The Use of Social Media in Colombian Democratic Spaces: A Double-Edged Sword

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Abstract

The world is flooded with news of how social media is being used to influence democracy in conflict-affected areas, for better or worse. Colombia is not an exception. The era of social media brings opportunities and challenges to a broad range of stakeholders in this country, to harness the power of technological innovation to foster a more open and transparent democracy in the midst of conflict. This policy brief examines the positive and negative influence of social media in three cases: (i) the 2016 plebiscite about the endorsement of a peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla; (ii) the presidential elections of 2018; and (iii) the threats and crimes against social leaders since the peace agreement was signed. Based on the cases analysed, the document draws recommendations for different actors at the local, national and international levels, to both minimise the harm and maximise the good of using social media in Colombian democratic spaces.

1.   Introduction

'We invite the communities to cease their activities', stated the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*, a Colombian criminal gang, in voice notes and flyers distributed via WhatsApp and other social media channels.[2] The group was announcing an armed strike in several municipalities of Antioquia, Cordoba and Sucre by the end of March of 2016. The information spread quickly. During the days of the strike, the threatened towns seemed abandoned due to fear of retaliation from the armed group.[3] Since then, in many affected municipalities, the police have created alliances with civilians to use social media and mobile phones to enhance an early warning system to fight criminal groups;[4] this has allowed the authorities, for instance, to tackle false rumours of a new armed strike, spread via WhatsApp audios in August of 2016.[5]

The world is flooded with news of how social media is being used in conflict-affected areas, for better or worse. Colombia is not an exception. By January of 2019, Colombia had an Internet penetration of 68%, with an equal percentage of social media users who spent an average of three and a half hours per day in platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter.[6] Information and misinformation spread through these channels has helped shape many views, emotions, narratives, and decisions about pivotal internal political processes, such as the armed conflict, peace negotiations with armed groups and elections.

As the use of social media rises, so do the studies about its negative and positive impact on diverse democratic scenarios. For instance, at a global level, specialised research has analysed issues as varied as the spread of viral extremist misinformation on Instagram[7], user interaction with electoral junk news in Facebook and Twitter[8], the impact of YouTube's algorithm on radicalisation[9], and the use of social media channels to support collective

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[2] Revista Semana, "Clan Úsuga usa Twitter, Whatsapp y Facebook para causar terror", September 4, 2016, https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/clan-usuga-usa-twitter-whatsapp-y-facebook-para-causar-terror/468659.

[3] Verdad Abierta, "Zozobra en Urabá y Bajo Cauca por paro decretado por Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia", March 31, 2016, https://verdadabierta.com/zozobra-en-uraba-y-bajo-cauca-por-paro-decretado-por-autodefensas-gaitanistas-de-colombia/; El Espectador, "Paro Armado del Clan Úsuga se vivió en 36 municipios del país", April 1, 2016, Redacción Política, https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/paro-armado-del-clan-usuga-se-vivio-36-municipios-del-p-articulo-625021.

[4] Caracol Radio, "Desmienten supuesto paro armado: Desvirtúan anuncio de supuesto paro armado en apoyo a camioneros difundido por redes sociales", August 18, 2016, https://caracol.com.co/emisora/2016/08/18/sincelejo/1471556980_090782.html; Canal Montería Digital, "Cuéntele al comandante del CAI, Estrategia reactivada por la emisora de la Policía Nacional", 2017, http://www.canalmonteria.com/cuentele-al-comandante-del-cai-estrategia-reactivada-por-la-emisora-de-la-policia-nacional/.

[5] Andrés de Pablos, "El audio de WhatsApp que amenaza con un nuevo paro armado en Urabá", Pacifista, August 17, 2016, https://pacifista.tv/notas/el-audio-de-whatsapp-que-amenaza-con-un-nuevo-paro-armado-en-uraba/.

[6] Hootsuite and We Are Social, "Digital 2019: Colombia", 2019, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-colombia/.

[7] Taylor Lorenz, "Instagram is full of conspiracy theories and extremism", *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/instagram-is-the-internets-new-home-for-hate/585382/.

[8] Nahema Marchal et al., "Junk news during the EU parliamentary elections: Lessons from a seven-language study of Twitter and Facebook", Data Memo (Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2019).

