

April 2019

Policy Point-Counterpoint: The Good and The Bad of the Social Media Revolution

J. Scott Lewis

Jesse Goranson

Lawrence Kastriba

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lewis, J. Scott; Goranson, Jesse; and Kastriba, Lawrence (2019) "Policy Point-Counterpoint: The Good and The Bad of the Social Media Revolution," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss1/18>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Policy Point-Counterpoint: The Good and The Bad of the Social Media Revolution

Cover Page Footnote

J. Scott Lewis, Ph.D. is an assistant teaching professor of sociology at Penn State Harrisburg. Jesse Goranson is an undergraduate student in the sociology program at Penn State Harrisburg and Lawrence Kastriba is an undergraduate student in the sociology program and American studies Program at Penn State Harrisburg.

Policy Point-Counterpoint: The Good and The Bad of the Social Media Revolution

Social media comprises a significant share of human interaction, commanding an increasing proportion of time and social space. Whole generations have now been born into the world of social media. The ubiquitous presence of social media—whether it be Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, or Reddit—has made it a strong agent of socialization, a force that significantly shapes a person’s beliefs, values, and behaviors. Yet, research on the effects of social media at both the micro and the macro level are still in the nascent stages. The use of social media may offer increasing connectedness, with a subsequent loss of intimacy in those relationships. In other words, while we connect to more people, the connections tend toward the instrumental. At the macro level, social media appears to be a potential driver of social change, as evidenced by its use in fomenting the Arab Spring and other acts in organizing political resistance.

The question of whether or not social media is a positive or negative force in the world remains a fundamentally open question. Perhaps the question is even a false dichotomy. Indeed, much social change has both positive and negative consequences. Elements of culture that benefit one group may disadvantage another. Technologies that have positive consequences in society often also have negative consequences.

In this policy point-counterpoint, sociology students Jesse Goranson and Lawrence Kastriba discuss whether social media operates as a positive social force or as a negative one. Jesse Goranson argues that social media can act to promote democratization among otherwise disadvantaged groups. By connecting individuals from disadvantaged groups, the scalability of

social media increases the social capital of the group members, thus giving the group a greater voice in society and allows them greater participation in the political process.

Lawrence Kastriba contends that the same social media technologies that increase political and social participation also allow corporations and governments access to formerly private information. Corporations like Google and Facebook collect and sell detailed information about users for profit. Drawing on the example of social credit scores now being experimented with in China, Lawrence Kastriba shows how governments can apply social media technologies to increase social stratification and control the population. He suggests that social media can be used by governments in a similar way as they are used by businesses—to track the trends and movements of the populace. He suggests that social media is an effective tool for control over populations.

Point: Social Media Increase Democratization

The studying of the benefits of social media often occupies the margins of social narratives. Research that exists on the benefits of social media is generally limited to their role in teaching and learning.¹ Conversely, the drawbacks of social media are commonly discussed, centering on tropes of people being unable to disconnect from their phones. Terms such as “screenager” capture the belief that adolescents are more interested in social media than in going outside or engaging in face-to-face socialization. The effects can even be felt in the job market, as companies struggle to find people with adequate socializing skills. While some of these observations may contain valid points, the benefits of social media far outweigh the disadvantages.

An ethnographic study conducted by the University College London analyzed how different cultures across the world used social media.² One of the concepts uncovered was

scalable sociality. Scalable sociality is the ability to pick and choose the publicity and size of your sociality, which basically translates into that people get to decide how many people they are communicating with at once. While some platforms, such as Facebook, are scaled to your friends and family, other social media platforms, such as Twitter or Reddit, are scaled toward much larger audiences. Potentially, millions of people can be exposed to an individual's post.

Scalable sociality brings new freedoms to members of marginalized groups who have been excluded from having their voice heard. Prior to the popularization of social media, the scalability of one's opinion was limited to the range of the individual's influence. With social media, the range of influence is exponentially expanded. Thus, negotiated social realities that were previously confined to small networks now have the ability to compete in an ever-expanding space with a simple click. Social media can transcend the boundaries of race, sex, and social class to create a level playing field. An economically challenged, single, African-American mother can now have her opinion heard by an upper-middle, class white male who lives across the country. As her ideas compete with his in unbounded social space, a new socially constructed understanding emerges that give voice to both views.

Relatedly, a member of a marginalized or disadvantaged group no longer needs the social capital to navigate through government bureaucracy to have their local politicians hear their concerns. Instead, the individual can use social media platforms to contact them in real time, which not only allows a direct line of communication to the politician, but also allows for everyone else on that social media platform to hear the question or message. This increases the accountability of the political elite and reaffirms democracy as a bottom-up process.

