

**Vetting Social Media: Has social media contributed to anti-liberalism and anti-democracy
in the US and India?**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Abstract

Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter play an influential role in billions of people's lives. They shape how we send out and receive information and our interactions with people in our lives. Further, they store petabytes and petabytes of data on all their users which is then used for a multitude of purposes. There is a darker side to these gigantic platforms. When viewed through the lenses of Winner and his paper *Do Artifacts have Politics?* it is revealed that these platforms possess political attributes that are causing damage to our society. The platforms are mainly concerned with creating profits for their creators, regardless of the cost in terms of privacy or liberty. From a US perspective, the government or military might argue that these platforms have been used by foreign adversaries like Russia, or local extremist governments like India, in diminishing democratic and liberal values in societies, may it be in the case of blemishing the reputation of the electoral system or creating cracks in the tolerance in a community.

Introduction

During the 2016 Presidential Election, the Russian state unleashed modern cyberwarfare against the United States of America. This attack came in many forms such as hacking of voter registration databases, DNC and Clinton campaign emails, and more subtly, and perhaps most dangerously, in the form of information warfare (Abrams, 2019; Masters, 2018). This warfare was primarily carried out through popular social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Whatsapp. The attack was seen as a success as evident by the fact that after the election Hillary Clinton and the Democrats blamed Russian interference for Trump's victory. This led to a multi-year investigation headed by Robert Mueller that intended to find any malice by Russians, and more importantly, any cooperation from the Trump Campaign (Fazzini, 2019). A more significant consequence of this event was that it brought one of society's most pressing issues to light: the role social media companies play in shaping the societies of the US and India. Congress has recently placed tech giants under a microscope like never before, with many congressional hearings taking place with tech CEOs (Feiner, 2021). However, even this response is minuscule compared to the global reach and influence social media companies have in the contemporary world. Beyond the United States of America, social media companies continue to play a defining role in shaping the realities of millions of people through their ability to connect people more than ever and transfer information at an unprecedented pace.

This research paper will consider how these features have politically impacted 2 different world regions. More specifically, this paper will analyze the extent to which Twitter, Facebook, and Whatsapp have contributed to anti-democracy and anti-liberalism in USA and India. Facebook is the world's most used social media platform and Whatsapp is the most used text messenger (*Global Social Media Stats - DataReportal – global digital insights 2022*).

Additionally, Twitter has been widely used by politicians, journalists, and activists as an avenue to reach the masses directly so these factors motivate the study of the three platforms.

More examples of the global scale of social media influence include Africa and Australia where Cambridge Analytica manipulated elections (*Cambridge Analytica: Australia takes Facebook to court over privacy* 2020), and Myanmar where the genocide of Rhongiyas was enabled through it (Milko, 2022). These incidents are only mentioned to further establish the influence of social media in today's political society and will not be analyzed in greater detail in this paper, however, they may serve as case studies for future papers.

Methodology

The Science, Technology, and Society (STS) theory that will be used to support this thesis's analysis of whether social media is playing a role in eroding the democratic and liberal values in the US and India is Langdon Winner's "Do Artifacts have Politics?". In his paper, Winner defines politics as the distribution of power, authority, and privilege in a community and technology as a way of giving order to the chaos in our world. Based on Winner (1980), there are two ways that objects can have politics: by decision, and by necessity. He describes the first one as follows: "instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue in a particular community" (p.3) and the second as "cases of what can be called inherently political technologies, man-made systems that appear to require, or to be strongly compatible with, particular kinds of political relationships"(p. 3). In the case of social media, the first definition is more applicable as its designers intentionally chose to add features that gave social media platforms a political incline that favored their biases best. One example of this is that these platforms hope to get users to spend as much time on them as possible so more ad revenue can be generated, and in effect, they encourage addicting and

