

Social Media Impacts on Social & Political Goods: A Peacebuilding Perspective

Lisa Schirch

The Toda Peace Institute and the Alliance for Peacebuilding are hosting a series of policy briefs discussing social media impacts on social and political goods. Over the next several months, top experts and thought leaders will provide insight into social media's threats and opportunities. This first briefing provides a conceptual summary, and a set of policy recommendations to address the significant threats to social and political goods. The Full Report provides a more in-depth literature review and explanation of key themes.

ABSTRACT

Social media is *both* an asset and a threat to social and political goods. This first in a series of policy briefs on social media aims to build the capacity of civil society to understand the economic and psychological appeal of social media, identify the range of opportunities and challenges related to social media, and promote discussion on potential solutions to these challenges. Currently, few in civil society or government understand how social media works. Technology experts and investor-oriented social media platforms cannot address the opportunities and challenges brought by social media capabilities. Together, government, corporations, and civil society, need to find ways to respond to the growing crisis of social media ethics and impacts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **All forms of media hold the potential for both solving and amplifying social and political problems.** Media is, as its Latin root suggests, “in the middle”; it is a channel for communication between people.
- **Social media vastly increases the amount of information and communication available to people.** Social media is a “supply-side shock to the amount of freedom in the world.” (Shirky 2008) Social media has been a massive technological experiment both for and against democracy.

- **Social media profit motives.** Social media corporations harvest data on users to create psychometric profiles that are then sold to advertisers with interests in persuading and manipulating the public toward specific goals. Social media corporations are driven by profit; they sell the attention of users to advertisers.
- **Brain hacking for Addiction.** Social media companies compete for user's attention. They have a profit motive to keep people using and sharing information on social media platforms. They design these platforms to foster greater use, what some refer to as "brain hacking."
- **Monetizing and Grabbing Attention.** In the "*attention economy*," social media platforms attempt to harness and monetize our attention by tech creating psychologically addictive programs that "hijack" attention. When users share information, they "harvest" these psychological profiles through a range of information-gathering surveillance. They then they sell this personal information to corporations and political actors with interests in persuading and manipulating the public toward specific goals.
- **Hate Spreads Faster than Truth or Love.** Social media platforms *algorithms* prioritize posts that contain strong emotions, spreading them to others. Research by the Wall Street Journal discovered that YouTube's algorithms more often recommended "conspiracy theories, partisan viewpoints and misleading videos" over more reputable but "boring" videos representing fact-based reporting. (Nicas 2018)
- **Affirmation Addiction.** Humans crave attention and connection. Social media offers instant gratification for social affirmation. MRI brain scans illustrate that feedback via social media activates the "reward center" of the brain in a way similar to addictive drugs. (Wolpert 2016)
- **Emotional Reactions, not Deliberation.** Social media's "race to the brainstem" makes complex thinking more difficult. Democratic deliberation, critical thinking to determine fact from fiction, and creative problem-solving takes place in the frontal cortex, behind the forehead. The frontal cortex is essential to building society, analyzing public problems, and creating solutions and innovations to improve social and political goods. In the midst of conflict and trauma, more primitive and emotion-based neurological systems tend to take over. Ironically, the more chaos and conflict that there is in society, the less able humans are to respond with the part of their brain that might enable them to reduce chaos and violence.

Summary of Social Media Opportunities

Starting in the late 1990s, many people believed social media could improve social and political goods by connecting and empowering people and improving access to information. Today, nearly half of the people on the planet use social media to exchange ideas, photos, and videos. States and civil society organizations are using social media for a

wide range of contributions to social and political goods, including the following, described in more depth in the Full Report.

Build empathy, tolerance and compassion for others and combat social isolation
Design “civic tech” to address social problems
Expand democratic governance and improve the state-society relationship
Enable social movements to coordinate and communicate with others around the world
Support crisis response, humanitarian assistance and development
Prevent and confront hate speech and threats of violence
Enhance public support for policy negotiation, diplomacy, and peace processes
Use new social marketing methods of crowdsourcing ideas, fundraising, broadening support, engaging the public and evaluating the impact of nonprofit groups

Summary of Social Media Challenges

Between 2016-2018, descriptions of social media dramatically shifted toward itemizing its faults: fake news, addiction, interference in democratic elections and deliberation, group polarization, and promotion of violent conflict. Researchers and journalists identify a wide range of social media harms to social and political goods, described in more depth in the Full Report.

Undermines personal well-being through chronic distraction, hijacking attention for corporate profit, which fosters addictive consumption and techno-stress
Spreads misinformation and disinformation
Undermines accurate information by decreasing the number of newspapers and the journalists as advertisers move to social media
Creates information filter bubbles and echo chambers via social media algorithms that filter information enabling forums for tribalism where small groups of people, including those with anti-social norms, connect without public scrutiny
Fuels social polarization and nationalism within groups
Provides new platforms for hate speech and incivility , where people can post their anti-social, hateful message aimed at interrupting civil discourse
Distracts people’s attention away from critical issues by flooding with personal interest or positive stories
Spreads deceptive propaganda, “influence campaigns” and psychological operations that “destabilize” public trust in public institutions
Sways elections with ads aimed at targeting and repressing voters
Empowers states to monitor and harass journalists and pro-democracy movements
Tolerates gendered online harassment of women
Allows ads that exclude specific groups , such as minorities, people of color, Jews, women, and people over 50
Treats small countries as social media laboratories
Allows recruiting and organizing for violent extremist groups
Enables groups to foment violence and mobilize genocide

Policy Recommendations

How do we maximize the possibility for social media to empower us to improve social and political goods, and minimize the worst impacts of social media? Recommendations to enable social media to contribute to social and political goods include the following:

A. Inspire “Humane Design”

Tristan Harris and the staff at the Center for Humane Technology, based in San Francisco, want to move away from technology that extracts attention and erodes society, towards technology that “protects our minds and replenishes society.” As former insiders in the social media industry, they assert the following:

