that require intervention, commonly referred to as public problems. What politicians choose to do to address these public problems should be an extension of the citizens they represent, many of which can be solved by large-scale collective action [35]. In this age and time, there is no better tool to gather social input and create public knowledge than social media. It is an effective, efficient, equitable, socially acceptable, and technically feasible means for decision-making. It could be a good alternative to the traditional mode of face-to-face participation in public affairs.

A healthy democratic society can flourish when citizens participate and engage in a rational debate, in a space where one can express ideas as equals, as suggested by Juergen Habermas. This translates to the need for free speech, accessible platforms, and some extent free press–characteristics offered not only by face-to-face deliberations but also by social media like FB, YouTube, Twitter, and the likes. In effect and theory, social media may be considered an enabler of democracy.

Participation of citizens in political processes is one measure of democracy and in doing so, can influence decision-making that has the potential to change individual and group behavior. Research has shown the benefits of face-to-face deliberations, including those of being exposed to other perspectives, but whether online deliberations through social media are equally beneficial, that remains to be seen [52]. Some researchers have earlier hoped that the internet would provide a much better process, access, and results for political discussions [20]. Conversely, there are those saying that online public spheres are not the most ideal, or are even inferior to face-to-face deliberations. There have been many arguments in both cases and in this paper, we go one extra step and posit that participation of the public in debates in social media may be a good alternative to aid decisions in an ailing democracy.

It has been mentioned that decision-making is accelerated by participating in online discussions, noting that reading social media posts, sharing, and retweeting, provide the information necessary to facilitate decision-making [11].

However, by acknowledging the importance of social media in maintaining a healthy democracy, there are additional considerations that should be met–those citizens and institutions are trustworthy and trusted. In both cases, we need to examine whether social media like FB, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, among others possess those characteristics or at least provide mechanisms in place to protect and promote information flow, privacy, safety, and security, and perhaps, truth.

Social media platforms have changed the way how information is made available and presented to the world. It has provided opportunities that stimulate trust as well as distrust--threatening legitimacy, fostering inequality, and instigating protests [9]. A case in point would be the evidence that Twitter played in 2012 in the revolution of Egypt [21]. Further, with almost four billion users of social media, the security risks associated with it include identity theft, malware, and damage to public service reputation [51]. To address these concerns, serious efforts are being made by governments and social media companies to regulate and avoid publishing misleading information through social media.

For example, in Germany, they have launched the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG law) in 2017, which obliges social media platforms to send suspected criminal content to Federal police, directly upon the report of a user. Such provisions of the law would like to address the rising right-wing extremism and hate crimes and spreading misinformation of fake news, which can undermine democracy. Another interesting practice in regulating social media platforms includes India's assertion that allows the government to remove content where they deemed it objectionable and also allows it to conduct internet shutdowns. A similar practice is seen in Kenya and Ethiopia. Meanwhile, countries like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China have been found to have the most restrictive social media. China bans western social media platforms and equivalent Chinese social media platforms are likewise closely monitored by its government. In Saudi Arabia, online discourses are extensively manipulated by Monarchy [54].

On another note, social media giants like FB, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are largely self-regulated but they have put in place some content moderation policies.

These policies would include barring posts that contain hate speech (or one that encourages hate speech) and sexually explicit posts. They have also taken steps to limit disinformation, including fact-checking posts, labeling the accounts of state-run media, and banning political ads [54].

Additionally, these platforms are compliant with the laws of the countries where they operate, which can restrict speech and use even further. These policies are implemented by social media companies by employing thousands specifically to screen posts for violations and by the use of moderation software that is powered by artificial intelligence.

Meanwhile, fake news continues to proliferate social media content and they have been considered a potential threat not only to press freedom but to democracy in general. Fake news has been recognized to have existed since 1439 when the printing press was first introduced [34]. It gained prominence during the Presidential election in 2016 in the US. Fake news comes in many forms including hoaxes, clickbait, propaganda, satire and parody, and others [15]. Among the forms of fake news, hoaxes are considered to cause the most damage to their victim, usually aiming at public figures [50].

In characterizing these different forms of fake news, we recognize the potential damage they will cause in misleading people from the truth, but let us not overlook the discerning capacity of those who engage in debates in social media and that while disinformation may be spreading fast, such is not impossible to extricate. Moreover, it has been mentioned that finding just enough common middle ground based on "incomplete theorized agreements" may be sufficient to move forward in deciding, as it is rare to find where a group completely agrees on all fronts [57]. The important thing is people who participate, whether in social media or face-to-face, ground their beliefs and attitudes and adjust their political judgments based on one hand--the merit of the case, and on the other, heuristics–not perfect but helpful in guiding political decisions.

Some mechanisms that have been employed include those that were initiated by the government and social media giants. Further, the spread of information literacy as a political literacy and agency has seen a continuing rise and appreciation when one engages in political discourses. Examples would include civic education on varying topics including election reforms, tax forum intellectual freedom among the youth, working-class, college students, and the likes. At the heart of this civic education is the notion that critical information literacy is key to countering the effects of fake news [16].

If a healthy democracy requires participation, then certainly social media provides that mileage for inclusion and access, so discounting the benefits of social media as a useful tool for decision-making will have to be looked at differently. After all and we support, that democracy does not ask that discourses in public spaces be devoid of distortions or concealment, but rather to have these spaces where mechanisms for addressing such distortions are addressed [12].

5. Conclusion

When democracy is spelled out in terms of access, inclusivity, validity, and participation are prized, considering political decision-making through social media can have its merits with impediments in terms of censorship, regulation, and legitimacy. Using the normative ideals of inclusivity and epistemic value of participation to justify the use of social media is a biased argument, particularly when the conditions under which the biases are developed and explained are held. In the end, accepting social media as an ideal to decision-making in democracy should not be taken as is, unless theorization of the role of social media and justification of its merits is made. Without such, we may fail to account for what we seek in social media to support democracy.

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