extremist content (Edelman, 2021). Facebook and Twitter creators admit that they hoped to get users to keep scrolling for as long as possible, even to the point they were addicted, so the use stats could later be presented to ad companies and shareholders in hopes of generating more profit from them and getting the stock price to rise (Andersson, 2018). One article termed this idea of using anger to increase engagement “enrage to engage”, which fits well because it shows the purpose of the complex algorithms these platforms use very concisely. Facebook and Twitter “enrage” by creating echo chambers where people are constantly fed content they agree with and then pit these echo chambers against one another on controversial topics such as Religion vs Atheism, Men vs Women, Liberal vs Conservative, etc. After this extreme emotion is evoked in a person, they engage with that post more even if it is to bash it or show their peers how ridiculous it is (*Enrage to engage: How attention economy profits from outrage* 2022). Another example includes how social media companies are designed to collect as much data as possible on their users so that can then be sold to advertisers or in some cases allow more targeted advertising, but not enough emphasis is placed on keeping that data secure as evident by leaks (Zialcita, 2019). This gives the platforms a politics of a spy on your phone that seeks to erase user privacy and reflects the values of its creators. Since the engineers are most motivated to increase company profits (perhaps because of personal greed, or supervisor pressure), they are primarily focused on engineering ways to create wealth and are less interested in user privacy.

Winner analyzed bridges built by Robert Moses using this perspective as an example of his claims. I will do something similar in order to analyze how, if, at all, these politics of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have eroded liberal and democratic values in the US and India. In order to limit the scope of the paper, I will focus on certain topics within each country. First, for the US, I will consider the 2016 Presidential election between Donald Trump and

Hillary Clinton to show how social media can erode democratic values in the context of foreign powers. Next, For India, I will consider the communal politics propagated by the ruling BJP party in order to win elections to show how social media can erode liberal values in the context of the government of the country itself; Finally, after that, I will address concerns raised by Social Media CEOs in regards to how their software is viewed. For the purposes of this paper, democratic values mean the values of popular sovereignty where people elect their leaders, and the basic tenet of that is free and fair elections (*Boundless political science*). Liberal values mean the idea of a free society with liberty, equality, and pluralism as its tenets (Crider, 2017). All people must be treated as equals and have the opportunity to practice their beliefs freely. These definitions will be used for the remainder of the paper.

United States Presidential Election 2016

The United States Presidential election of 2016 was one of the most passionate and contested elections since the election of 2000 between Bush and Al Gore. The temperature in the country was high due to candid and in some cases inflammatory speeches by a Washington outsider Donald Trump. Donald Trump took the country by storm with his casual approach in rallies, which appealed to an average American more than the convoluted and diplomatic speech of his rivals. This allowed him to become the Republican Presidential nominee for the 2016 election against another Washington regular Hillary Clinton. The nomination was followed by a vicious campaign from both sides, laden with controversial leaks and personal attacks that polarized the country and set the stage for foreign powers to interfere in the electoral process.

This foreign interference came in many ways, such as leaks of DNC officials' emails, hacking of state registration databases, and a powerful information war on social media.

Throughout the election, the Hillary Clinton campaign was faced with a recurring problem of the

nominee's emails being leaked from her time as the Secretary of State. WikiLeaks, a news organization, had managed to get hold of a lot of the emails and released them periodically, greatly damaging Hillary Clinton's credibility as a potential President. It was later revealed by American intelligence agencies that it was Russian intelligence that had hacked the DNC officials and leaked the emails to WikiLeaks to favor Trump's victory. More dangerously, it was revealed that the Russian Kremlin-linked group IRA (Internet Research Agency) had spread large amounts of disinformation through Facebook and Twitter, potentially influencing the opinions of millions (Masters, 2018).