[9] Kevin Roose, "The making of a YouTube radical", *The New York Times*, June 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html; Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, "How

action in authoritarian countries.[10] In Colombia, there is also a growing literature on the influence of the use of platforms such as WhatsApp[11], Facebook[12] and Twitter[13] on different internal political processes. Still, social media platforms move much faster than the scholarship produced, and there is plenty to learn and analyse about their effects on democracy.

This policy brief aims to contribute to the cited scholarship by analysing both crosscutting and distinct pearls and pitfalls of the use of social media in three specific democratic spaces in Colombia. The three cases are characteristic of mechanisms for, respectively, direct democracy, representative democracy and citizen and political participation in public matters. The first case is the 2016 plebiscite to endorse a peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrilla. The second case examines the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia. The last case explores the threats and crimes against social leaders since the peace agreement was signed. Based on the cases examined, the brief draws recommendations for conflict transformation in future similar Colombian democratic scenarios that may face analogous situations or even hazards yet to come.

As a methodological approach, the brief uses qualitative and quantitative data to examine the following overarching question in the three cases: What are the opportunities and challenges of the use of social media in the democratic spaces under examination? Primary and secondary documental data and social media records and statistics were analysed to answer the central query. Likewise, the preliminary results of the case studies and recommendations were discussed in a workshop held in Bogotá in August of 2019, with the support of Policéntrico and the Open Society Foundations. The participants gave valuable insights to complement the initial findings with collaborative critical perspectives that are included in this final version of the brief.

Given that Internet penetration is limited in certain municipalities of Colombia and to specific socio-economic sectors, especially in rural areas of the country, the analysis in this brief cannot be generalised to the areas and populations where there is a digital divide. Furthermore, more quantitative and qualitative studies, among others, of social media sentiment analysis, the spread of junk news and polarisation, are needed to understand the scope and range of how the use of specific social media platforms shaped democratic decision-making processes in the cases analysed. Hence, this brief only envisions to depict preliminary exploratory results to trigger a conversation and discuss possible recommendations.

The document is structured in three sections. After this introductory section that portrays the context, policy problem addressed, objective and methodological approach, section two

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YouTube radicalized Brazil", *The New York Times*, August 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/americas/youtube-brazil.html.

[10] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Online clustering, fear and uncertainty in Egypt's transition", *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): 1159–77.

[11] Carlos Cortés and José Peñarredonda, "Politics (on WhatsApp) is dynamic: Disinformation and the spread of political 'chains' in Colombia", (Bogotá: Linterna Verde and FLIP, 2018).

[12] Gladys Acosta, "Gestión de pasiones y polarización en las redes sociales. Un análisis del aplicativo grupos en Facebook", *Discurso & Sociedad* 6(4) (2012): 684–719.

[13] Andrés Marín and Jessica Quintero, "Confianza en el proceso de paz en Colombia en Twitter", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 80, no. 1 (2018): 115–37.

studies the positive and negative effects of the use of social media in the three selected cases. The third section includes a set of actionable policy recommendations for future cases. An annex at the end defines key terms used in this brief.

2.   The Influence of Social Media Use in Colombian Democratic Spaces

This section studies the influence of the use of social media in the three cases under examination. Although the three cases have distinct dynamics and characteristics, there are three cross-cutting elements found in all of them, that could contribute to the creation of patterns to devise future policies, strategies and recommendations to tackle the risks and capitalise on the beneficial effects. All three are interrelated. First, in all the cases social media helped to trigger and shape emotions of citizens with an influence on their decisions. Second, in the three cases, information and misinformation, spread through social media platforms, appeared to affect the political choices made by many citizens. Third, in the three events, online political polarisation was influenced by filter bubbles and echo chambers that fed polarisation.

The next paragraphs discuss in detail the mentioned effects and distinct dynamics of each case, by describing the unit of analysis, examining the social media platforms used and how they were used, and studying the positive and negative effects of the use of social media in the events observed.

