

# **The Social Groups Invested in Social Media and Democracy**

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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

Whether it is through sharing videos with friends or contacting people internationally, social media connects us all. So, what happens when the tools we use to connect with others also spreads misinformation, deepens social divides, and negatively impacts our mental wellbeing? As Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen puts it, Facebook has been aware its app does all of those things but has chosen to continue them in the pursuit of profits. Given this whistleblower incident and growing public awareness about the dangers of social media, change is expected to come soon in the form of new government laws and industry implementation. Nevertheless, are we considering all of the perspectives needed to make an informed decision about changes to this technology? We know that changes to technologies have strong impacts to society. In this paper, I hope to use the Social Construction of Technology framework in order to identify the relevant social groups and make a recommendation about which social groups need to be considered more so in the discussion about changes to social media and democracy. The methods used in this paper include two interviews and a bibliography analysis. The interviews expanded my background understanding of democratic backsliding and social media. By analyzing bibliographies of 3 popular papers about social media and democracy, I identified and recorded the number of instances that an author belonged to a particular industry, gender, nationality, and publishing year. The bibliography analysis found that the majority of the papers analyzed were written in academia as opposed to other institutions, by men as opposed to women, from the USA as opposed to other countries, and in more recent years. From my results, I believe we need to include more female, government, and industry perspectives in order to come to more well-rounded decisions about how to change the laws around social media. Given the timeline of

published articles, I also expect to see a higher rate of papers published per year on the subject of social media and democracy in the coming years.

### Introduction of STS frameworks & Links between STS framework and Social Media

The theory of Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) states that new technologies change and develop into their final form through negotiation between different social groups (Pinch and Bijker, 1984). It is through a competition of needs that the technology develops into the form that we know today. This theory rejects the idea that technologies inevitably fall into their final form with no social inputs, and therefore implies that it is essential to discuss how a technology should conform to society's needs. A key element of SCOT is interpretive flexibility, an early state where technologies have a broad scope of possible uses, forms, and meanings to different people. I imply that social media is experiencing its period of interpretive flexibility, and therefore, it is important to consider a wide variety of social groups so that the changes that will be implemented in the law are well-informed and can meet the greatest number of needs.

### Detailed Background

In 2021, Frances Haugen, a former employee of Facebook, claimed the company acted repeatedly in ways that maximized its own profits at the expense of protecting democracy (Allyn, 2021). It did this by showing content to users that was radical, polarizing, or fake in order to maximize user engagement which was then used to sell ads and generate profit for the company. Frances Haugen testified in front of Congress to demand more accountability to be put on social media companies, went on 60 minutes for an extended interview, and leaked more than ten-thousand files to the Wall Street Journal. This has led many around the world to start

scrutinizing the role of social media on democracy and think about what changes need to be made in order to protect them.

Social media was used in several events that lead to the breakdown of democracies, including the 2021 Jan 6<sup>th</sup> US Capital Attack, Russian interference in the 2016 US Elections, ISIS recruitment in Britain. In 2021, the “free speech” social media company, Parler, was used as a platform by protesters to organize and coordinate their protest-turned-attack on the US Capital Building (Munn, 2021). Inside the pages of Parler, users spread fake news without supportive evidence, causing many to believe that the 2021 US election experienced widespread fraud. The subsequent call of arms led to the attack on the US Capital building, all organized and coordinated through social media.

Russian hackers in 2016 posed as paying advertisers for Facebook in order to sway votes in the US election (Ribeiro et al., 2019). They used Facebook’s algorithm to target specific demographics of Americans, showing politically divisive ads to people. These well-timed advertisements swayed people’s votes by casting doubts against certain candidates at crucial points in the election, such as right before the election took place. Given that these advertisements were shown to specific demographics of people, for example those living in the swing states that Trump won in, it is believed by some that the advertisements from the Russian hackers impacted on the outcome of the election.

From 2014 to 2017, ISIS recruited 750 British citizens through Youtube videos and Facebook advertisements (Awan, 2017). In their recruitment videos, they showed ISIS fighters as heroic figures, caring for the wounded in hospitals, and displaying courage in the fight against foreign powers. Social media proliferated the recruitment of a terrorist organization that actively undermined democratic nations.

