

Research on the Impact of Social Media on the US Election

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Abstract

In the era of Web2.0, social media is widely used in various fields. Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. election has made people rethink the impact of social media on the U.S. election. Taking the 2016 U.S. election as an example, this paper analyzes the positive impact of social media on the U.S. election and, simultaneously, explores the negative impact of social media on the U.S. election based on Lasswell's 5W theory. This paper believes that the influence of social media has two sides. It provides voters with new information access channels, enhances voters' political participation, and improves the quality of participation. However, it also has adverse effects, spreading false and non-objective information and misleading voters.

Keywords

Social media; US election; Political participation; Laswell's 5W theory.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Web2.0 era, social media has been widely used in various fields. In 2016, Trump's victory in the U.S. election brought social media to the forefront of public opinion, and the influence of social media in the political field has also been re-emphasized. The 2016 U.S. election was called "a social media presidential election." Trump won the election by creating a personal account on the social media platform, and his Twitter followers surpassed Hillary Clinton's by nearly 3 million. He is also known as the "Twitter President," which shows the significant influence of social media in the 2016 U.S. election.

With the Internet's globalization, social media's influence on the U.S. presidential election is increasing. However, we should be careful to distinguish between social media's positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it provides voters with more election information as an information acquisition channel. At the same time, it also enhances the political participation of voters and, to a certain extent, improves the quality of citizens' political participation. However, on the other hand, we should also pay attention to the natural dissemination of social media, which promotes the rapid and widespread dissemination of fake news, which disseminates non-objective news, misleads voters, and makes them lose their rational judgment. In social media, multiple factors such as the ambiguity of the communicator's own identity, the falsity of the content, the information cocoon effect caused by the personalized push function of the media, and the non-objectivity of the recipients themselves are all contributing to what is known as the "fourth power." "The media lost its impartiality, which harmed the U.S. election and hindered the development of democratic politics.

Based on the above considerations, this article discusses the impact of social media on the US election. In a theoretical sense, based on the two-sidedness of social media influence, this paper discusses its positive and negative effects on the US election. It combines the theory of

communication to explore the role of social media in democratic politics when analyzing the adverse effects. This article uses Lasswell's 5W theory to explore the adverse effects of social media on the general election from multiple aspects. In a realistic sense, the 2016 general election reminded people that social media not only affects people's daily lives but also subtly affects the development of modern democratic politics. We need to face up to the adverse effects of social media on top of the positive effects of social media so that we can better use social media to promote the development of democratic politics. In recent years, emerging concepts related to social media and politics, such as "national computing political propaganda," have been put forward, which indicates that in the future, the field of competition among countries will gradually shift from the actual field to the competition in cyberspace, and "information warfare" will intensify, social media will become the new virtual battlefield. Therefore, exploring the impact of social media will help us better understand the properties of social media so that we can better use social media in the future.

2. The Positive Impact of Social Media on The U.S. Election

2.1. New Channel

In the past half-century or so, people have generally relied on television to obtain election information in US elections, and candidates are also accustomed to using television to promote their political ideas and shape their political images. For example, President Kennedy is the representative of "television elections." Nevertheless, since social media appeared and was increasingly used by candidates, it has gradually become a new channel for voters to obtain information in US elections. Compared with the "one-way" and "top-down" information dissemination characteristics of TV in the past, social media has many advantages such as "two-way," "unrestricted by time and space," and "timely feedback." Voters can communicate directly with candidates, and candidates can directly publish propaganda content with personal characteristics through social media, spread their political ideas, and seek voters with the same political ideas. According to statistics, in 2015, Internet users in the United States accounted for nearly 86% of the total population (Hao 2018).

According to a 2016 report by the Pew Research Center, an American polling agency, American adults under 30 almost exclusively access political-related information through social media (Che 2020). It can be seen that social media has become a new channel for voters to obtain information. Through social media, people can actively engage in political contact with candidates. Candidates can also accurately push campaign advertisements to voters based on the personal information of users based on the significant data statistics of social media platforms and disseminate election information in a targeted manner. The dissemination of information changes accordingly be denser.