2.1.   A battle of emotions: Social media use during the 2016 plebiscite to endorse the peace agreement with FARC-EP guerrilla

'We wanted people to vote while they were enraged', said Juan Carlos Vélez, the manager of the campaign against the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrilla, during an interview about the strategy of the 'no' movement in the plebiscite. Vélez explained that, during the campaign, they discovered the 'viral power of social media', which they used to trigger citizen's feelings against the agreement. When asked about why they used that strategy, he mentioned that the supporters of the agreement did the same.[14] In fact, many 'yes' campaigners also aimed to mobilise both positive and negative emotions to encourage citizens to vote in favour of the accord; while some campaigns boosted a message of hope towards the possibility of ending the war with FARC-EP, others tried to trigger fear of a war if the agreement was not endorsed.

The peace agreement between the Colombian Government and FARC-EP guerrilla was officially announced to the public on August 24, 2016, after four years of confidential negotiations between the parties in Havana, Cuba. The 297-page agreement aimed to end a fifty-year-old conflict with FARC-EP, the oldest standing guerrilla of the Americas, by reaching a consensus between the parties about issues at the core of the beginning, duration and end of the war. The topics settled included land reforms, mechanisms for direct and representative democratic participation of former combatants and traditionally marginalised

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[14] La República, "Estábamos buscando que la gente saliera a votar verraca": Juan C. Vélez, El Colombiano, October 6, 2016, https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/acuerdos-de-gobierno-y-farc/entrevista-a-juan-carlos-ve-lez-sobre-la-estrategia-de-la-campana-del-no-en-el-plebiscito-CE5116400.

populations, the conditions for a ceasefire and the process of reintegration of demobilised combatants, provisions to end illegal drug trade, transitional justice mechanisms to satisfy the rights of the victims, and measures to monitor, implement and endorse the agreement.

One of the conditions set in the agreement to trigger its implementation, was its public endorsement by Colombian citizens in a mechanism for direct participation called a *plebiscite*, an election summoned by the President to allow citizens to directly support or reject a decision of the executive power.[15] In this case, the question put for citizen consideration to vote on October 2, 2016, was a yes or no decision about the approval of the peace agreement with FARC-EP. It was a deeply contentious issue given that, during the four years of negotiations that led to the accord, a sector of society led by prominent political figures such as former president of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, was harshly opposed to the talks.

Social media played a pivotal role in shaping the emotions, perceptions and opinions of citizens during the peace process, the one-month campaigning period before the plebiscite was held, and the subsequent stage of renegotiations to settle a new accord. The fact that the peace talks were confidential, lengthy, and in Havana, made it easier for speculations to spread about the content of the agreement. Information and misinformation were easily scattered through a broad range of social media platforms. When the plebiscite was held, the emotions triggered by the content shared were so influential on the final results that Vladdo, a local caricaturist, sarcastically proposed to use Facebook's reactions on a new plebiscite's ballot as a way for citizens to express their views about the peace process. This is shown below in *Figure A*.

During the month that the campaign for and against the agreement lasted, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels were actively used by supporters and opponents to the accord.[16] They primarily used memes, pictures, hashtags, voice notes, texts and videos to express their views. Once the outcomes of the election were announced, these platforms were also keenly employed by a broad range of stakeholders to share opinions about the results and to pressure the negotiation and endorsement of a new accord. The days after the plebiscite was held also triggered a broad range of sentiments. The supporters of the agreement called this period the *plebitusa*, in English 'a plebiscite heartbreak'.[17]

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[15] In contrast, the referendums in Colombia are elections that can be activated by either public authorities or citizens for the people to approve or reject the creation of a new norm or the abolition of an already existing norm.

[16] *Cf.* Stephanie Salazar, "La conversación sobre el plebiscito de refrendación en las redes sociales", in *Medios de comunicación y plebiscito de refrendación de los acuerdos de paz* (MOE, 2017); Iván Ríos, Mónica Pérez, and Solbey Morillo, "La agenda setting en la red social Facebook: Campaña del plebiscito por la paz en Colombia", *Kepes* 15, no. 17 (2018).

[17] Deissy Perilla, "La Plebitusa: Movilización política de las emociones posplebiscito por la paz en Colombia", *Maguaré* 32, no. 2 (2018): 153–81.

Figure A.   Vladdo's cartoon proposal for a new plebiscite's ballot.