## Analysis by STS Frameworks

To collect data, I used the methods of interviewing and bibliography analysis. For my interviews, I spoke with Professor David Waldner from the Political Science Department and Professor Christopher Ali from the Department of Media Studies at UVA. I tried reaching out to Professor Siva Vaidhyathan, an expert in the subject of social media and democracy, however, he did not respond to my interview request several times. Some of the questions I asked my interviewees are included in the Appendix. The purpose of the interviews was to establish background information about how democracies work in the US. In addition to interviewing, I also conducted a bibliography analysis, collecting sources from 3 papers that had over 150 citations in the field of social media and democracy. These sources include:

1. Social Media and Local Government: Citizenship, Consumption and Democracy
2. Using social media dialogically: Public relations role in reviving democracy
3. From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media And Democracy

In total, I collected 147 sources and recorded each source's published year, author gender, author nationality, and the institution that the source was published in or associated with. I did this in order to understand which social groups seemed to be most invested in this subject now.

## Results

### *Bibliography analysis*

The following pie charts show the distribution of author gender, author nationality, and institution that the paper was published through. In Figure 1, more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the papers were first authored by men, and in Figure 2, more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the paper came from other English-speaking countries such as US, UK, Canada, and Australia. From Figure 3, around  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the sources came

from academia while 1/4 came from press and the rest were from governments and private companies. From Figure 4, more sources are being published in the recent years than in the past.