Technology that tears apart our common reality and truth, constantly shreds our attention, or causes us to feel isolated makes it impossible to solve the world’s other pressing problems like climate change, poverty, and polarization. No one wants technology like that. Which means we’re all actually on the same team: Team Humanity, to realign technology with humanity’s best interests. (Center for Humane Technology 2018)

The Center for Humane Technology is encouraging a “design renaissance” that emphasizes “non-extraction-based design decisions and business models” that might empower people to manage their attention toward activities that benefit the social good, both personal and collective. Unlike social media platforms that have a profit motive to keep users on the platform longer, companies like Microsoft, Apple, and Samsung that make the devices that run social media could design safeguards for human security since their profit model does not depend upon users sharing information online. These corporations can design their products to protect our minds and society, to enhance focus rather than distraction. (Center for Humane Technology 2018)

B. Design an “Architecture of Serendipity”

A functional democracy requires encountering experiences, facts, opinions, information and ideas different from our own, and then finding common ground and building empathy and understanding based on shared experiences, facts, and beliefs. Current social media platforms reduce user’s exposure to ideas or experiences that challenge their point of view. Social media platforms could design unplanned serendipitous encounters. This “architecture of serendipity” would replace the current algorithms that foster echo chambers and like-minded groups recognizing that such serendipitous encounters improve both social and political goods. (Sunstein 2017)

C. Design Platforms that Facilitate Empathy, Dialogue and Deliberation

Social media’s contribution to polarization and violence requires a new generation of conflict transformation experts who specialize in social media strategies for dialogue and deliberation. It requires tech companies to consult with experts who specialize in facilitation, dialogue and social cohesion. People in the fields of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, including social movement activists, facilitators, mediators, and

peacebuilders, including the sponsors of this report, have special training and practical experience in designing intergroup processes to address conflict, orchestrating complex peace processes, and community organizing. Conflict transformation analysis and skills could help to reform social media platforms so that they build empathy and enable dialogue and deliberation, social cohesion, and cross-cutting relationships on social media.

D. Conduct “Do No Harm” and Conflict Sensitivity Assessments

Social media platforms are responsible for unintentional harms that occur as a result of the design and algorithms on its products. Other organizations that create unintended harms, including the fields of medicine, humanitarian assistance, and peacebuilding, as well as the military, invest significant resources in assessment and planning to avoid unintended consequences. **Conflict sensitivity** is the use of assessment tools to analyze the local context (such as the country in which a social media platform operates) to anticipate ways the platform may be abused or contribute to social divisions or violence within that context. Social media companies can use conflict assessment tools to advance their capacity for conflict sensitivity and design their services to minimize harm with knowledge of the local context. (Schirch 2014) There are conflict transformation and peacebuilding organizations operating in nearly every country in the world that could work with social media organizations to carry out such assessments.

E. Coordinate Support for Fact Checking and Hate Monitoring

When does fact-checking happen? Who does it? How do they do it? The truth needs staff. Facebook already has nearly 20,000 contractors attempting to review and respond to complaints of hate speech and fake news. But often these contractors sit in tiny offices in other countries and only have 3-5 seconds to decide whether a post or comment stays or is deleted. (Chen 2014) Fact checking is a collective effort, requiring coordination of diverse actors, including:

- Social media company staff,
- Users who flag false, hateful or violent content, and
- Organizations devoted to media accuracy and truth.

F. Coordinate a Campaign for Social Media Literacy

People do not want to be “data producing farm animals, domesticated and dependent” upon social media for our unhealthy addiction. (Vaidhyanathan 2018, 203) The public needs to understand how social media is impacting their personal lives and broader society. Providing social media literacy for billions of people is daunting. Governments, social media platforms, corporations, schools and universities, and civil society organizations all need to participate. The content of social media literacy should include the following:

- basic training on privacy settings to help users be aware and control their information;
- strategies for self-control, so social media users set limits on their own usage;
- accountability coaching, so users understand the impact of incivility and hate speech; and
- training to recognize the tricks of persuasion and propaganda.

Propaganda does not work when people recognize the signs of propaganda. Yet even experts find it challenging to determine the difference between real and fake accounts

on Facebook. (Collins and Frenkel 2018) Researchers found that simply encouraging people to question whether a news story is true or false makes them less likely to share a news story that they suspect might be fake in the future. (Pennycook and Rand 2018) One option is to design a social media alert to let users know that they are experiencing a narrow view or unsubstantiated information. (Bail 2018)

G. Advocate for Government Regulation

As with any industry, consumers can press governments for consumer protections so that social media corporations are held accountable for public harms. The European Union actively regulates social media corporations recognizing the vast effects they have on social and political goods. In August 2018, US Senator Mark Warner released a white paper entitled "Potential Policy Proposals for Social Media and Technology Firms" with a menu of regulation and policy options including identifying false information, offering government support for media literacy, and protecting information. The white paper states, "The size and reach of these [social media] platforms demand that we ensure proper oversight, transparency and effective management of technologies that in large measure undergird our social lives, our economy, and our politics." (Warner 2018)

There are a range of proposals and examples, including

- Treating social media companies as "information fiduciaries" and as such need regulation to protect and care for the public's access to accurate information. (Balkin 2016)
- Developing "public interest curators" with "civic-purpose algorithms" including the integrity, reputation, location, and inclusion of those producing the data. (Kelly 2016)
- Designing social media platforms so that the sources of political information posted on social media are transparent and accountable for its accuracy. (Center for Humane Technology 2018)
- Regulating social media to ensure there are greater privacy controls, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation ("GDPR")
- Requiring social media platforms to take the legal responsibility for removing extremist content. in Europe, for example, social media platforms must remove terrorist content within one hour of its posting. (Counter Extremism Project 2018)