Source: Revista Semana nº 1799, 2016.[18]

2.1.1. Misinformation, covertness and polarisation at the verge of uncertainty

The years during which the peace process lasted were a time of great uncertainty for Colombians. Several failed dialogues preceded these talks, which had many ups and downs that, respectively, created both optimism and pessimism about the outcomes of the peace talks in Havana. When the final agreement was announced, and the campaign for and against its endorsement started, social media interactions on this issue increased.[19] Some of the exchanges caused three main harmful effects on democracy:

- **The discrete charm of junk news:** Some of the most prominent traits of the peace agreement were its complexity, technical language and extent.[20] This made it challenging for non-experts to grasp the scope and limits of the accord, which in turn fed the opportunity of spreading junk news about the agreement's content. Most of the misinformation shared included images of sports figures, singers and politicians with false messages supporting or rejecting the peace agreement.[21]

    Furthermore, some of the opposition's messages aimed to spark religious concerns about the deal, by claiming that it had an agenda called 'gender ideology'. In their view, this agenda aimed to change the role of men and women in society and give more rights to women and the LGTBI population, which they argued was opposed to their religious

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[18] Vladdo, *Nuevo lenguaje*, October 22, 2016, Vladdomanía, Revista Semana nº 1799, https://www.semana.com/caricaturas/articulo/vladdomania-edicion-1799/499709.

[19] Salazar, "La conversación sobre el plebiscito de refrendación en las redes sociales".

[20] Revista Semana, "El acuerdo para terminar la guerra", 2016, http://especiales.semana.com/acuerdo-para-la-paz/index.html.

[21] Laura Cerón, "Campaña sucia, uno de los males dentro del plebiscito por la paz", Universidad del Rosario, September 16, 2016, https://www.urosario.edu.co/Periodico-Nova-Et-Vetera/Analisis/Campana-sucia,-uno-de-los-males-dentro-del-Plebisc/.

beliefs.[22] Others intended to activate public fears about having FARC-EP combatants as political leaders or of the economic conditions decreasing due to FARC-EP's affiliation with communist political ideas, for instance comparing Colombia with Venezuela.

Some of these messages were featured both in online and offline scenarios, such as in the case of *Figure B*, which shows a billboard ad in the city of Santa Marta. The poster showcased a picture of Timochenko, FARC's main leader, claiming that a yes to the plebiscite would give him the chance to be Colombia's president with the support of Cuba and Venezuela. A picture of the advertisement was widely shared in a broad range of social media platforms.

Figure B.   Image shared on social media of a billboard claiming that Timochenko would become president if the plebiscite was endorsed.

Source: El Tiempo, 2016.[23]

- **Facing emotions with data and confrontation:** During both the agreement negotiation process and during the plebiscite campaign, the Colombian Government made numerous efforts to explain its content to the citizens. Some of these initiatives were spread in social media through videos[24], infographics[25] and hashtags to foster conversations, answer citizen's questions and encourage their support and campaigning in

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[22] Andrei Gómez-Suárez, *El triunfo del no: La paradoja emocional detrás del plebiscito* (Ícono, 2016).

[23] El Tiempo, "Centro Democrático no permite desmontar valla de 'Timochenko'", September 21, 2016, https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/valla-de-timochenko-presidente-en-santa-marta-34438

[24] See, for instance: Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *Acuerdos alcanzados en la Mesa de Conversaciones de La Habana*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lxwl81HvT3U; Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *¿Qué contiene el acuerdo solución al problema de las drogas ilícitas?*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpO3Sh0bKgs; Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *¿Qué dice el punto sobre participación política del Acuerdo de Paz?*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj6CeBDkU-4&t=1s.

[25] Some of the infographics can be seen in this webpage of the Government: Oficina del Alto Comisionado para

favour of the agreement.[26] Likewise, the Colombian Government, through its Office of the High Commissioner of Peace, led many educational campaigns to inform a broad range of populations about the peace process.

Most of the content shared was information intended to enlighten the public about the agreement. In only a few cases, such as in a video contrasting the experiences of the conflict between rural and urban adolescents, the information was also intended to trigger citizens' positive emotions.[27] In other cases, the use of social media by the Colombian Government boosted negative emotions towards the agreement by disseminating information that directly confronted the political opposition. This is the case, for instance, of the campaign *Mitos y Realidades sobre el Proceso de Paz* (Myths and Realities about the Peace Process), shown in *Figure* C. This initiative used tweets of members of the political opposition, such as former presidential candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga, and labelled them as myths.