The IRA curated a sophisticated misinformation attack by first creating actual accounts on Twitter and Facebook that garnered a large following by tweeting in support of President Trump on controversial issues. They then amplified their divisive message by forming a bot network that interacted with those accounts (Mueller, 2019). Once a strong base was established, some American politicians fell prey to these malicious accounts and interacted with them on Twitter. This gave further credibility to these foreign actors, allowing their message to spread further. All of this was aided by Facebook and Twitter because they encouraged these controversial accounts that invoked people's extreme emotions and got them to interact with their content. This can be seen from the fact that even though the direct audience of the misinformation posts spread on Facebook was 29 million, it ultimately spread to 126 million people (*Russia-backed Facebook posts 'reached 126m Americans' during US election 2017*). Facebook argues that this was because people were sharing these posts, and that may be true. However, a feature of these social media platforms is that they prioritize the content users interact with presently higher on their viewing feed in the future (Jewiss, 2021). This means that once the provocative misinformation penetrated the users, Facebook and Twitter both helped the

future fake news posts spread by making them more accessible so they could keep the user engaged and increase profits for their creators. This fits well with the presence of inherent politics of social media platforms that Winner mentions in his framework for any artifact. Facebook and Twitter clearly had the values of greed of their creators' built into them which furthered the disinformation campaign at the cost of electoral trust. Beyond spreading misinformation through accounts and pages, targeted advertising was also done by the Russians. Over 3000 ads were posted, which would be seen by approximately 10 million people (*Russia-backed Facebook posts 'reached 126m Americans' during US election 2017*). Neither Facebook nor Twitter made any effort to vet where the provocative ads were coming from to stop foreign actors from manipulating American voters' emotions, as they were mainly concerned with accumulating as much ad revenue as possible. The ad service of Facebook was designed to spread the message to intended audiences as effectively as possible without vetting what the message was, where it originated from, and whether it was accurate because the profit was only based on how much engagement the ads got. Once again, analyzed from Winner's perspective, we see another feature with inherent politics of greed built into it by the creators.

Another unique manipulation happened through the collaboration between the Trump campaign and UK-based technology consulting firm Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica, advertised as a technology consulting firm, helped many parties around the globe manipulate elections through a data-based approach. They created a program that, when fed large amounts of user data, provided clear and targeted triggers for each population in order to get them to vote for you. Donald Trump hired this firm to aid his campaign. It was revealed that Cambridge Analytica imported large amounts of data on millions of people through Facebook, a lot of times without their consent (Zialtica, 2019). Due to social media platforms providing little

security for user data, a political factor built into these apps, this was easily attainable. This is another “by decision” choice that Winner mentions in his paper because the creators chose to value the security of user data lower than features that were actively involved in making them money, thus giving their platforms this politics. The exact gravity of these actions came to light after the election when large-scale investigations were conducted by the US and UK Governments and mainstream media such as The Guardian.

A report by ICO, the UK’s information commissioner’s office, found Facebook in particular guilty of not protecting its users' data, which resulted in Cambridge Analytica stealing information on 87 million people. This information was then used to create psychological profiles of the users and create pinpointed advertisements/messaging for each group. Facebook did not have any built-in protection to stop this acquisition of the data or its mischievous use. The impact of this heist was never quantified due to its complicated nature but some people have argued it could have been large enough to shift the result of the election.

The politics of social media platforms to gather meticulous information on its users to then sell as a product in order to generate large amounts of revenue without much regard for privacy, and its functionality to keep the user engaged even at the expense of faulty content caused great damage to the American electoral process. Free and fair elections are the hallmark of a democratic society and it is necessary for the electorate to trust the process to reflect their true will (*ELECTIONS*). The social media controversy raised questions about this process and has eroded the American people’s trust in its effectiveness, thus greatly diminishing the democratic principles in the country. This was reflected in the calls for an unfair election in 2020 as it was no longer extraordinary to make such a claim after the debacle of 2016. The blame for this debacle has gone around to different parties like the Russian hackers, the Russian

government, and social media companies. The Russian hackers were responsible for the hacking and leaking of DNC and Hillary Clinton's emails, the Russian government was responsible for the direct hacking of different localities' election infrastructure, and waging the information war. However, the information war was spread and gained momentum in the US only due to the political attribute of Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter purposefully allowed the foreign network to spread misinformation for sake of engagement and ad profit (Rutenberg et al., 2020).

