

# Social Media and the Deterioration of Constructive Political Discussion


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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received  
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## **Social Media and the Deterioration of Constructive Political Discussion**

### **Introduction**

In a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Richard Price in 1789 “wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights” (Jefferson, 1789). By all accounts Thomas Jefferson believed that having a well informed and educated populace was essential for the success of any democracy. Since Jefferson’s time, the dramatic transformation in which information is disseminated, particularly with the rise of the internet and social media, has put American society into uncharted waters.

While all of the world’s news and facts are now available to everyone instantaneously, so is a massive amount of misinformation and unnuanced narratives. For many Americans every bit of this information is then filtered and shared through social media websites such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and individual channels within these social media sites. According to Pew Research approximately one in five U.S. adults use social media as their primary source for political news, and a majority get at least some of their news from social media (Mitchell). This presents a problem, the novel facts and ideas presented to social media users are delivered with far greater efficiency than any book possessing hard earned wisdom ever could. This behavior, coupled with social media algorithms that are specifically designed to feed you information that keeps you emotionally engaged and outraged, appears to have contributed to the incredible political division, lack of institutional trust, and rise of radical beliefs in the U.S. (Orlowski, 2020). Both sides of the political spectrum are having an increasingly difficult time understanding and respecting those who disagree with them.

There are many significant issues facing the United States, what makes this problem unique is that it is deteriorating the nation's ability to solve every other problem. In order for democracy to work effectively, citizens must practice reason over tribalism and be well informed with the necessary facts and a broad range of perspectives. The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of social media in its current form that have contributed to the deterioration of political discourse in the United States. Constructive political discourse being defined as debate using facts and arguments from a wide variety of perspectives and temperaments that ultimately results in a compromise solution to solve complex problems and maintain a functioning society. This study will cover specific human psychological patterns and an historical analogy that will help put the situation into better context. The study will then identify the specific characteristics of social media that engage the behavioral predispositions responsible for contributing to the deterioration of constructive political discussion. Finally, potential solutions for the issue will be briefly addressed.

## **Literature Review**

In order to understand how social media has been degrading political discussion it was necessary to first establish a basic understanding of human psychology and its predisposition toward tribal behavior. The vast majority of human evolution has taken place in tribal settings of about 150 people. As such human behavior patterns have developed in a way that is optimized for the survival of the tribe and the continued pass down of shared genes. It must be acknowledged that the genetic predispositions discussed in this study influence behavior but are ultimately not in control of an individual's actions. The logical forebrain is one of the more recent evolutionarily developed features of our brains and we must contend with the fact that

most conclusions individuals reach are not made using reason alone (Hobfoll, 2018). Our natural inclination to find and form tribes is extremely powerful and evident across all parts of society. The ultimate form of human tribal nature in the modern world takes place in national identity. While competition between world powers remains non-kinetic, the apex of tribal identity for Americans appears to have been redirected to the next level down; politics. The release of social media on to unsuspecting societies has contributed to the regression from reasoned and logical discussions being the main method of political discourse back towards the more primitive approach of tribalism.

In the book *Tribalism: The Evolutionary Origins of Fear Politics* Hobfoll describes several of his personal theses on human behaviors that can be explained by genetic predispositions formed through natural selection in the tribal setting. The first is the “defend and aggress” instinct that he says is engaged as soon as people feel that there is a loss or severe threat to something valued by their tribe. He says this tends to put humans in a defensive mode that is void of careful logic and reasoning. Survival of the tribe and its culture become paramount and their effort is then devoted to the termination of the threat. The second behavior he discusses is the natural tendency to form group cohesion and personal identity around a group with shared values or a common enemy. He uses the unusual level of devotion demonstrated toward President Trump by his supporters as a modern example. The third thesis he describes that is most pertinent to social media is the tendency of the tribe to create its own version of reality or what he calls “the twisted fabric of unrelated threats.” He goes on to explain how the emotional thought centers of the brain are deeply rooted and that people will often have an emotional reaction of fear and anxiety to an event first. This emotion strengthens their resolve in their tribe and draws an aggressive feeling toward the threat. Emotionally based conclusion is reached

before the logical forebrain becomes involved, which at that point the human brain will work its own logic and reason around its emotionally based preconceived notions (Hobfoll, 2018). This is essentially what is known as confirmation bias but from a tribal perspective.