Another governmental campaign used videos that featured the story of a cartoon character called 'Inocencio' (equivalent to Mr. Naive), who was angry with news he received on social media about the peace process. The messages echoed some of the oppositions' social media content about the process, such as a common idea known as 'peace without impunity', that opposed legal immunity for demobilised combatants. In the videos, a friend of Inocencio communicated to him that the news was false and that he needed to stop being 'naive' by believing in them, given that the members of FARC-EP would be prosecuted.[28]

Social media was a powerful method to communicate with citizens during the peace process. Still, the use of social media by the Colombian Government before and after the plebiscite show a mainly reactive instead of proactive approach, based mostly on rational arguments that were not enough to understand, build trust, inform and mobilise public opinion in favour of the agreement. This confrontational strategy sometimes even increased the distrust towards the accord.[29]

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la Paz, "Todo lo que necesita saber sobre el Acuerdo de Paz", 2018, http://www.altocomisionadoparala-paz.gov.co/herramientas/Paginas/Todo-lo-que-necesita-saber-sobre-el-proceso-de-paz.aspx.

[26] This was the case, for example, of the campaign #AcuerdoDePaz. Cf. Urna de Cristal, "Informe de la campaña #AcuerdoDePaz" (Presidencia de la República, 2016), https://estrategia.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/623/articles-51941_archivo_04.pdf.

[27] Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *La paz está en nuestras manos*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCA8nJ3YhOc.

[28] Presidencia de la República, *Guerrilleros sí serán juzgados según lo acordado en el proceso de paz #Inocencio*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcp-YHtMLZ8.

[29] Salazar, "La conversación sobre el plebiscito de refrendación en las redes sociales".

Figure C.   Example of messages spread in the campaign *Myths and Realities about the Peace Process.*

Source: www.mitosyrealidades.co, 2015.

- **Running to the extremes:** In Colombia, polarisation towards the peace process with FARC-EP has been a determinant issue in direct and representative democratic elections since 2014. In the presidential elections of 2014, the main topic of debate between the leading candidates was the peace process. In those elections, former president Juan Manuel Santos was re-elected with 50.98% of the votes with the promise of continuing the talks, against a turnout of 44.98% in favour of Óscar Iván Zuluaga, who opposed the negotiations led by Santos. In the 2016 plebiscite to endorse the peace agreement, the opponents had 50.21% of the votes, whereas the supporters 49.78% of them. The presidential elections of 2018 show a similar trend. Iván Duque, the candidate of the right and current president of Colombia, won with 53.98% of the votes, whereas Gustavo Petro, the contender of the left, had a turnout of 41.81%.

Echo chambers and filter bubbles during the peace process and plebiscite fostered online polarisation. In these cases, junk news spread through social media both for and against the agreement, creating a mix of emotions that triggered citizens to share the content in their networks. The content shared, in turn, fed the algorithms that determined what they saw in their social media platforms. In many cases, the filter bubbles gave citizens the impression that the reality was the news they were consuming online,

which they discussed with like-minded or extremely opposed people, which nurtured polarisation.[30]

2.1.2. Knowledge, deliberation and action to end the conflict with the FARC-EP guerrilla

Not all the use of social media was harmful. There are also three examples of beneficial uses of social media during the peace plebiscite:

- **Increased information and reach of the content:** Amid the debates about the meaning of some of the settlements reached by the parties, a broad range of initiatives led by civil society flourished in social media, to inform the population about the agreement. The strategies ranged from WhatsApp and Facebook groups with experts to answer questions about the deal, to images with short messages that included basic information about the accord.[31] One example was the initiative 297p, led by the rock band Rompefuego, which live-streamed videos of collective sessions to read and discuss the accord's content. These initiatives were mainly run by citizens concerned with more people knowing the facts about the decision that Colombians had to make in the plebiscite.

- **Fostering dialogue and reconciliation between citizens with different views:** A broad range of social media initiatives encouraging dialogue and reconciliation also emerged during the campaigning days before the plebiscite vote and after the results were announced. These strategies aimed to boost informed discussions about the peace process, while encouraging empathy and respect between citizens with diverse opinions. For instance, the project *Diálogos Itinerantes de Paz* (Itinerant Peace Dialogues), used songs to encourage conversations about the peace agreement in the municipality of Suárez, Cauca.[32] This type of initiative helped to confront polarisation and showcase content that could, to some point, ameliorate the adverse effects of the echo chambers and filter bubbles.