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FULL REPORT

An Introduction to Media Effects on Social and Political Goods

- 1. All forms of media hold the potential for both threatening and securing social and political goods.** Media is, as its Latin root suggests, “in the middle”; it is a channel for communication between people to either achieve – or destroy – social and political goods.
- 2. The fantasy of fixing social problems with technology has a long history.** In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky observes, “For a hundred years after it started, the printing press broke more things than it fixed, plunging Europe into a period of intellectual and political chaos that ended in the 1600s. (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* 2008, 73) Social media is a tool, and as with most tools, it can be used for both good and evil. In their book on *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy*, Diamond and Plattner describe the internet as “a “cyberstew”; a widely divergent mix of actors and motives, where “liberation and control, transparency and deception, cooperation and predation, tolerance and extremism all vie with one another” both to “boost democracy” and “enable repression.” (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* 2008, xiii)
- 3. Social media is distinct from other media in at least six ways** known as the 6Vs: volume, variety, velocity, value, veracity, and variability. Social media significantly increases the ability for diverse people and groups to communicate, share, cooperate, and take collective action without the guidance of institutions

Social goods refer to actions, resources, or anything that benefits social relationships such as education, clean water, healthcare, safety, empathy, understanding, and a sense of community.

Political goods refer to the institutions, rule of law, and decision-making processes that protect and create social goods.

or organizations (volume and variety). Social media enables a much faster spread of information, images, and videos (velocity). But the quality and types of the information are highly uncertain (value, veracity, and variability).

4. **Social media is a “supply-side shock to the amount of freedom in the world.”** (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* 2008) Social media has been a massive technological experiment for democracy. But merely giving people access to modes of communication and forms of information does not strengthen democracy.
5. **The rise of social media correlates with significant threats to social and political goods.** Social polarization, nationalism, and threats to multicultural values are increasing. Democratic freedoms are declining around the world. (Freedom House 2018) Authoritarian leaders and some of those who elect them are undermining social and political goods in the following ways:
 - Attacking democratic norms and institutions
 - Undermining belief in science, facts, and news media
 - Repressing the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities
 - Corrupting governments to advance their own selfish financial interests

How Social Media Works

Social media is a broad term, including communication systems such as emails, texts, and blogs as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google platforms, including YouTube. Most of social media’s problems relate to platforms geared toward profit.

6. **The Goals of Social Media Platforms.** Leaders of social media corporations often seem genuine in their desire to contribute to social and political goods.
 - Until recently, Google’s motto was “don’t be evil.” Today Google’s mission is to “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”
 - Twitter’s mission is “is to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers.” Twitter’s website states, “We believe in free expression and think every voice has the power to impact the world.” And the company’s page “Twitter for Good” outlines its civic engagement efforts to support social goods.
 - Facebook’s mission is “to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” Facebook’s Social Good Forum rolls out new aspects of its platform to aid a variety of social goods, including crisis response, health, charitable giving, and mentoring. And Facebook has observer status in the Global Network Initiative aimed at protecting human rights and corporate responsibility in the tech industry.
7. **Social Media Platforms are Profitable Corporations.** Social media corporations are geared toward shareholder profit. Facebook’s profits jumped from \$26 billion in 2016 to \$40 billion in 2017. (Statista 2018) While profit is not

necessarily incompatible with contributing to social and political goods, there are inherent tensions.

8. **Advertisements on Social Media.** Like newspapers, TV, and other media, social media platforms like Twitter, Google's YouTube, and Facebook operate based on ads. Six million advertisers place ads on social media platforms. These ads generate profit and pay for the thousands of staff running corporations like Facebook. (Crawford 2018)
9. **Attention for Sale.** What is being sold by social media corporations is the *attention* of social media users. In exchange for using social media platforms, users agree to have their information shared with advertisers, including corporations who want to sell products, and those with specific social and political goals that want to sell ideas.
10. **Harvesting Personal Data and Psychometric Profiling.** Social media platforms "harvest" personal information by collecting data on what users post, where they are, who they know, and how they might be influenced. Psychometric profiling provides advertisers and political strategists with information based on users' online activity, interests, gender, sexual preference, geographical location, religion, and any other information gleaned from our social media posts so that advertisers can tailor their ads to these "custom audiences." (Tactical Tech 2018)
11. **Advertisers Prefer Placing Ads on Social Media.** For a fraction of the cost of placing an advertisement on television, newspapers or magazines, advertisers using social media platforms can target specific ads to specific groups of people. Facebook calls this its "Custom Audiences" program. Google places advertisements based on user's searches. Google's search engines and **algorithms** prioritize and sort links to pages on the internet that are relevant according to a viewer's geographic location, language, traffic, and other factors.
12. **Cultivating Addictive Habits to Collect More Data.** Social media platforms like Google and Facebook collect information on billions of people, more than a third of the human race. The more time people spend on these platforms, the more data these corporations can collect. More data allows the corporations to sell more ads, in turn generate greater shareholder profits. Some researchers argue that the profit model of social media platforms relies on "hijacking attention" away from other activities. "Facebook attracts us, hooks us, encourages us to declare our affiliations, divides us, and tracks every single interaction along the way." (Vaidhyanathan 2018, 51) In response to this critique of "addiction by design," a few social media corporations began introducing new settings and options for users to monitor their usage in August 2018. (Hern 2018)
13. **Public Loyalty and Profit.** Public loyalty is important to social media platforms' business model. Tarleton Gillespie describes the challenge that social media companies face in their torn loyalties to "customer-users" and profit-driven investors in his book *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content*

Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media. (Gillespie 2018) The public's loyalty to a social media platform requires trust that users will not unintentionally encounter pornography, hate, or violence while scrolling through their news feed. Negative stories about social media's role in undermining elections and fostering extremism from 2016 to the present also impacts public loyalty. For example, Facebook lost \$118 billion of stock value in July 2018 following news stories of the company's anti-social roles. (Solon 2018)

