From Agora to Echo Chamber: Reclaiming Civil Discourse in the Age of Social Media.

Alyssa Debideen

St. Augustine Girls' High School

Trinidad and Tobago

Social media which we all use, is present in every aspect of our lives. It has become so pervasive that it is utilised in a full range of activity from tweeting celebrities, to posting pictures for friends, to marketing ourselves for prospective employers. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that social media is greatly involved in the decisions of people ranging from millennials to teenagers, especially in relation to civil society matters and politics. As a vibrant space for collective ideas, social media presents itself as the equivalent of a "University" of Woodford Square[1] in the digital age. With the advancement of social media, it is faster than ever to share information or congregate virtually in cyberspace to exchange opinions. Unlike with legacy (traditional) media, such as newspapers or television channels, the barriers that inhibit voicing one's opinion are lower. Social media promotes a level of freedom of speech which is absent in the mass media institutions that existed prior to the Information Age.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that while social media offers an unprecedented level of openness and connectivity compared to established media, its impact on democratic engagement is complex. Social media has expanded avenues for communication, exposed corruption, and enabled grassroots campaigns to challenge injustice. Despite this, its economic incentives compromise its potential to dispense reliable news content or encourage civil discourse. Aside from amplifying citizen participation, social media platforms employ user data to erode faith in institutions and exacerbate societal tensions. It affects the system of democracy by implementing algorithms that fuel confirmation bias, or by presenting the user with content specifically to spark dissent, thus maximising engagement. This demonstrates that social media

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[1] The University of Woodford Square is a creation of Dr Eric Williams who used the Square to educate the public by giving lectures on a range of topics that were relevant to Trinidad and Tobago.

is currently a substandard medium for constructive decision-making amongst citizens, or as a source of credible information. The weaponisation of information and algorithms, designed for user engagement over accuracy, undermine the pillars of civic discourse and political communication, which are essential to a thriving democracy in the 21st century.

The internet's present-day ubiquity masks its origin in the 1960s as simply a military communication network (ARPANET). From this, early precursors like Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) laid the groundwork for widespread email use in the 90s, which paved the way for social media's core function today, facilitating user interaction. However, today's social media landscape, dominated by platforms like Facebook (33 minutes/day per user engagement), TikTok (32 minutes/day per user engagement), and X (formerly Twitter) (31 minutes/day per user engagement) (Statista 2023)[2] is fraught with anxieties about human security, and the potential erosion of civil liberties.

Overall, communication on the internet differs from legacy media. It is more diverse, broad-reaching, and anonymous. These characteristics serve as a double-edged sword, either spurring people to acts of violence, or serving as a tool for civic participation. In Northern Ireland for instance, youths in 2009 were organising riots via Bebo and SMS[3], and by 2023, social media had begun to facilitate "arranged" fights between youths on either side of the struggle. This example of online-initiated fights illustrates the fact that a message on social media can reach millions of people worldwide in minimal time. Anyone can post an article, on any topic, with little to no cost. Additionally, senders can find other interested users, and meet in virtual chat rooms to have private conversations. Unlike conventional media, digital technology

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[2] "Facebook MAU Worldwide 2023."

[3] "'Anti-social' Networking in Northern Ireland: Policy Responses to Young People's Use of Social Media for Organizing Anti-social Behavior - Reilly - 2011 - Policy & Internet - Wiley Online Library."

is rapidly developing new ways for users to produce content. It also enables tech company owners and governments to track users' locations and their digital activity. Furthermore, information shared on social media is known to hold legitimacy based on social endorsement, rather than editorial standards. This reliance on "popular support" fosters a modern, digital third space, where users' personal lives can overlap with the political sphere.[4]

Within this unique blending of political and personal, the definition of democracy itself must be considered. Traditionally understood as the process by which information is analysed, and decisions are made for the greater good of society, democracy has existed before the Digital Age. Throughout history, humans have implemented forms of political decision-making through elected officials and village councils. Nowadays, social media facilitates most citizens' civic discourse, access to information, and awareness of social issues. Social media is not just a space like the oligopolistic media environment, where major public news outlets produce mass market news for "ordinary people" to view the "virtual stage of mediated communication."[5]. Today, the average user is more aptly, a 'prouser', both producer and user of content.[6] Even though platforms are aiming to provide decentralised spaces for communication[7], they remain firmly controlled by headquartered management teams, with the power to shape user experiences through algorithms and content moderation. This centralised control is a key catalyst contributing to echo chambers and political polarisation.