India's BJP's use of Social Media

In 2014, the Indian people saw BJP to a landslide victory in the national Election, comprehensively beating the ruling Congress party. BJP is a Hindu-nationalist party of India that seeks to establish a Hindu-based order, an ideology known as "Hindutva". From its inception, BJP and its "Volunteer group" RSS have been scarred with controversy when one of RSS' members assassinated Gandhi (Lal). It later also became involved in the demolition of Babri Mosque, and its current leader Prime Minister Modi oversaw a massacre of over 2000 Muslims in the state of Gujarat, where he was the Chief Minister at the time (Sinha & Suppes, 2014). All of this made BJP a very controversial party, however, its hardline Hindutva approach made it extremely popular among upper-caste and North Indians, giving it back-to-back victories in national elections. BJP, realizing the importance of the communal politics at play, turned to social media in order to spread its message further and silence any critics. It set up large IT farms that seek to propagate the Party messages and shift all conversations to where the Party wants it. These farms also seek to disparage and silence anyone who does not tow the Party line, including activists and opposition leaders (Sircar, 2020). Members of these farms pretend to be regular citizens on social media and attempt to create the notion online that the government policy is

popular among the masses. This tends to misinform the Indian people of the reality because they're faced with the resources of a state actively manipulating the opinion online (Subramanian, 2022). Once misinformed, they're more likely to stay quiet and accept as it's harder to stand up against a policy when everybody else seems to be on board.

India has one of the largest Social Media presences in the world with over 239 million users on Facebook, 487 million people on WhatsApp, and 24.45 million people on Twitter (Ceci, 2022). This makes its social media ground some of the most fertile for propaganda by any source, and that is what the BJP was quick to grab on to. The BJP now operates around 200,000 to 300,000 WhatsApp groups and controls 18,000 fake Twitter handles (Jose, 2022). It has used this vast network to push communal talking points such as "Love Jihad" (Mirchandani, 2018) and "#IndiaSupportsCAA" campaign.

"Love Jihad" is a conspiracy theory by Hindu nationalists that states Muslim men are trying to seduce Hindu women and marry them in hopes to convert them to Islam. This theory has put interfaith marriage and tolerance for interaction between the two communities in general in great jeopardy, damaging the fragile liberal and secular fabric of Indian society. Investigations into the matter revealed that this was spread on social media, and was eventually picked up by mainstream media. One particularly horrifying story regarding this is of Mohamed Afrazul, a Bengali Muslim migrant, who was hacked to death with a meat cleaver and then burned. His killer was inspired by the "Love Jihad" campaign, but one fact that stood out was that the campaign did not have any presence in his nearby community. All the videos he saw online were geotagged to hundreds of kilometers away but due to the design of Facebook's algorithm, he was driven to these videos and this hatred was spread to him digitally (Mirchandani, 2018). Facebook not only employed no checks to stop this deadly conspiracy theory from spreading but made it

mainstream enough that people far away were viewing it in enough quantity to be inspired by it to the extent that they would kill someone. In this case, Facebook played a role in damaging the tolerance of society by spreading hateful campaigns originating in faraway societies by some extremists. These sorts of campaigns are unofficially sanctioned by the BJP as the party thrives on creating a communal divide and charging up their Hindu base to win elections.

Another campaign the BJP sanctioned was that of #IndiaSupportsCAA. CAA was a controversial amendment passed by the Indian Parliament that said all persecuted religious minorities that had migrated to India before 2014 would be given citizenship except for Muslims. In addition, India declared a lot of Muslims stateless by stripping them of their citizenship based on some arbitrary citizenship proof requirements that these people lacked (*What is CAA? know everything about citizenship amendment bill: India News - Times of India* 2020). Protests erupted throughout India in response to these blatantly discriminatory bills. Twitter and Facebook were also lit up with strong condemnations from all around the world. In order to deal with this crisis, BJP attempted to use its IT farms to manufacture artificial support for the bills and shut down the critics. BJP officials shared a video of Sadhguru, an influential guru in India with a following of millions of people, on social media in which he speaks favorably about the bill. He also acknowledges that he has not read the bill himself however that fact was lost on many people. The video spread like wildfire in form of ‘WhatsApp forwards’ among the older community. In order to target the campaign on Facebook and Twitter, BJP officials funded ads through their IT farm run pages. Many politicians paid money in *lakhs* to fund ads that attempted to create the illusion that these bills enjoyed widespread popularity thus reducing the true will of the people on the digital space. The BJP funded over 11,348 posts that got over 10,469,758 interactions within a one-month period. Most of these views came from West Bengal, where BJP has been