2.2. Drive Engagement

The positive effect of social media on voters' political participation can be seen in the US general election voting. Public opinion is unpredictable, and voting is tangible and visible data. To get more votes, candidates use social media to conduct massive political campaigns. Many of this propaganda has "personal features" associated with candidate status. Because social media has the function of personalized push, people will be targeted by the social media platform to push the topics they are concerned about during the continuous reading, thus being attracted to support the relevant candidates and vote for them.

During the 2016 US election primaries, Hillary made many remarks about women's identity on social media platforms, and related topics quickly attracted the attention of many feminists and female voters because the topics Hillary published were closely related to her interests. . At the same time, social media can also inform people about election-related information in the first

time, so that voters can understand the current voting situation. Much election-related information, voting, and candidate information are flooded on social media platforms, making voters unconsciously pay attention to the election situation, and their willingness to vote has also improved.

2.3. Quality of Engagement

As an important carrier and dissemination channel of information, social media plays a crucial role in the US election, improving the quality of voters' political participation. Presidential candidates can publicize their political ideas and attract more voters by publishing speech videos, campaign advertisements, policy initiatives, etc. On social media platforms. In addition, candidates can also be used as self-media, not bound by the restrictions of mainstream media, and directly express their views on an event through two-way interaction with voters, creating a unique image of a candidate. Therefore, social media has become a powerful tool for presidential candidates to promote themselves. Compared with traditional TV propaganda, it transmits more information to voters, which helps voters to understand the candidates and their political thoughts closely and deeply.

In addition, social media can also generate polls through big data, thereby providing suggestions for voters to adjust their election strategies. Candidates actively adjusting their election strategies in response to the polls will also improve voters' political participation willingness and quality. From voters' perspective, the unique communication properties of social media can also help voters better understand candidates. As a window for voters to learn about candidates, social media allows voters to pay attention to different policy issues according to their vital interests and preferences, and they can like, repost and even comment on the content posted by specific candidates on social media. As a result, voters can more efficiently and deeply understand the political ideas of different candidates, and the quality of their political participation is also improved.

3. The Negative Impact of Social Media on The U.S. Election

3.1. Identity Ambiguity

However, behind the positive impact, we should also face up to the negative impact of social media on the U.S. election. In Lasswell's 5W theory, the communicator is responsible for collecting, processing, and transmitting information. However, in the U.S. election, the communicator's professional identity and personal identity in social media were confused. The ambiguity of the communicator's identity made the information he disseminated no longer objective. On the one hand, social media provides a way for original journalists to express their opinions. When using social media, it is difficult for journalists to strictly distinguish their identity as a reporter from that of a social media user. Personal emotional tendencies will inevitably appear when expressing opinions, and the content they publish loses objectivity(Chang 2021).

Another study found that in the 2016 U.S. election news, the editorial offices of several media organizations encouraged journalists to publish stories on social media that attracted netizens in their capacity, thereby enhancing the news selling point. This move makes it more difficult for voters to distinguish which reports are objective and which contain the personal feelings of self-reporters. On the other hand, the identity of each user on social media is also ambiguous. Each user is a news gatekeeper on social media, and everyone is a "communicator" who can express their views on the news while disseminating news by commenting or forwarding. Although this dissemination attribute of social media greatly expands the breadth of news dissemination, it makes the news lose its objectivity and conveys more of each user's personal views.

3.2. False Content

In the era of social media, news dissemination is influenced by business logic and false information. Information with solid emotional colors, such as panic, anger, fear, etc. It is more widely disseminated because it can easily arouse the audience's interest. Bassfield's research shows that during the 2016 US election, young people in the Balkans in southern Europe published false news about the election, with heavily biased stimuli, such as "the Pope endorses Trump.", to get the advertising share of Facebook and Google(Chen 2017).

The "hacker door" incident in the U.S. election has reminded us even more that the false information spread by social media dramatically affects the election's outcome. After Trump won the U.S. election in 2016, then U.S. President Barack Obama accused the Russian government of creating an election scandal about candidate Hillary Clinton by helping to hack into the Democratic Party's network system, stealing emails related to Hillary and her team, and making them public. To a large extent, Hillary lost popular support and lost the election(Lang 2021).