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[4] Graham, Jackson, and Wright,2016 "'We Need to Get Together and Make Ourselves Heard.'"
[5] "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research1 - Habermas - 2006 - Communication Theory - Wiley Online Library."
[6] Bruns, 2009 "From Prosumer to Produser."
[7] Raei2023, "The Future of Social Media."

In Sri Lanka, computer literacy in the 15-19 age demographic is higher than in any other age group, at 74.8%[8]. In 2015, around 50% of its citizens, ages 18-24, said that they decided to learn about a political issue because of something they read online.[9] The fact that almost half of young adults turn to online sources for information reveals the significant impact of the Internet in shaping an engaged citizenry which is vital for a functioning participatory democracy.

For immigrants from Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia, the growing influence of social media has created new channels for meaningful engagement with homeland politics. A qualitative analysis of social media posts among the diaspora reveals that a crisis in the homeland, such as the violence on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in April 2021, can trigger bursts of digital activism and citizen journalism, which evolved from digital "likes" to actual funds being raised to help victims and for the reconstruction of buildings.[10] This demonstrates the potential of social media to nurture positive cross-border communication among people.

In the civil sphere, political figures are actively engaging with citizens on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, providing a sense of trust and transparency through direct communication. For example in recent years, Trinidad and Tobago's Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi (@faris_alrawi_; May 18, 2021) spoke to the public multiple times via Twitter Spaces[11] about the Government's legislative concerns. Even though politicians have been using social media to connect with citizens, concerns about government overreach are prevalent. Not everyone may view their government's social media engagement as sufficient or genuine.

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[8] Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics 2022."
[9] "Democracy in Post War Sri Lanka | April 2016 – Centre for Policy Alternatives."
[10] Chekirova, "Social Media and Cross-Border Political Participation 2022."
[11] "AG Joins Twitter Space, Brings in over 3,500 Listeners | Loop Trinidad & Tobago."

Veering towards mainstream society, social media has been shown to provide a link between geographical and cultural barriers. Take, for example, the "Filming: Indo-Pak Dialogue" event organised by Indian and Pakistani Oxford students in March 2019 through the Facebook page "Oxford South Asian Society"[12]. By recording and sharing their conversation on social media, they aimed to break down stereotypes and create a platform for mutual understanding. Similarly, initiatives like The Cutlass Magazine promote global connectivity, by sharing posts and content dedicated to the Indo-Caribbean community and descendants of indentured labourers, celebrating their heritage and fostering connections across generations of the South Asian diaspora.[13]

In Egypt, during the 2010 protests calling for President Hosni Mubarak's ouster, X provided a haven for young people to vent frustrations. During this time, Khaled Said, a 28-year-old blogger, uploaded footage of a police drug deal to his website, attempting to expose corruption. He was publicly beaten to death by police officers.[14] After his murder, a powerful Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said," created by Google's Wael Ghoneim, garnered international support and incited protests in Said's hometown of Alexandria, and in front of the Egyptian embassy in London.

Often, however, political engagement on social media generates no new knowledge, but inflames already raw emotions. Brazil, with 66% of Brazilians having access to the internet, faces a distinctive challenge – digital disinformation motivated by socio-economic inequalities. YouTube, popular among Brazilians, has been shown to favour biased content through its

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[12]Tyagi 2019 "(2) Filming: Indo-Pak Dialogue with Oxford Students | Facebook."
[13] "— Caribbean Collective."2022.
[14] "The Murder of Khaled Said."

algorithms, as argued by politician/YouTuber Kim Kataguri.[15] This potential for algorithmic bias can contribute to social polarization and the spread of misinformation. Another prime example is the "gay kit" case. In 2018, it was alleged that then Education Minister Fernando Haddad planned to distribute a book in schools teaching children "how to turn gay". It was never published, but the story became a persistent piece of disinformation, amplified by conservative media and even President Bolsonaro's family.[16].

On the other hand, India, as the second biggest online market and the world's largest democracy, has enabled its citizens to broadcast their political opinions, while those with manipulative intentions find ways to engage in the rampant spread of false information. This encompasses both the term 'misinformation', defined as "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead"[17], and 'disinformation', defined as "information that is deliberately false or misleading"[18]. From April-May 2019, India's elections saw 500 million Internet users navigate a minefield of misinformation,[19] particularly on Facebook and WhatsApp [20]. In February 2019, one viral WhatsApp message promised overseas Indians online voting, directing them to register on the Election Commission's website (ECI). However, the ECI quickly debunked the message on their official social media platforms [21].