14. **Government Surveillance.** In telling the story of how social media works, some point to the history of the development of the internet and the world wide web. Walter Isaacson details the "creative collaboration" between the military, academic institutions, industries, and a group of progressive and libertarian freethinkers in his book, *The Innovators*. (Isaacson 2014) The U.S. military helped to create the internet to enable communications in the event of a widespread attack or disaster. Some assert the military also had an interest in designing a communication platform that would enable intelligence collection on populations so that it could identify threats. Some researchers note that "No matter what we use the network for today—dating, directions, encrypted chat, email, or just reading the news—it always had a dual-use nature rooted in intelligence gathering and war". (Levine 2018)

Today it is no secret that government's spy on their citizens through social media platforms. The number of requests by governments to Facebook for user data is steadily increasing as states learn about Facebook's psychometric profiling data. Facebook's April 2018 Transparency Report reports that over 100 countries made over 80,000 information requests to Facebook between January 2013 and April 2018. (Facebook. 2018)

Today, millions of people upload photos to social media every day. These photos, paired with facial recognition technologies, create intelligence data for spy agencies tracking people. For states focused on human security and combatting crime, such surveillance might improve public safety. But for governments focused on concentrating wealth and power, such surveillance undermines democracy.

Neuroscience and the Appeal of Social Media

Neuroscience is an interdisciplinary study of the brain and nervous system. Researchers use neuroscience to understand how humans feel, think, and behave. Neuroscience is essential to appreciating the psychological appeal of social media.

15. **Social Media Noise.** Social media vastly increases the amount of information available to people. Getting attention is difficult given this overwhelming information "noise." Techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci observes, "In the 21st century it is the flow of attention, not information (which we already have too much of), that matters." (Tufekci 2018)

- 16. The Psychology of Grabbing Attention.** Attention is a finite commodity; each person has a limited span of attention. Dozens of books by marketing experts and psychologists describe how to “break through the noise” and “grab” the public’s attention by using compelling personal stories and metaphors to “frame” an issue. Social media platforms attempt to harness and monetize our attention. In the most skeptical analysis of the “*attention economy*,” tech companies create psychologically addictive programs that “hijack” attention; they “harvest” psychological profiles through a range of information-gathering surveillance; and then they sell this information to corporations and political actors with interests in persuading and manipulating the public toward specific goals. (Vaidhyanathan 2018)
- 17. The Neuroscience of Persuasion and Strategic Communication:** the field of strategic communication studies how to influence people by understanding their needs, interests, and perspectives. Stanford University’s *Persuasive Technology Lab* teaches business and tech leaders how to capture and keep audience attention by designing social media platforms and applications, or products and messages, with “stickiness” that creates behavioral changes. One of the key elements of their research is how to remove obstacles that make people less likely to spend their time and money on social media. The photos, images, colors, and feedback tools to “like” and comment on social media are designed to keep people on these platforms longer and to return regularly. (Alter 2017) (Salkever and Wadhwa 2018)
- 18. Fear, Anxiety, and the “Race to the Brainstem.”** Tech ethicist Tristan Harris describes tech companies’ competition for our attention as “brain hacking” and a “race to the bottom of the brainstem.” (Harris 2016) The oldest part of the brain is the reptilian brain stem. It controls automatic fight-or-flight reactions that respond to fear, anxiety, or threats. Newspaper editors often quip, “If it bleeds, it leads” to indicate that emotional content on the front page, whether evoking fear, disgust, anger, or joy, sells well. Emotions are contagious. Similarly, social media posts that invoke intense emotions like fear and anger get more “views” from other people. Emotional posts seem to stimulate biochemical responses that make people anxious and more likely to share these posts with others. (DiResta 2016)

Social media platforms *algorithms* prioritize posts that contain strong emotions, spreading them to others. Research by the Wall Street Journal discovered that YouTube’s algorithms more often recommended “conspiracy theories, partisan viewpoints and misleading videos” over more reputable but “boring” videos representing fact-based reporting. (Nicas 2018)

- 19. Affirmation Addiction.** Humans crave attention and connection. Social media offers instant gratification for social affirmation. The limbic system, or reward system, controls emotional responses and positive or negative rewards. This part of the brain responds to social media’s offer of social affirmation through “likes” and comparison to others. These older brain structures become addicted to the images and feelings invoked by social media feeds. MRI brain

scans illustrate that feedback via social media activates the “reward center” of the brain in a way similar to addictive drugs. (Wolpert 2016)

Psychologist Larry Rosen describes:

The typical person checks their phone every 15 minutes or less and half of the time they check their phone there is no alert, no notification. It's coming from inside their head telling them, “Gee, I haven't check in Facebook in a while.... I wonder if somebody commented on my ... post.” That then generates cortisol [in the brain], and it starts to make you anxious. And eventually, your goal is to get rid of that anxiety, so you check in. (Anderson Cooper 2017)

The colored thumbs up on Facebook offers users a hit of dopamine when someone on their Friend List hits a key. Dopamine, a pleasurable brain chemical, is infamous for its role in creating a sense of pleasure for people with self-destructive addictions to food, sex, and drugs. By offering affirmation through “Likes,” social media platforms are creating what many researchers call “affirmation addicts.” This may be particularly harmful for young people, especially young women, whom researchers document have lower levels of self-confidence after interacting on social media. (Teen Safe 2016)

Social media gives us the ability to publicly perform affiliations and project identity while inviting affirmation and confirmation of relationships. In his book *Anti-Social Media*, Siva Vaidhyanathan describes the sadistic origin of social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram in an online game called “Hot or Not.com,” in which people judged and offered their faces to be judged by others, signaling the intense human desire for social feedback. (Vaidhyanathan 2018, 39-50)

- 20. Emotional Reactions, not Deliberation.** Social media’s “race to the brainstem” makes complex thinking more difficult. Democratic deliberation, critical thinking to determine fact from fiction, and creative problem-solving takes place in the frontal cortex, behind the forehead. The frontal cortex is essential to building society, analyzing public problems, and creating solutions and innovations to improve social and political goods. In the midst of conflict and trauma, more primitive and emotion-based neurological systems tend to take over. Ironically, the more chaos and conflict that there is in society, the less able humans are to respond with the part of their brain that might enable them to reduce chaos and violence. (Alliance for Peacebuilding 2016)

Opportunities for Social and Political Goods

The dawn of social media came with a techno-optimist narrative that new technologies could help individuals and institutions devoted to social and political goods.