Social media has also democratized information itself. Prior to social media, the dissemination of information was limited to print newspapers, books, and a selection of

television and radio news. Controlled by corporations, these outlets controlled the flow and content of information so as to shape public opinion toward a predefined end. This end often served the political and social elite by reaffirming extant social values and discouraging dissent, while simultaneously charging a fee for services and products. Social media, however, has made information flow more readily. News can now be gathered through several hundred sources, including individuals, to create a collaborative dialogue between people from all walks of life. The dialogues and exchanges of information that happen within this collaborative effort through social media ultimately allow a negotiated understanding of information that defies corporatism. A great example of this collaboration is Wikipedia, a non-profit, free, online encyclopedia to which anyone can contribute information. Although Wikipedia does have editors, they often have no formal training or knowledge.³ Information and editing is a volunteer, collaborative effort, in which anyone can contribute as equals.⁴

With social media taking steps towards leveling the playing field for receiving and distributing information, a greater variety of political belief can heard and evaluated. Ideally all information exists in a fair space where it can be evaluated independently of the power and control of elites. Robin Thompson points out how social media is used to “radicalize” individuals, by allowing people from all around the world with similar interests to share ideas with each other.⁵ These individuals can then collaborate and negotiate ideologies. Through the discourse that takes place, they can interrogate current social norms and constructs that were being reinforced by large media corporations. This negotiation allows people to put aside the identities of politics, granting perspectives and policies to be deliberated on an ideological level. These “radical” individuals that gather over the internet form groups advocating for their

negotiated ideological understanding, whether it be regarding political change, social justice, or in attempts to convey their perspective to others.

The 5 Star Movement in Italy has a social agenda that coincide with left-wing policies, such as income inequality and environmental consciousness, while concurring with the right-wing's value for boarder security, and is an example of how this discourse on social media can facilitate ideological collaboration, rather than political cohesion.⁶ The Arab Spring is another movement started with citizens meeting over social media. Unlike the 5 Star Movement, the Arab Spring became larger than just a political movement, bringing about rebellion and the overthrow of governments. Through social media, citizens from all over the Middle East and North Africa were able to share their opinions and disdain for the treatment of their living conditions by the government. This massive uproar on social media led to the radicals protesting, arguing for new legislation to be passed; and in a couple cases fomenting revolutions that led to entire governments being overthrown.⁷

Social media offered a tool by which marginalized and oppressed people could come together and organize. Social media provided an outlet for suppressed opinions, which challenged the norms established by tyrannical governments. Social media effectively helps put information back into the hands of the people and has given underrepresented members of society a voice.

Counterpoint: Social Media is a Tool of Control

It is estimated that worldwide, more than 2.34 billion people use social media.⁸ This remarkable feat of information exchange may indeed bring disparate groups together, but it also serves as a means to exploit and divide these same people. When ideas expressed on social

media are contested, it leads to the breakdown in communication and creates conflict between ideologies that often prove incompatible. Much of the incompatibility is the result of misinformation from uninformed, non-expert sources that drive social beliefs and inflame social discourse.

However, this hides a more pernicious problem. Data mining is a practice that undermines the democratization of information shared through social media. Most of social media is run by for-profit companies seeking to capitalize on the ubiquity of information exchange. As information flows across social media platforms the companies that own the platforms collect data on posting habits, buying trends, video streams, and advertisement watching of the users of social media. Data is also collected on all of the people connected to the user, creating a scalability of data collection previously only dreamed of by large corporations. The companies know who their users are, what they believe, who they voted for, and who they are related to. This information is only minimally protected under law, and social media corporations routinely sell the information to other companies in large blocks, matching individual users on a variety of variables tailored specifically to the needs of the purchaser.

As the scalability of sociability increases through social media, the scalability of data collection also increases. Privacy decreases. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified in Washington D.C. to address concerns about data mining, when it was discovered that Facebook users' information was sold without their consent or knowledge. Senate Commerce and Judiciary Committees were brought together to ask Zuckerberg if he knew what he was doing, considering it violated a decree established in 2011 between his company and the Federal Trade Commission.⁹ Zuckerberg addressed the European Union in Brussels for the same reason, showing that data mining is now a global phenomenon. The data was gathered by a political

firm called Cambridge Analytica, a now defunct political consulting firm out of the United Kingdom. Facebook acknowledged that the company knew of the practices of Cambridge Analytica for three years; and it was not until recently they admitted they knew who they were and what they were doing.¹⁰

China faces a different crisis when it comes to data mining. In this case, it is the government that is collecting detailed information about its citizens. China's main platform resembles Twitter. Called *Sina Weibo*, it is a highly censored platform where all dissenting political messages are promptly removed. Other platforms are directed toward commerce.¹¹

China's detailed data collection is being used in conjunction with other surveillance techniques, such as cameras, to increasingly monitor the beliefs, behaviors, and values of citizens. China has developed a road map for using such information in the creation of a social credit score, which will quantify adherence to state ideologies and obedience to state directives.¹² A high score will create privilege and access to resources, such as higher internet speeds, cheaper loans, and college admissions. Lower scores will create limits on travel, occupation, and other valued resources.¹³ As Edward Snowden revealed, the American government has similarly collected data on its own citizens, tapping into social media sites such as Facebook and Google.¹⁴

Social media does not always bring the masses together. Rather, it frequently polarizes people.¹⁵ While connecting across a geographic chasm with someone who agrees with you can be gratifying, encountering dissent by a stranger can be frustrating. Since information is disseminated by everyone, it is trusted by no one. This leads inevitably to a polarization of opinion that defies reason and science.