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[15] Broderick, "YouTubers Will Enter Politics, And If They Do, They're Probably Going To Win."

[16] Bracho-Polanco, "How Jair Bolsonaro Used 'Fake News' to Win Power." The Conversation 2019.

[17] "'Misinformation' Is Crowned Dictionary.Com's Word of the Year | CNN." Diaz 2018,

[18] Jack, 2017. "Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information."

[19] Bajoria, 2019 "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation | Human Rights Watch."

[20] Phartiyal, Kalra, 2019 "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls | Reuters."

[21] Times of India 2019. "ECI Steps in to Check 'Fake News' on WhatsApp."

Government agents play a part in the cross-border disinformation spread as well, with Russia, Iran, and China alleging that Israel bombed the Al Ahli hospital in Gaza, while credible sources reveal that a misfired rocket from Gaza hit the site.[22]

Despite marginalised voices being amplified, social media algorithms regularly trap users in filter bubbles. Polarisation, the tendency of humans forming groups to distinguish themselves, is not just a product of the Internet, but is also inherent in society. Social media merely acts as an accelerant, worsening existing divisions through targeted content. When citizens lack reliable information, they are less likely to take part meaningfully in political decision-making. TikTok, for example, with 80 million monthly active users in the U.S., 60% between the ages of 16-24, has a particularly intriguing impact on political discourse. Its "For You" page enables constructive discourse, yet risks political polarisation due to its personalised algorithms. Users may be exposed to unintentional confirmation bias or content that solely triggers negative emotions.[23] Features like "duetting" make the custom of publicly disparaging opposing viewpoints on TikTok easier and faster. The resulting polarisation spills over into the real world, increasing societal divisions and inhibiting productive dialogue. In response to this, the Montana State Government has been proposing measures to ban TikTok altogether.[24] And this has been a mere prelude to the US Supreme Court's January 2025 ruling upholding Congress's law to ban it nationwide, citing security concerns.

Although users hold the power to break free from echo chambers, social media platforms incentivise the opposite. Since social media is driven by algorithms and advertisement revenue, more user engagement and hence more profit, is generated from misleading news. Digital

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[22] Eisikovits, "War in Gaza."
[23] Carson, "A Content Analysis of Political Discourse on TikTok."
[24] Shepardson 2024, "Montana Appealing Ruling That Blocked State from barring TikTok Use."

journalism companies frequently manoeuvre statistics or phrase headings in ways that propagate disinformation. In Nigeria, the website Parallel Facts' slogan is "No Clickbait, No Propaganda, and No Fake News"[25] However, the BBC counted several news stories containing falsehoods on this website. To combat these issues, users may actively seek out diverse content for themselves, and engage in respectful discourse with opposing, political viewpoints, releasing themselves from echo chambers and cultivating a more informed understanding of the world, crucial for the forward development of society.

It is clear then, that social media can be manipulated to undermine civil liberties and democratic processes, and authoritarian regimes can and do exploit these digital tools for censorship, propaganda, and surveillance. Digital footprints track our every move, and algorithms constantly evolve in uncharted territory. The Cuban government, one of the lowest internet connectivity providers in the Western Hemisphere, actively monitors its citizens' online activity and filters content deemed threatening to its one-party rule.[26] This highlights the fear shared by many closed dictatorships – that unfettered internet access poses a potential threat to their hold on power.

Unlike previous authoritarian regimes who resorted to completely blocking internet access, 21st-century autocrats have adopted a more sophisticated approach. They keep the internet open, but exert their control by meticulously restricting content that empowers dissent and activism. China's Great Firewall, for instance, censors news critical of the government and

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[25] Nwonwu, Tukur and Alo 2023 "Nigeria Elections."
[26] "Cuba's Internet Cutoff: A Go-to Tactic to Suppress Dissent "| Loop Caribbean News.2021"

restricts access to Facebook and X.[27]. This controlled online environment makes it harder for citizens to challenge the regime.

Venezuela offers another example of these tactics in action. Under Hugo Chávez, internet access bloomed, but as political freedoms slipped away, so did the digital landscape. Oil wealth gave way to crumbling infrastructure and stifling media censorship, silencing journalists and activists alike. Chávez's tactics included discriminatory laws and undermining democratic institutions. [28] His successor Maduro's regime further tightened its grip, employing website blocks and even imprisonment while using "sovereignty" to shield itself from criticism. Their RESORTE law restricts journalism[29], and Telasaur, a government-funded channel, promotes its own prejudiced narrative.[30] These regimes are serving to actively manifest a future where technology becomes a tool of oppression, not liberation.