- 21. Connecting with Others to Build Empathy, Tolerance, and Compassion.** Social media offers people more opportunities to voice their experiences, ideas, and political preferences. People can connect with each other, combatting social

isolation and bringing the world closer together. At the individual level, social media allows people to share their thoughts and experiences. This can enable people to understand, feel empathy and compassion for others. Social media also saves time and energy by reducing the need for travel through increasing the ability to email or video conference.

- 22. Designing Civic Technology.** “Civic Tech” is an umbrella term that describes the use of technology for various social goods, including improving governance and coordinating community action. CivicTech “hackathons” are happening all over the planet to solve social problems. In *Civic Tech in the Global South: Assessing Technology for the Public Good*, authors document a variety of tech solutions to social challenges, such as Brazil’s use of online voting on participatory budgeting, (Peixoto and Sifry 2017) In Seattle, Washington, for example, a variety of independent groups gather staff at technology firms with community leaders concerned about the social good to think about how to use technology including social media to solve social challenges both locally and globally. (SeattleTech4Good 2018)
- 23. Expanding Democratic Governance.** Community leaders, governments, and international organizations like the World Bank use social media to improve the state-society relationship. Social media allows governments to hear directly from citizens to identify concerns, brainstorm solutions, and share information related to public issues. Social media platforms also create opportunities for citizens to hold governments to account, as policymakers respond to constituent “noise” or pressure. Without social media, elected officials in some countries encounter far more “noise” from corporations with lobbyists pressing and rewarding officials who respond to corporate interests, often at the expense of public interests.
- 24. Enabling Social Movements:** Prior to social media, the expense of phone calls and transportation made it difficult for civil society groups around the world to collaborate. Social media offers virtually free methods for civil society to coordinate global protests against war and sexual abuse, and global actions to stem climate change and coordinate with each other to advance social and political goods. Social media also lets citizen reporters document abuses of power, even when mainstream news sources ignore or cover up these abuses. Social media enables activists to amplify information aimed at empowering people to take collective action.

Between 2010 and 2012, civil society activists in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere credited social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook for enabling civil society to organize themselves in social movements and take mass action to hold those in power to account. While on-the-ground activists had worked for years to build social movements in the so-called “Arab Spring”, social media boosted these activists by creating wide public awareness of protests. Social media also gave people a way to communicate quickly. Social media helped people overcome isolation brought about by “pluralistic ignorance”—the lack of

understanding that other people share the same grievances, hopes, or ideas. (Tufekci 2018)

A 2018 Pew Research study on social media and social activism found abundant examples. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has appeared nearly 30 million times on Twitter to help mark and sort conversations on race, violence and policing. In the first two months after women on Twitter asked each other to post #MeToo to report on sexual harassment and abuse, nearly 2 million people used the hashtag. The Pew report finds that two-thirds of Americans believe that social media plays a vital role in citizen engagement and drawing attention to issues that political leaders need to address. (Pew 2018)

Yet the report also finds that a majority believe that online activism results in “slacktivism,” in which less motivated people who might not join a protest in the street could send an email to their political leader or share a Facebook post about an issue from their home. Researchers find that this low-cost and low-risk activism may actually weaken the type of in-person social movement activity necessary to further social goods. (Schumann and Klein 2015) Some note that working-class groups have less access to online social movements. (Schrader 2018)

25. Supporting Crisis Responses, Humanitarian Assistance and Development.

Social media technology has an essential role in providing an early warning and responding to human rights emergencies and humanitarian crises due to natural disasters and violent conflict. The United Nations and NGOs are scaling up social media technologies to help people sound the alarm about an impending crisis, and then to coordinate and respond to crises with two-way communication technologies. For example, the International Network of Crisis Mapping works at the intersection of humanitarian crises, new technology, crowd-sourcing, and crisis mappers.

26. Preventing Violence and Hate Speech. Social media platforms can spread information about human rights and dignity to prevent and confront hate speech and threats of violence. Kenyans created the “Ushahidi” social media technology to coordinate efforts to prevent election violence, document voting irregularities, and counter hate speech. (Ushahidi 2017) Ushahidi also functions as a coordination system for humanitarian response.

27. Enhancing Negotiation, Diplomacy, and Peace Processes. Many peace processes designed to end armed conflict end in failure, primarily because of lack of public support. Social media offers new ways to communicate about the tradeoffs and options discussed by high-level diplomats. Researchers found that social media was an important method of communication about the Colombian referendum on the peace process, hypothesizing that social media could have helped to engage the public on various options for ending the armed conflict in Colombia and building public support for the peace plan. (Nigam, et al. 2017)

28. Marketing for Social Good. Before social media, only wealthy groups could afford to put together an ad campaign that required buying newspaper, radio, or TV slots. Now, even the smallest nonprofit organizations can have a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and a blog without spending much money. Minority groups and small NGOs can amplify their voice even when professional news organizations ignore them. Social media creates vast new possibilities for how groups go about working for the social good, including new social marketing methods of crowdsourcing ideas, fundraising, broadening support, engaging the public and evaluating the impact of their work. (Kanter and Fine 2010) (Aaker and Smith 2010) (Mathos and Norman 2012)

Challenges and Threats to Social and Political Goods

Alerts about social media's potential dangers began years ago. But these "techno-pessimist" concerns are escalating. Dozens of new books and research articles document a wide range of social media-related challenges to social and political goods.