Figure 1: Distribution of Author Gender

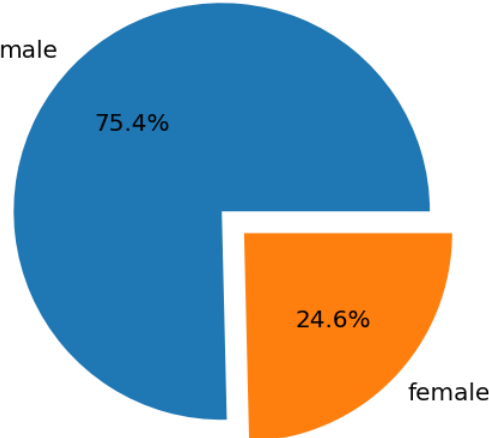


Figure 2: Distribution of Author Nationality

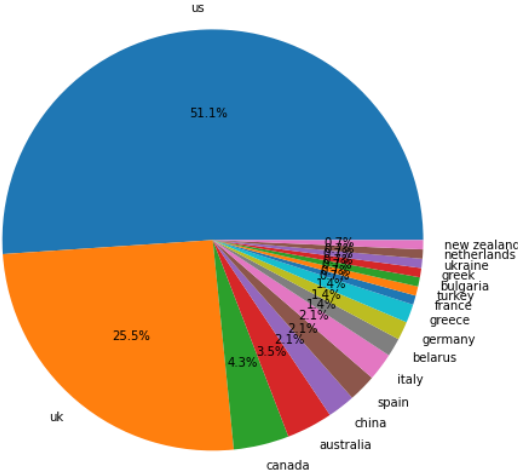


Figure 3: Distribution of Institution

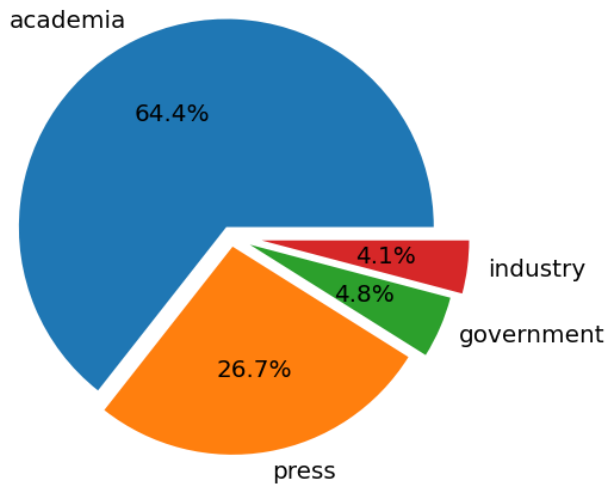
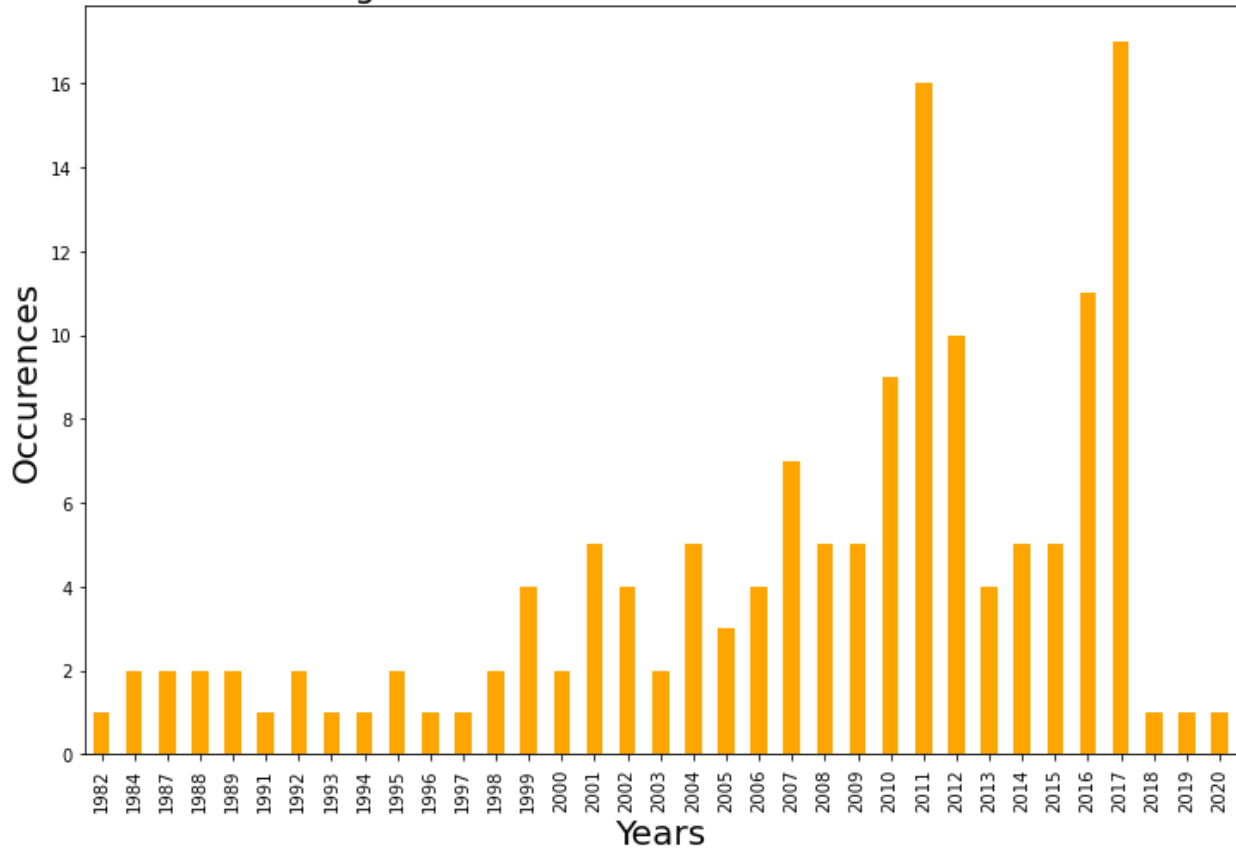


Figure 4: Distribution of Published Year



## *Interviews*

Below are summarized notes from each of my interviews. David Waldner is a professor in the Political Science Department at UVA and Christopher Ali is a professor in the Media Studies Department at UVA. Both of these interviewees wanted to clarify that they were not experts in the field I was looking at but would help me with my project. They recommended me to Siva Vaidyanathan who did not respond to my request.

- David Waldner
  - Without social media, a violent insurrection could have occurred. Social media just enhances the spread and dissemination of information
  - Mentioned the Arab Spring – based on social media, and people thought it would spread democracy
  - Backsliding refers to the movement of a government away from a democracy into autocracy
    - Could occur from an elected official who then changes the rules of the constitution to sustain their presidency: Hungary and Turkey
  - A major characteristic of a democracy is accountability of leaders, transparency, and publicity
    - By targeting press, a government can remove accountability, and therefore become more autocratic
- Christopher Ali
  - Concerned for democracy- wealth inequality
  - Technology has a huge impact on society during the pandemic- internet is how we learned, worked, social distanced



- It depends on how social media is used that affects democracy
- Advised me not to imply technologies have politics but instead looked at how it's used- very SCOT perspective
- Right now, section 230 protects Facebook and social media company from being sued over any content that is shared under their platform
  - Implied major changes in this department
  - There is no regulation regarding accountability or censorship currently
    - No words on what companies can do to censor or regulate- because it relies on companies doing what they want “in good faith”- needs to be more specific
    - They're not responsible for the words on their platform.

## Discussion

From my interviews Dr. Waldner and Ali, I learned about democratic backsliding and the current laws that protect social media companies. From Dr. Ali, I learned about Section 230. This law protects companies or distributors of information from liability. There is a current push to make social media companies more responsible for the rhetoric on their platform. On the other hand, there needs to be more laws addressing the right of these companies to censor information on their platform.