- **Triggering citizen participation and mobilisation:** For the agreement to be endorsed in the plebiscite, the 'yes' ballots not only had to attain a majority, but the people who voted in favour had to surpass 13% of the electoral roll. This was a high bet, given that usually abstention in Colombia exceeds 50% for elections of representative democracy, and it is even higher in mechanisms of direct democracy. For instance, a public consultation held in 2018 in Colombia to fight corruption had a turnout of only 32%. Although 99% of the voters endorsed the measures, the consultation was not approved because it required 33.3% of the voter turnout to be officially accepted.

  The risk of abstention was so high, that before deciding on initiating the plebiscite the Congress approved a reform changing its rules regarding voter turnout. The original

[30] William Rincón, "Redes sociales en el plebiscito: El fenómeno del yo con yo", *Revista Semana*, October 4, 2016, https://www.semana.com/tecnologia/articulo/plebiscito-por-la-paz-la-burbuja-de-las-redes-sociales/497814; Salazar, "La conversación sobre el plebiscito de refrendación en las redes sociales".

[31] Camilo Quiroga, "Los lazarillos ciudadanos para el plebiscito", *La Silla Vacía*, October 13, 2016, https://lasilla-vacia.com/historia/los-lazarillos-ciudadanos-para-el-plebiscito-57931.

[32] Mary Díaz, *Diálogos itinerantes de paz*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAox27x65fA.

rule ordered that plebiscites could only be valid if more than 50% of the electoral roll voted, either with a yes or a no. The new law lowered the requirement, to allow the results of the peace plebiscite to be valid if more than 13% of the electoral role voted yes. At the end of the day, the voter turnout in the plebiscite was only 37.43% of the electoral roll, but 18% of those voters cast their vote in favour of the agreement, making the election binding. Although the abstention was high, initiatives in social media that encouraged citizens to vote and to participate in democracy helped to boost citizen participation in the plebiscite's elections. This is the case, for instance, in the campaign *#ColombiaSeAbraza* (in English #AHugforColombia), that included messages of reconciliation to encourage young adults to vote.

Once the results of the plebiscite were announced, citizens both in favour and against the agreement used social media to pressure the parties to renegotiate the deal. Some of these initiatives included massive country-wide demonstrations organised on WhatsApp and Facebook groups.[33] The pressure appeared to be effective. A new deal was signed by the parties on November 24, 2016 and endorsed by the Colombian Congress on November 30, 2016. After the agreement was endorsed, new citizen-led initiatives emerged in Colombia to monitor, support and oppose its implementation with the use of social media.

2.2.   New media, new political campaigning: The Colombian presidential elections of 2018

In 2018, Colombia held three distinct pivotal representative elections that, for the first time in history, featured FARC as a political party. In March of 2018, Colombian citizens voted for representatives in Congress. In May of 2018, the first round of the national presidential election was held and five candidates from various parties competed for the presidency. In June of 2018, a second round of the presidential election took place between Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro, the two candidates who obtained the majority of the votes in the first-round election of May of 2018.

As the use of social media increases, so does the capacity of political candidates to use social media platforms in favour of their political campaigns. Since 2010, parallel to an increased scepticismtowards traditional media, Colombia has seen a growth in the employment of social media platforms to influence the elections for all the different positions of representative democracy available in the country. During the 2018 democratic elections, messages spread through WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, shared content that aimed to influence people's decisions at the polls. This second case study analyses the positive and negative influence of social media on the Colombian presidential elections of 2018.

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[33] Perilla, "La plebitusa: Movilización política de las emociones posplebiscito por la paz en Colombia".

2.2.1. Junk news and breaches to rights in the midst of polarisation

The political polarisation that Colombia experienced during the peace process and plebiscite continued during the 2018 presidential elections. Polarisation in favour and against the final agreement proved to be a successful electoral strategy in the previous elections. Thus, exploiting this division became a signature feature of many 2018 presidential campaigns. In this divided political arena, social media use encouraged two practices harmful to democracy, given that they deceived citizen's freedom of choice.