29. Undermining Wellbeing. Social media undermines personal well-being in at least three ways. First, social media exposes people to money-making scams, computer viruses, weapons-making instructions, recruitment from violent extremist groups, hate speech, fake news, and unwanted sexual content. Second, social media is primarily a space devoted to increasing the sale of consumer goods. Corporations aim to hijack attention for corporate profit through constant exposure to consumer goods which can foster addictive consumption. Third, this flooding of information, both positive and negative, adds to "techno-stress" and fosters chronic distraction, taking people's attention away from life-giving relationships and activities.

30. Spreading Misinformation and Disinformation.

Misinformation is the spread of information that is unintentionally inaccurate. People share misinformation on social media when they incorrectly think it is true. *Disinformation* is the intentional spread of false information or "fake news." People share disinformation when they have tainted social and political motives. Caroline Jack's *Lexicon of Lies* identifies an array of terminology relevant to "problematic information." (Jack 2017)

Social media's role in spreading inaccurate information is unique in terms of the *scale* and *scope*. In his book *#Republic*, Cass Sunstein describes how social media disseminates inaccurate information and emotions, particularly fear and anger, through "cybercascades" that spread like wildfire through social media platforms. (Sunstein 2017, 98)

In April 2018, a group of MIT researchers released a report, based on a data set of false "rumor cascades" on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. Researchers found that

false news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people.

Falsehood also diffused faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences observed. (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018)

The design of social media platforms contributes to this problem.

- Fake news stories often invoke fear or anger, resulting in greater attention and sharing. Social media algorithms then highlight these posts, further promoting misinformation and disinformation.
- People who use social media primarily for entertainment may encounter fake news involuntarily. If they do not seek out other sources, this fake news may be their only encounter with news-related information.
- Social media platforms do not distinguish the source of information through unique fonts, colors, or frames that could alert users to credible news sources. Facebook's News Feed posts all look the same, regardless of the content, thus mixing our political, personal and commercial activities. (Vaidhyanathan 2018)
- Anyone can create an account, or multiple accounts, on a social media platform to enable the anonymous sharing of disinformation. In the first quarter of 2018, Facebook reported that it disabled 583 million fake accounts. (Facebook. 2018)
- On some social media platforms like WhatsApp, an instant messaging app owned by Facebook with over a billion users around the world, people can post a fake news story and circulate it within a group without any public exposure. This means that the rest of the public may never know that a fake news story has spread. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for fact-checkers or professional news media to counter the false information.

Social media companies often say that they lack the capacity to reliably check for conspiracies, lies, and fake users. Faced with criticisms that they censor too many posts on one hand and allow too much hateful and violent content on the other, social media companies are struggling to come up with community guidelines and processes for removing misinformation and disinformation. WhatsApp asserts that it cannot monitor messaging on this app, although some assert that it could remove such content if it wanted to. (Gupta and Taneja 2018)

31. Undermining Accurate Information. Social media undermines authentic news in a variety of ways. In a report on the "Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism," the Taylor Owen and Emily Bell note, "Journalism with high civic value—journalism that investigates power or reaches underserved and local communities—is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability." (Owen and Bell 2017) Social media platforms that collate news stories draw people away from the news sources where the stories first appeared. Consequently, the audience is reading the ads placed on social media, not the ads placed in newspapers. This change has had a dramatic effect on the financial viability of professional journalists and news producers who are doing the actual work of reporting.

While professional news services have oversight and public accountability, social media producers of fake news are far less likely to be held to account. The increase in social media as a source of news and information correlates with a decline in professional journalism, and it's "general interest" intermediaries who help to provide common, accurate information and experiences that enable informed deliberation. (Sunstein 2017)

Social media promised the *democratization of information*, but some counter that it has resulted instead in the *weaponization of information*. Many commentators believe social media is enabling "information pollution" making it more difficult for society to have a conversation based on shared understanding of what is or is not true.

- 32. Creating "Information Filter Bubbles" and "Echo Chambers."** Human cognition already has a bias toward confirming what we already think and overlooking information that disproves or complicates our understanding of the world. People endorse information on social media by sharing it with their friends. Misinformation and disinformation passed on through friends are more likely to be read and viewed as credible. People want to reinforce their own views.

Eli Pariser called these "**filter bubbles**" anticipating years before most that people receiving information through social media filters may view other people, with different sources of information, with suspicion and dislike. Information bubbles are a result of both self-selection and algorithms that ensure people with similar experiences and opinions see the same types of information. (Pariser 2011) People in an information bubble may experience a type of "**echo chamber**" where most of their social contacts post information that is similar to what they believe. This environment can create an illusion that "everyone believes as I do" or that a person is validated in their beliefs because they perceive that they are a "majority" even if their echo chamber is relatively small, and most of the population believes differently.

Social media enables "**enclave deliberation**" or caucus groups between like-minded people. These internal negotiations could, in some circumstances, improve how groups relate externally. But misperceptions shared by a group of people are more likely to persist, even in the face of information that counters the perception. Individuals are more likely to change their mind when they are not part of a "group think" that reinforce each other's misperceptions. Discussion among like-minded people can contribute to people becoming overconfident that their views are right, and others are wrong.

- 33. Worsening Polarization.** The design of social media platforms inherently drives polarization and undermines democratic deliberation and dialogue. Social media platforms use algorithms to link people with similar interests. Social media offers an "architecture of participation and control" where people participate in choosing what they want to see and hear from others on the platform.