trying to make inroads and win assembly seats (Halder, 2020). This suggests that BJP officials deliberately targetted areas where they sought electoral victory with fake news and Facebook/WhatsApp and Twitter employed no checks to stop the spread of this fake illusion. They instead tried to spread these sponsored posts in order to satisfy their customer, once again showing the greedy biases of their creators built into them. This manufactured epidemic of fake news had the capacity to manipulate voters of West Bengal and shift election results, casting a dark cloud over the world's largest democracy's electoral process.

Winner argues in his paper that the politics of technologies contribute to the current status quo, and that power begets power. This can be seen in the case of social media furthering the Hindu majority's strict rule over the Muslim minority through spreading hateful conspiracy theories or furthering manufactured fake news. This hate, once initiated, continues to spread organically unchecked on these social media platforms due to the design of their algorithms. The algorithms used by these platforms distort realities and create alternate ones in echo chambers of like-minded users where beliefs are perpetuated, even those that are premised on hate and lies. In India's case, this spread of hate speech throughout the country led to the deaths of innocent Muslim men and significantly damaged the tolerant fabric of India's society. It also cast doubts on India's electoral process thus putting its status as a democracy in jeopardy as free and fair elections are among the main tenets of democratic nations. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, in this manner, significantly eroded democratic and liberal values in India.

Counterarguments

CEOs of Facebook and Twitter argue that their apps are mere platforms for people to use and that they do not have an influence on the activity of the people (Edelman, 2021). They merely are a way to transfer information that the people choose to transfer and that these

platforms do not manipulate how or what is shown. However, that is not true because algorithms of these companies purposefully create echo chambers, even of hate, to keep the user engaged and create more ad revenue. They intentionally, and unintentionally, manipulate public opinion by presenting fringe yet addicting ideas regularly, and higher, on the feed. This activity encourages manipulation of the public where if a user once reads something controversial or conspiracy-like, they are constantly fed similar content by these softwares leading to their potential brainwashing. This can also be explained using the STS idea of coproduction where technology and society both lead to the evolution of each other. By presenting fringe ideas to millions of users regularly, networks like Facebook and Twitter make those ideas more available and acceptable in society, thus causing a radical change in the everyday narrative. Similarly, the fringe ideas of society are presented on these social networks which cause these networks to read and store them thus skewing the algorithm further towards the extreme. Another argument given is that Facebook and Twitter believe in freedom of speech and encourage all speech unless it incites direct hate, however, we can see that is not true because accounts are suspended from social media routinely at the behest of extremist governments like that of India. One example of this is when Twitter blocked over 500 accounts of activists and opposition leaders in India after orders from the Government (Frayner & Bond, 2021). Social Media platforms willingly manipulate the opinion online to be able to continue making a profit, often at the expense of liberal principles. This shows how social media, as an institution, actively works to promote its own values of greed and in the process harms those of the liberal world.

Conclusion

Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have played a significant role in the decline of democratic and liberal values in the US and India. Their features have led to a decline in trust in

the electoral system of both countries and contributed to propagating hate by creating echo chambers premised on murderous ideas. This has resulted in these platforms facing global scrutiny and it can be seen that there is a push, especially by the US government to shift the way they function. Since, based on Winner, it is not possible to eliminate the politics of any artifact completely, we now see that governments are trying to move the politics of these platforms from politics of decision to politics of necessity, where these platforms would have more values of our society embedded in them. Instead of greed being the motivator for how these products function, liberal ideas would serve as the new backbone of their functionality. However, since Governments will take on the role of managing this centralized politics of social media, that poses another threat where the Governments could pursue fascist agenda through these as the case of India already preludes. What is the most effective way to embed social media remains an open question, however it is clear that in their current form, Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp have damaged the liberal principles they were supposedly going to promote.

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