An earlier technological development that can be used as a helpful analogy to better understand how increased information flow can affect societies was the invention of the printing press. Before the printing press books were difficult to get a hold of and the transmission of information largely relied on word of mouth and dissemination of information from institutions. When the printing press made books and publications far more numerous and affordable societies in the west became significantly more educated and informed. The dramatic increase in availability of publication greatly contributed to the age of enlightenment, and revolutionary thought (Empiresandrains, 2016). The Boston University College of Communications points out the “printing press played a key role in enabling revolutions to happen.” It afforded revolutionaries the ability to spread their ideas, beliefs, and information to a far greater number of individuals than was ever possible for (BU College of Communications, 2017). Ultimately, there was a massive transmission of power from the rulers to the ruled, as scrutiny of those in power became far more difficult to suppress. The printing press greatly contributed to the rise and sustainment of Democracy around the world. That is why when social media was born into existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the broad assumption was that it would further aid the effectiveness of democracy. Human nature and societal unfamiliarity with the technology has since shown that the effects of social media are far less simple than they once appeared.

## **Characteristics of Social Media That Lead to the Deterioration of Political Discourse**

The first and most self-evident characteristic of social media that hinders useful political discussion is the fact that online interaction does not occur in a face-to-face setting. “Expressing outrage in person (that is via verbal sanctions or aggression) is necessarily constrained by the wrongdoer. But expressing outrage online is not limited” (Crockett, 2017). This is a problem that has been notoriously pointed out by anti-bullying advocates in the past with the emergence of cyber-bullying. They would correctly point out that attacking individuals is far easier online where there is little chance of physical reprisal and empathy for the victim is greatly reduced. The incivility of aggressiveness towards an individual becomes immediately apparent in person. Society typically constrains this behavior at an early age, but online this behavior is still tolerated. An example of this behavior is the phenomenon of so called “twitter mobs” when thousands of social media users display their outrage toward a particular person or group in an overly aggressive manner. Mob-like behavior that occurs in person is considered socially unacceptable. This is because mobs have no control over themselves, it is a manifestation of tribal instincts that blocks out the forebrain of logical reasoning. Without the control or reason that characterizes organized groups, mobs can often end in unnecessary violence. The consequences of the online version of this type of behavior are not yet obvious so society has yet to constrain it.

The online social media setting has a degree of separation that makes people of opposing viewpoints appear close enough to them to be a threat, but not close enough to build a shared sense of community. The “contact hypothesis shows that contact between groups lessen prejudice” as long as those groups share some form of an equal status or a common goal (DeWit, 2019). However, if these groups do not have a shared goal, or something that indicates that

the groups belong to the same tribe, more contact can actually create more friction. Social media has created an environment where there is plenty of contact but little sense of community, and thus it's more likely to engage "defend aggress" behavior. This reflects the idea expressed by Hobfoll that the human brain is trained to recognize a different group that lies nearby as an imminent threat, but differences between members belonging to the same tribe are insignificant because there exists a trusted alliance (Hobfoll, 2018 Pg. 52). Once the parties having the discussion see each other as a threat rather than an ally the discourse between the two will be hostile rather than constructive.

The second characteristic of social media that creates an issue is the shortness of the platforms that are used to carry out the dialogue. Political and cultural issues are incredibly complex especially in a country of 350 million people. Tweets, however, are limited to 280 characters, Instagram posts are limited to a few photos, and on Facebook usually nothing bigger than a phone screen is shown on a user's feed. Trying to carry out a nuanced and well thought out dialogue is incredibly difficult to do in such a small platform. There just isn't enough room to fit anything besides a short opinion or factual statement that usually does little to convince the other side. The room to present evidence, argumentation, debate, and deliberation just isn't there, resulting in online shouting matches where plenty is said but little is heard. Social Media could work to lengthen their platforms but this would defeat the point of social media which is to feed you as many posts as it can in the shortest amount of time in order to keep you engaged. Not only would this defeat the point, but the profit of the social media corporations is directly dependent on engagement.