Candidate Trump frequently uses social media to release inflammatory remarks, speculation without evidence, or even statements that cover false facts to attract voters(Tian 2017). It can be seen that social media has occupied the commanding heights of public opinion with fake news and has become a sharp weapon, challenging the American democratic system and influencing the outcome of the American election(Wang 2019). The truth is heavily blocked in the post-truth era dominated by social media, with false content and unrealistic news flying around, prompting prejudice and loss of judgment.

3.3. Information Cocoons& non-objectivity

As a communication medium, social media has a particular function of "personalized push," which collects the user's personal preferences by collecting the big browsing data of each user to push personalized content according to the user's personal preferences. Although this function caters to the audience's preferences, it has affected the US election, formed an information cocoon effect, isolated users from diverse political ideas, promoted the germination of extremist sentiment, and exacerbated social tearing.

In the 2016 U.S. election, candidates and numerous groups of social media users such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter were caught up in a substantial political information dissemination turmoil. In this turmoil, the filter bubbles of social media software have facilitated the formation of information cocoons about candidates, and social media platforms provide users with "filtered" information tailored to users' previous activity records and search content. As a result, users are gradually isolated from views and information that differ from their views. For example, the homepage of social media platforms of users who initially supported Democrats may increasingly be filled with topics related to Democratic candidates or even anti-Republican topics. The information filter bubble can not only track and identify the user's personal preferences through its algorithm to determine which party the user supports and then automatically filter out information related to or beneficial to the party and push it to the user, constantly strengthening the voter's popularity. At the same time, users with similar preferences can be gathered on the same topic through "issue setting" so that they can influence each other(Jiang 2017).

The information cocoon effect of social media further narrows or even unidirectional users' cognition, thus making users trapped in their own ideological "bubble" and unable to extricate themselves(Xu 2017). Meanwhile, social media users who accept dissemination are less active in understanding information that differs from their own opinions because of their own rational limitations. Because most of the recipients are non-objective and prefer to believe information that is consistent with their views while subconsciously filtering out dissent. As a result, the

supporters of the two parties gradually formed an ideological differentiation, and the social contradictions became more and more intense(Song 2020).

4. Conclusion

In the era of Web 2.0, social media has been widely used in various fields. Social media heavily influenced the 2016 US election. In terms of positive impact, first of all, as a new channel for voters to obtain information, social media breaks the one-way transmission of election information in the past, promotes the interaction between candidates and voters, and strengthens the dissemination of information. Second, in social media, candidates can target different identities of voters to promote. Voters can thus learn about electoral issues that are genuinely relevant to their interests, and their political participation increases. Finally, on social media, candidates can use a variety of ways to promote their political ideas and directly interact with voters. At the same time, the personalized push of social media also promotes voters to have an in-depth understanding of the candidates they follow and their political ideas, thereby improving the quality of political participation.

Moreover, we should also face up to the negative impact of social media on the US election. First, the disseminators of social media have the problem of ambiguity about their identity. Journalists who were initially journalists lost their objectivity and began to spread the news with personal emotions, and each user also became a news disseminator, making the information on social media platforms gradually lose objectivity. Secondly, under business logic, social media spreads much false content without a factual basis and has become a "cocoon room" and "hotbed" for incubating revolutionary ideas. The effect of its dissemination is not optimistic, and social media, to a certain extent, promotes people's prejudice and causes them to lose their rational judgment. Finally, the information cocoon effect of social media and the non-objectivity of the recipients themselves lead to the narrowing of users' cognition, which leads to further differentiation of ideology and intensifies social conflicts.

Paying attention to the positive influence of social media can promote the rational use of social media in the US election and then promote the development of democratic politics. In addition, we should face the negative impact of social media, re-examine the role of social media with a critical eye, and take actions to gradually eliminate this negative impact, to promote social media to serve the progress of information democracy and society.

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