Reprising the Indian example, prior to 2014, standard media channels dominated Indian elections, but Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) saw the power of social media and rode the digital wave. They built cyber armies, targeting voters through thousands of WhatsApp groups. Their resounding success spurred communication with the digital population at the grassroots level. To achieve this, over 900,000 "cell phone pramukhs" served as trusted voices within their communities, setting up neighbourhood-based WhatsApp groups to share insights into the BJP's work and Modi's electoral journey.[31] But with this, misinformation and divisive content flooded platforms, with even government officials like the Press Information Bureau

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[27] Quan,2022 "Censorship Sensing: The Capabilities and Implications of China's Great Firewall Under Xi Jinping."
[28] Corrales and Penfold,2015 "*Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez*".
[29]Sousa Matos 2016, "Diplomacia Pública y América Del Sur. De Los Conceptos a La Práctica."
[30] Puyosa 2019"(PDF) Rusia, Venezuela y El ALBA, Compartiendo Malas Prácticas Para El Control de La Información y de La Sociedad Civil."
[31] Williams and Kamra, 2019, "Technology Could Torpedo India's First WhatsApp Election."

resorting to this digital chicanery. A study at Oxford University showed that 33% of BJP-circulated WhatsApp images were designed to divide, not inform.[32] The digital age has clearly empowered a version of democracy in India, but will they be able to harness this power to strengthen its democratic fabric, or will misinformation eclipse the promise of informed participation?

As content distribution increases, so will the spread of false information. Malicious actors and machine-learning systems alike are constantly honing their misinformation-spreading techniques.[33] OpenAI's Chat-GPT, for instance, has been trained using vast amounts of text data, including potentially misleading information from the Internet. This raises concerns about the future of journalism. While journalists remain skeptical about AI-generated news, they acknowledge the potential for AI to be used to spread misinformation through the dissemination of biased information, subtly shaping public opinions without explicit deception.[34] In an effort to demonstrate accountability, WhatsApp and X previously addressed these tactics by implementing in-app message labels, new encryption measures, and a user-driven verification tip line in India,[35] but their effectiveness ultimately hinged on users' critical thinking skills and digital hygiene. At the same time Meta, Facebook's parent company, announced that they "removed or marked as disturbing more than 795,000 pieces of content for violating policies in Hebrew and Arabic."[36] Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's CEO, declared a focus on algorithmically

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[32] Narayanan et al. 2019, "DemTech | News and Information over Facebook and WhatsApp during the Indian Election Campaign."

[33] Klepper, Swenson 2023 "AI-Generated Disinformation Poses Threat of Misleading Voters in 2024 Election | PBS NewsHour."

[34] "AI's Impact on Our Information Sphere | Annenberg."

[35] (Ponniah 2019, "WhatsApp."

[36] Ramirez 2023, "Israel-Hamas Misinformation Is Rampant. Here's a Guide to What's Out There."

promoting meaningful user interactions, a step away from advertisement-driven content.[37] Along with Kannur's digital literacy workshops, these offered a commendable start, but they demand wide-scale reach in various languages.[38] Now though, with the tech companies openly bending the knee to US President Trump's demands, many of these limited safeguards have not only been rendered impotent but non-existent as well, all under the guise of deregulation.

Globally, legislation should focus on balancing the protection of human rights while introducing clearer, ethical frameworks for prosecuting cyber incivility. Economic sanctions like those reimposed against Venezuela[39] are effective but pose negative consequences for mainstream society. Nevertheless citizens, armed with circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs), can draw international attention to human rights violations and internet censorship practices, thus liberating themselves from the suffocating grip of digital oppression.

In sum, social media has the ability to spark collaboration across borders on critical issues, yet its shadows have severely darkened the civil sphere. Through collective action, however, we can utilise its connective power to build bridges between individuals and communities, rather than walls, in order to create a flourishing technological utopia.

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[37] Macready, 2024 Facebook Algorithm."

[38] Chan 2019 Chaturvedi, "Facebook Introduces Fact Checking in More Local Indian Languages, Provides Additional Funding to Partners."

[39] Pozzebon 2024, Rios, "US Moves to Reimpose Sanctions on Venezuela after Opposition Candidate Barred from Presidential Election."

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