Jonathan Haidt believes the constant feed of new information, which is very addictive to human brains, is actually leading to the decline of wisdom. He points out that although

individuals are now more informed on the day-to-day events, their knowledge of the hard-earned wisdom of the past is actually decreasing because they are busy being consumed by the new information (Haidt, 2019). The daily feed of information gives people a surface level knowledge of a wide range of issues, which to social medias credit does help keep the public informed. However, without taking the time to dive deep into complex issues, a constructive conversation is unlikely without a decent understanding of the nuance that goes into issues such as race relations, climate change, and military conflicts. As mentioned in the literature review humans form emotionally based opinions, typically aligned with whatever “tribe” they identify with, before their forebrain is even engaged (Hobfoll, 2018). This confirmation bias means the feed of day-to-day information goes directly to reinforcing what people already believe, rather than opening their minds to new possibilities.

The third characteristic of social media that breaks down political discourse is its tendency to reward posts of moral outrage. Research is showing that social media posts that engage the viewer emotionally garner the most attention (Crockett, 2017). This is backed up by Pew Research which shows that critical posts receive far more praise and attention than those where no disagreement is to be had (Pew Research, 2020). This is likely because it was evolutionarily advantageous for humans to focus on information that triggered emotions of fear and anxiety. These posts contribute little to informed discussion but do keep the user more engaged with the social media site. Crockett hypothesizes that through positive feedback such as “Likes, shares and so on” users are unwittingly drawn into a habit of engaging with, posting, and reposting moral outrage. He also goes on to attribute the ease with which one can repost as a contributing factor as well, given that it can be done with the press of a finger and nary a second thought. Perhaps his most compelling hypothesis as to why critical posts are all the rage,



however, is that the consequences that one will experience for a critical social media post are practically nonexistent. The fear of reprisal associated with criticizing a person standing in front of one's self is not present on social media, and without an in-person presence there is little empathetic cost as well (Crockett, 2017). The degree to which physical separation detracts conversation was already discussed with the first characteristic, but it is useful to note how interrelated these characteristics are to each other.

The cultural consequence of rewarding moral outrage is that it raises the country's political temperature. Those who agree with an emotionally triggering post become infuriated and those who will disagree then feel threatened by their emotional reaction. A heightened sense of threat kills any attempt to see the other point of view. In order to win elections, politicians then mirror the behavior of their electorate. De-Wit points out research which shows "that tweets with more emotive and moral words were more likely to be retweeted" and that "This work suggests that if politicians want to maximize their impact on Twitter, they need to resort to more moral and emotive vocabulary" (De-Wit, 2019) The purpose of a republic is to counter the factious behavior that degrades pure democracies. Social media, however, is providing a perverse incentive to the politicians, encouraging them to mirror the emotional overreactions of their electorate. This is precisely the opposite behavior of what their job requires of them. That is, to use reason and to make calm well thought out decisions for the greater good of those they represent. To make matters worse the moral and emotive vocabulary used by the politicians then outrages members of their opposing party and thus a positive feedback loop is born that encourages endless statements of outrage.

The fourth characteristic leading to the deterioration of constructive political conversation is the fact that practically anyone is allowed to post on social media. This is both a feature and a bug. Allowing anyone to post in many ways empowers lower class members of society who otherwise wouldn't have a voice. Unfortunately, this also means that bad actors are enormously empowered as well. Whether it be online trolls looking to instigate trouble, foreign powers attempting to interfere in U.S. politics, or conspiracy theorists looking to benefit from the anxieties of gullible individuals, there is no shortage of bad actors looking to deceive and misinform large numbers of people. Many social media companies such as Twitter and Facebook have attempted to create their own way of fact checking posts in an attempt to thwart misinformation quickly. Unfortunately, many have outsourced the fact checking to third party sources that have shown evidence of providing counter opinion rather than fact checking. (The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2021). Even if social media companies were able to objectively fact check, the effectiveness of doing so is limited by the fact that many who are being misled wouldn't believe the fact check provided to them (O'Sullivan, 2020). Additionally, when users do believe the fact check it does little toward changing their minds (Barrera, 2015)

There is plenty of blame to go around for the storming of the Capitol Building on Jan. 6, but there is no doubt that the rampant spread of misinformation holds much of that blame. Most of the people who stormed the capitol had a completely warped view of reality, in which a grand conspiracy was taking place to cheat the 2020 election and bring in a new world order. From their point of view, they likely thought they were saving the world, while in reality they were throwing the entire U.S. political system into chaos. As explained in the literature review humans have a natural propensity to create a false reality that justifies a tribal worldview. In addition to

the ease of posting misinformation, social media has two other features that make it incredibly easy for users to fall down the rabbit hole.