The platforms own algorithms operate to maximize homophily. **Hashtags** help people find conversations or other people or groups. (Sunstein 2017)

Echo chambers can breed polarization, hate, contempt for others, and violent extremism, a set of beliefs that justify violence toward others to support ideological goals. Self-insulation decreases understanding of different points of view, or common values and experiences. (Sunstein 2017, 57) People tend to choose friends and groups that share their interests and opinions. Social media helps people to create self-assembled “tribal” groups with similar interests. This is known as “**homophily**”, or the human desire to connect and bond with people who are similar to ourselves.

People organize on-line to overcome real-life hurdles, including social disapproval for their group. On-line groups grow in strength as like-minded people cooperate to overcome external threats. Tufekci describes this as “a shift from a public, collective politics to a more private, scattered one, with political actors collecting more and more personal data to figure out how to push just the right buttons, person by person and out of sight.” (Tufekci 2018)

34. Expanding Hate Speech and Incivility. There are several hypotheses related to whether people express less respect and more hatred for others on-line than in person. People may simply encounter a greater variety of political opinions on-line than they do in person, and so it may be difficult to compare on-line and in-person communication styles. Some social media platforms allow anonymous posts, or posts with a pseudonym. This option might make it less socially costly to express hate and anger, and there may be fewer mechanisms of accountability and less impact on the reputation of those who do post such messages. (Trump, et al. 2018)

35. Using “Strategic Distraction.” In addition to flooding people with inaccurate information, social media platforms also are a channel for information aimed at distraction. *Xuanchuan* is a Chinese word to describe the government’s attempt to distract the public on social media away from controversial stories by flooding it with positive, personal-interest stories. China is well known for its media censorship, and its contribution to fake news in China and other countries. But this new technique of strategic distraction is a significant new tactic. By some estimates, the Chinese government employs 2 million people to make up 448 million posts aimed at “strategic distraction” each year. These are called “50 cent” posts because the people in China’s “keyboard army” are reportedly paid half a dollar for each post. (King, Pan and Roberts 2017)

Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* described an age when governments control the public not through force, but because individuals in society are drugged, emotionally detached, overstimulated by fluff entertainment, and distracted with empty pleasures. For many observers, social media and its distracting fluff stories are the drug enabling authoritarianism. (Sampson 2017)

36. Conducting Influence Campaigns and Psychological Operations. States have long used propaganda in their deliberate attempts to manipulate the public toward a desired political goal. The Russian term *dezinformatsiya* refers to the attempt to “destabilize” public trust in the media and other public institutions with the goal of fostering approval for authoritarian leadership. (Jack 2017) For example, the US military uses *Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)* or *Military Information Support Operations (MISO)* to “create emotions, attitudes, understanding, beliefs, and behavior favorable to the achievement of United States political and military objectives.” The US goal is to “win the hearts and minds” of local populations in the war on terror. Social media creates vast possibilities for non-state groups without the financial resources of the US military, like white nationalists and ISIS, to wage large-scale psychological operations that undermine social and political goods.

Swaying Elections and Suppressing Voters. Political actors use social media to influence elections in a variety of ways. Political actors who do not have explicit help or coaching staff from the corporation itself also use social media platforms to sway voting. In the 2016 US Presidential election, Russia created fake Facebook accounts (known as “bots”) that posted divisive and fake news stories with the intent to sway voters toward candidate Trump and away from candidate Clinton. In July 2018, Facebook revealed that it had uncovered an alarming rate of attempts to interfere in the November 2018 midterm elections. (Fandos and Roose 2018) Russia also used social media to sway the UK Brexit vote, as well as in voting in European and other countries.

Some social media companies, such as Facebook, provide staff assistants to any political campaign that buys ads. Facebook staff have provided advice to authoritarian leaders in the Philippines, India, Russia, and elsewhere who use Facebook to threaten journalists, spread disinformation about minorities, and undermine social and political goods. (Etter, Silver and Frier 2017) But Facebook asserts that they have “agnostic” political values. Facebook offered staff assistance to “embed” with *both* the Trump and Clinton campaigns during the 2016 US elections. Clinton declined the offer of a Facebook staff support, while Trump’s campaign relied heavily on the daily advice and guidance Facebook staff gave to their campaign.

In addition to spreading mass propaganda and disinformation, political actors also use micro-targeted ads to suppress or influence specific users. (Tenove 2017) The Trump campaign also ran three types of micro-targeted ads on Facebook to suppress votes for Clinton. Ads targeted Bernie Sanders supporters, young women, and African Americans in key swing states with the goal of introducing doubt and convincing even a small minority of them not to vote for Clinton. (Beckett 2017)

The Berlin-based think tank Tactical Tech reports on the psychological basis of developing psychometric profiling via social media platforms, and how political strategists use such profiling to sway elections. (Bashyarkar 2018) (Hankey 2018) The Cambridge Analytica corporation obtained psychometric

information on 50 million Facebook users before the 2016 US election. Just as ISIS uses social media with the intent of recruiting new members, so do political candidates, including those with the intent of undermining democracy. "Persuading somebody to vote in a certain way is really very similar to persuading a 14- to 25-year-old boy in Indonesia to not join Al Qaeda." (Bashykarla 2018) Political actors project mass propaganda and micro-targeted propaganda aimed at specific psychological profiles to sway elections.