From my interview with David Waldner, I established background on democracies that I sorely needed to tackle this subject matter. Although most of what I learned from Dr. Waldner did not pertain to social media's effects on democracy, I still learned about ways democracies backslide. In many historical examples, publicly-elected leaders erode at the constitution of their nation in order to stay in office. They deny the legitimacy of elections and go against the press because that is what keeps them accountable for their actions, promises, and track record. In fact, Dr. Waldner believes maintaining a free press protects a democracy from becoming an autocracy.

From the bibliography analysis, roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the sources were first authored by men which illustrates an imbalance of opinion on this subject. I believe a possible consequence of this trend is that women may be left out of the discussion. Applying the Social Construction of Technology framework to this observation, the changes that come out of social negotiation may lack female perspectives and might create changes that lead to problems for women.

Because I used English to conduct my literature search, the majority of authors came from English speaking countries. Following English-speaking countries, we have China, which is

not surprising given that Chinese graduate students make up a significant population of students in US universities (McGregor, 2021). The rest of the countries mainly include western European countries, all of whom also govern democratically and therefore share an interest in publishing papers regarding democracy. Is it harmful for us to be informed on this subject matter by English speaking or European countries that also govern democratically? I don't think so. Therefore, this result seems less important for the goal of this paper, which is to identify gaps in social groups that are not being considered in the discussion to change social media.

The most common institution of papers came from academia and press. This is not surprising because the most fundamental research is usually conducted in academic institutions. Nevertheless, academic papers are usually consumed by academics and not by lay people. The press, however, is strong indicator that lay people are interested. Since roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of sources come from the press, I assume that the average lay person also takes interest in the matter. This suggests that people are taking interests, and politicians will start implementing changes. Government and industries were cited the least. Given that Section 230 is also of hot debate, I predict that government sources should increase in numbers of publications. Tech companies may be the slowest to change because changes are costly and time-consuming. I think we will expect to see more information being published by governments and industry given the recent attention on Section 230 and tech companies.

The timeline results in Figure 4 match my expectations because social media and artificial intelligence have been recent inventions. According to the figure, there are more published articles in recent years, indicating increasing growth in the number of papers on social media and democracy. I predict that the subject of social media and democracy will increase in popularity in the future.

## Main Points vs. Strongest Counterarguments

So far, I found that the majority of the papers I analyzed were written by men from the English-speaking world. Although, there is no issue in that fact alone, we if consider the SCOT framework, I would argue that we should be paying attention to more diverse opinions, such as female perspectives on the matter, since the decisions made on social media will have lasting impacts on society. From the timeline and institution pie chart, I believe the topic of social media and democracy is only beginning to be explored and soon, governments and companies will be publishing more information on the subject.

There are counterarguments against my choice methods. One of which is that I should have judged these papers solely based on their ideas, and not the demographic of the authors. Even though I believe people of the same demographic think differently, I think that in order to gather even more diverse thoughts, we should consider people of demographics that on average, vary a lot more. From that, I argue that we can become even more holistic in the types of social groups that we consider when making decisions about technologies. In conclusion, although US men being the majority of thought on this matter is not an issue, I think it serves as an indicator that we need to include more social groups in the discussion of social media in order to gain more well-rounded perspectives for laws that will be implemented into social media.

## Conclusion

Social media has been the center of many controversies, including the Russian hacking of the 2016 US Election and the January 6<sup>th</sup> US Capital Attack. Using the Social Construction of Technology framework, I interviewed and conducted a bibliography analysis in order to understand the types of social groups that are discussing change. From bibliography analysis, I learned that most papers were written by men in English-speaking countries. Other source of information, like the press, government, and private companies fall short, indicating a slow but growing interest from those social groups. From my interviews, I learned about Section 230 and how changing the wording of the law would affect the rights social media companies have when it comes to censorship and liability of information published on its platform. I argue that we need to consider other demographics in order to make the most holistic decisions for changes in social media.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Questions for Interviews

1. How concerned are you for our democracy? Why?
2. What do you think is the biggest threat to our democracy today? Why?
3. Do you think social media is a threat to our democracy? In what ways?
4. When were times in history where political divide was stark? In your eyes, how were those times different than now? How did those events reconcile?
5. Why do you think we are so divided politically today? Do you believe tech companies are mostly responsible for sowing deep political divides? Why or why not?
6. What do you think the future of news will look like in America? We went from having three major television networks to having YouTube, which curates videos to every person. How do you think that will affect political discourse in the future?