The first of these is the speed with which information can be transmitted. Social media posts can go viral within hours and before anyone can disprove a false statement it can misinform thousands if not millions of individuals. In the past when information and ideas were spread through books, newspapers, and word of mouth, the speed with which bad ideas and passions could be spread was exponentially slower. In the Federalist Paper 10 James Madison brought up his concern for the rise of factions in the U.S. A phenomenon which he describes as a number of citizens “who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community” (Madison, 1787). This phenomenon is most likely a manifestation of the tribalist human behavior discussed in this study. As Jonathan Haidt points out, James Madison was comforted by the fact that the separation provided by the vastness of U.S. territory would make the rise of factionalism incredibly difficult. By allowing bad ideas and misinformation to spread to everyone instantly, social media has unintentionally removed the country's best insulation against factionalism (Haidt, 2019).

The other aspect of social media that makes it incredibly easy for normal citizens to fall into a false reality are the algorithms that drag them into ideological echo chambers. These algorithms exist to keep users engaged and active on social media thus maximizing profit for the company. As we know, what keeps people engaged is what triggers them emotionally. Once the algorithm has an idea of what triggers people emotionally it will continue to feed them similar material as it learns what exactly catches the user's attention. As the Social Dilemma pointed out if one isn't careful it becomes very easy to start believing in conspiracy theories (Orlowski,

2020). Unfortunately, the algorithms are not designed to expose you to a wide range of opinion. In a study done by a German academics from the University of Duisburg-Essen, 1,663 YouTube German political videos were analyzed to assess the homogeneity of their content. It found that YouTube's recommendation algorithms, would keep users in a social media environment with a high degree of ideological uniformity (Rochert, 2020). At best this leaves users stuck in an ideological echo chamber where they only hear information that reinforces their confirmation bias. At worst the user is seduced by increasingly radical ideas until they begin to believe that a satanic child sex abuse ring is being operated under the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria (Kennedy, 2017).

### **Potential Solutions**

The emergence of social media in the United States has put our country into a paradoxical situation with no obvious solution. To suspend social media would be a gross violation of first amendment rights and the great practice of free speech. To allow social media to continue with the status quo, however, may continue to push the country towards tribal hostility and social chaos. Without precedent there is no way to know where it will eventually lead the country. An increasingly popular position is that the government should begin to regulate social media companies as to restrict the spread of misinformation. Free speech advocates and proponents of small government take issue with this because it is not apparent how they will do so in an impartial manner (Blair, 2021). Proponents of regulation argue that government representatives are held accountable by their electorate and thus the power of the vote can be used to enforce impartial regulation. Unfortunately, this creates a glaring opportunity for corruption. By giving representatives the ability to restrict the information being passed through social media, they now

have the opportunity to influence the media narrative in a way that increases their chances of staying in power. Thus, turning a technology that was used to hold the government accountable into a propaganda machine.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to identify why social media has contributed to the degradation of constructive political discourse in the United States. Human beings have genetic predispositions that drive them to behave in a manner that was advantageous to the survival of their tribe. These behavioral patterns still greatly influence humans today and certain characteristics of social media unintentionally encourages tribalistic behavior over rational discussion. These characteristics include: the lack of physical presence, publishing platforms that are too short, the popularity of moral outrage, massive amounts of misinformation, instantaneous transmission of destabilizing ideas, and algorithms that draw people into ideological echo chambers. Censorship and regulation are a possible solution but they could have devastating consequences. Regardless social media users should be encouraged to inform themselves of the psychological effects social media has on them. This would allow them to use the relatively new technology in a more responsible manner. As Thomas Jefferson once stated, as long as the people are well informed, they can be trusted to run their own government.

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