- 37. Harassing and Threatening Journalists, Minorities, and Government Critics.** Governments use social media to harass and repress journalists. Filipino President Duterte's authoritarian approach to governing includes the use of "patriotic trolling" by "troll armies" of fake accounts that harass journalists and critics of the regime. (Etter, Silver and Frier 2017) In India, Prime Minister Modi's troll armies threaten political opponents and journalists critiquing anti-Muslim policies. Russia and China censor and remove posts aimed at mobilizing social movements or expressing grievances against the government. Instagram (owned by Facebook) agreed to a Russian government request to block the website of opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny. (Troianovski 2018)

Social media platforms do not publish the rules for what content they deem inappropriate and what they will remove. Minority groups assert that there appear to be different standards in use for minority groups. For example, Facebook did not remove a Facebook post from a Louisiana Congressional Representative who called for identifying and killing all "radicalized" Muslims in the US, but removed a Facebook post and disabled the account of an African American activist who posted a comment noting that all white people are racist. (Angwin and Grassegger 2017)

- 38. Tolerating Gendered Online Harassment.** Female journalists and bloggers face an alarming amount of online abuse on all social media platforms, including threats of murder, rape, and violent attacks via email and comment sections. (Mijatović 2016) Amnesty International found that 1 in 5 women has experienced online abuse and threats, and that many report stress, anxiety, or panic attacks as a result of harmful online experiences. In 2017, the hashtag, #WomenBoycottTwitter aimed to expose how Twitter failed to apply its community standards and remove content including threats of rape and death to women using Twitter. (Amnesty International 2017)

The Sri Lankan Center for Policy Alternatives found in their research that Facebook pages include a culture of misogyny and impunity enjoyed by the often-anonymous perpetrators of online violence. This included frequent incidents of sexual harassment, non-consensual dissemination of intimate images and other forms of technology-related violence against women and girls that even when reported to Facebook, are not removed. (Center for Policy Alternatives 2018)

The University of Maryland found that those with female usernames in online chatrooms experienced threats 25 times more often than those with male or

ambiguous usernames. (Department of Mechanical Engineering 2006) The Pew Research Center found that while men more often reported less severe forms of harassment such as online name-calling and embarrassment, women overall were more concerned about online abuse, and young women reported more severe forms, including physical threats, posting of photoshopped pictures, sexual harassment, and stalking. (Dugan 2017)

39. Allowing Targeted Ads that Intentionally Exclude Specific Groups. Until 2017, white supremacist groups could sell Nazi merchandise or invite people to a white supremacy rally using Facebook's Custom Audiences while making sure that Jews would not see the advertisement. (Angwin, Varner and Tobin 2017) It remained possible in 2018 for advertisers to intentionally exclude specific groups, such as ethnic or racial minorities, or people over 50, in their advertisements for housing or jobs on Facebook, despite repeated promises and several lawsuits pressing the company to fix this problem. (Tobin 2018) Facebook promised to ensure that advertisers could not discriminate against legally protected minorities in the US immediately and stated that this promise would eventually be extended to other countries. (Perez 2018)

40. Treating Small Countries as Social Media Laboratories.

Facebook's "Free Basics" program provides Facebook access free of charge to those who cannot afford to buy internet service. But Free Basics offers a different version of Facebook than available in the US. In Cambodia, Bolivia, Sri Lanka, and other countries, the Facebook News Feed on Free Basics excludes stories from reputable news sources while allowing and amplifying fake news stories that people share with each other. This gives the public open access to disinformation but restricted access to accurate news sources. (Frenkel, Casey and Mozur 2018)

In a related Facebook experiment in response to public concern about fake news on its platform, Facebook redesigned its site by splitting its News Feeds. One tab allowed notes from friends and families. A separate tab allowed news stories from professional news groups. The change greatly reduced exposure to professional news. A Slovenian journalist wrote about this Facebook experiment, "By picking small countries with shaky democratic institutions to be experimental subjects, it is showing a cynical lack of concern for how its decisions affect the most vulnerable. (Dojcinovic 2017) Facebook decided to end the experiment after negative public feedback. (Ingram 2018)

41. Recruiting and Organizing for Violent Extremist Groups. Before social media, a terror group like ISIS had little opportunity to communicate or recruit members outside of their own community. ISIS invests heavily in recruiting new members and supporters on social media. On average, every day ISIS uses social media to share three videos, fifteen photographic reports, 90, and between 46,000 and 70,000 pro-ISIS twitter posts. (Radsch 2016, 5) White supremacists in the US, Germany and other countries also rely heavily on social media to recruit and organize. German white nationalist groups coordinate flash mob attacks on immigrants via posts on social media. (Bennhold 2018)

Extremist groups use well known social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, but they also use less well-known sites that allow anonymity, like Reddit, YouTube, 4chan, and 8chan.

Social media programs may profit from high traffic to controversial posts. In April 2018, Facebook testified to the US Congress that it was removing extremist content. But in July 2018, the Counter Extremism Project found that Facebook was not taking down material denying the Holocaust or promoting terrorism and violence against women. Analysts noted that extremist content is sometimes removed but that profit-generating extremist content is often left in place. (Counter Extremism Project 2018)

- 42. Calling for and Directing Violence.** In India, a rumor about child kidnappers spread on WhatsApp led to mob violence killing at least 29 people. When the government hired someone to counter the rumors to stop the killing, the crowds lynched him too. (Vij 2018) In Myanmar, pro-government, anti-Muslim Facebook accounts called for ethnic cleansing of the Muslim-minority Rohingya population, including boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses, a ban on interfaith marriages, and limits on rights of Muslims. Despite reports to Facebook complaining of these posts and asking for their removal before the explosion of violence against the Rohingya, Facebook initially did little to stem the tide of hate. (McKirdy 2018)

Social Media: Social and Political Goods vs Evils

Dante's *Inferno* defines *evil* as pride, envy, anger, laziness, greed, over-consumption, and lust. These evils undermine social and political goods. **Dante's list of evils reads like a litany of problems exacerbated by social media.** People use social media platforms to boost their ego (pride), compare themselves to others (envy), express outrage (anger), procrastinate work or real relationships (laziness), be bombarded with advertisements (greed and overconsumption), and share pornography (lust.) (Vaidhyathan 2018)

While social media holds the potential to support and expand social and political goods, it also has the potential to hijack democracy, polarize society, and concentrate wealth and access to power among an elite group at the expense of others. The Policy Recommendations found in the Executive Summary for this report lay out an agenda for civil society, government, and business to work together to address these challenges.

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