The Dunning-Kruger effect explains this problem in more detail. People desire a positive social identity, and people who exist on the margins of society often feel as though they are

highly intelligent and refuse to believe otherwise. While others may clearly see the errors in logic, the individual under the effect is unwilling to criticize their own point of view or recognize their errors.¹⁶ Social media merely exacerbates this effect. Rather than democratize information, social media offers a means by which information is radically pigeon-holed into rigid categories of right or wrong. For individuals or groups that are disadvantaged, it is often difficult to negotiate these boundaries effectively. Social media becomes a forum for defending what is already believed, rather than a force for spreading true knowledge and information. The ubiquitous nature of social media creates cohorts that rally behind half-truths. That is beneficial for governments seeking to maintain power and control through policies of divide and conquer.

Conclusion

Social media is a ubiquitous fact of life, and solid research on the costs and benefits of social media is sparse. Certainly, debates about whether social media is good or bad are simplistic overgeneralizations. There is much to appreciate as social media allow ordinary people to participate in the rapid flow of information that characterizes the modern democratic process. There is much to admire in the way social media gives voice to marginalized groups, allowing them to spread grassroots movements with unprecedented rapidity. However, social media can also be weaponized by large corporations and governments as a tool to divide people and set groups with common interests against themselves. Social media can be a powerful tool of control and coercion, influencing both individual beliefs, values and behaviors; as well as potentially influencing collective social behaviors such as elections or social movement. Like all social institutions, social media should understood as a two-edged sword, cutting both ways in a rapidly changing global society.

ENDNOTES

1. J. Gikas, and M. M. Grant. (2013). "Mobile Computing Devices in Higher Education: Student Perspectives on Learning with Cellphones, Smartphones, & Social Media," *Internet and Higher Education*, 19, 18-26.
2. J. Snyder. (2013). "Wikipedia: Librarians' Perspectives on Its Use as a Reference Source." *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 53(2), 155-163.
3. "Who Writes Wikipedia?" Wikipedia: the free Encyclopedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Who_writes_Wikipedia%3F
4. D. Miller, E. Costa, N. Haynes, T. McDonald, R. Nicolescu, J. Sinanan, J. Spyer, S. Venkatraman, and X. Wang. (2016). "What is Social Media?" *How the World Changed Social Media* (London: UCL Press), 1-8.
5. R. Thompson. (2011). "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media." *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4(4), 167-190.
6. R. Vignati and K. Pruegel. (2012). "The Challenge of the Five Star Movement," *Italian Politics*, 28, 78-94.
7. M. J. Flynn. (2018). "Cyber Rebellions: The Online Struggle for Openness," *Journal of International Affairs*, 71 (1.5), 107-114.
8. Statista: The Statistics Portal (2019). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>
9. K. Atkins. (2018). "Mark Zuckerberg Survives Day One of Hearings on Facebook Breaches," *Boston Herald.com* (April 11, 2018). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>
10. I. Sherr. (2018). "Mark Zuckerberg Gets Grilled by EU Over Data Mining, Election Meddling," *The International New York Times* (May 29, 2018).
<https://www.cnet.com/news/mark-zuckerberg-gets-grilled-by-eu-over-data-mining-election-meddling/>
11. Y. Ren. (2018). "Know Your Chinese Social Media," *The New York Times* (Nov. 19, 2018)
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/fashion/china-social-media-weibo-wechat.html>.
12. B. Marr. (2019). "Chinese Social Credit Score: Utopian Big Data Bliss or Black Mirror on Steroids?" *Forbes* (January 21, 2019).
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2019/01/21/chinese-social-credit-score-utopian-big-data-bliss-or-black-mirror-on-steroids/#9731c6948b83>
13. A. Mitchell and L. Diamond. (2018). "China's Surveillance State Should Scare Everyone," *The Atlantic* (Feb. 2, 2018). <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/china-surveillance/552203/>
14. "Edward Snowden: Leaks that Exposed US Spy Programme" *BBC News* (January 17, 2014).
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23123964>
15. W. L. Bennett. (2012). "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 20-39.
16. D. Dunning. (2011). "Chapter five - The Dunning-Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One's Own Ignorance," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 247-296.