- **A war of misinformation:** Similar to the spread of junk news during the plebiscite's campaign, the 2018 presidential elections also featured a broad range of false viral content that was shared through different social media channels. It is difficult to measure the impact of how this content actually influenced people's votes in favour or against specific candidates. Still, as Cortés and Peñarredonda assert in a study on junk news spread though WhatsApp, although in some cases people are reluctant to share this kind of content, the distribution of these messages in closed elections could mobilise the vote of a good enough number of people to decisively change the electoral results.[34] Furthermore, junk news was shared not only in WhatsApp; other social media platforms were also employed to spread this content.

  Hernández et al. identified four distinct citizen reactions when receiving junk news during these elections. First, citizens receive junk news and accept it as true, even if they later see content that disproves it. Second, users eliminate content shared which spreads junk news once they learn it is false, but do not explain to their networks why the message was erased. Third, a minority of users share with their networks the reasons why the junk news received is false. Lastly, a majority of users due to filter bubbles and echo chambers never receive information discrediting the junk news received.[35]

  Some of the junk news spread during the elections included false content about the candidates' policies. Likewise, certain junk news untruthfully warned that the pens provided in the voting polls had an erasable ink to ease changing the ballots' results, while others portrayed a supposed affiliation of the candidates with illegal groups.[36] For instance, an altered viral photo spread in several platforms gave the impression of former FARC-EP guerrilla members supporting the presidential candidate Gustavo Petro.[37] This diverse range of junk news spread through echo chambers shaped by filter

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[34] Cortés and Peñarredonda, "Politics (on WhatsApp) is dynamic: Disinformation and the spread of political 'chains' in Colombia", 20-21.

[35] Fabián Hernández et al., "Impacto de las redes sociales en el proceso electoral colombiano", in *Medios de comunicación, redes sociales y democracia: Elecciones presidenciales y legislativas 2018* (MOE, 2018), 33.

[36] Carlos González, "El top de las noticias falsas sobre elecciones para la Registraduría", *ColombiaCheck* (blog), 2018, https://colombiacheck.com/chequeos/el-top-de-las-noticias-falsas-sobre-elecciones-para-la-registraduria.

[37] El Tiempo, "Las noticias falsas que circularon durante la jornada electoral", June 17, 2018, https://www.eltiempo.com/elecciones-colombia-2018/jurados-y-votantes/fake-news-difundidas-durante-la-segunda-vuelta-presidencial-231116.

bubbles, triggering citizen's emotions, fostering polarisation and influencing their democratic decisions.

Given that junk news is easy to disseminate in social media, tackling its effects is lengthy and complex. In fact, as Hernández et al. show, during the 2018 electoral campaigns, it usually took from two to four days for the messages to be verified and confronted. Still, more often than not, the online communities that shared the junk news were not connected with the ones that disproved it, challenging the capacity to contest it.[38] This made it difficult for some citizens to distinguish true from false or deceitful information, ultimately affecting the population's capacity to make an informed choice.

- **Possible transgressions to rights:** A second significant harmful effect of social media employment during the 2018 presidential elections relates to three kinds of potential breaches to rights, both of the electorate and the candidates during the campaigning and elections. First, in many cases the content of the junk news accused the candidates of committing crimes or being associated with criminal activities.[39] Hence, the first kind of possible rights' breach aligns with an infringement of rights related to the good name, personal integrity and reputation of the candidates.

  A second feasible infringement of rights relates to the data privacy of the voters. As Peñaredonda argues, many 2018 electoral campaigns used personal data of the Colombian citizens obtained though Facebook and website tracking tools, to advertise in favour of certain candidates without explicit consent and using websites vulnerable to security risks.[40] Although there are several denouncements of data rights infringements during the 2018 electoral campaigns, the scope of the possible breaches is yet unknown.[41] As in the case of Cambridge Analytica, in many cases the citizens did not have information on how the campaigns obtained and used their data. Still, in 2018 the Colombian Data Protection Agency blocked the services of the application Pig.gi, while it investigated claims of Facebook data breaches against Colombian citizens.[42]

  Ultimately, this contravened the personal integrity of the candidates and the data privacy of the citizens in a polarised context where junk news designed to manipulate people's opinions is the new norm. This situation sparks questions about infringements on the rights to freedom of information and choice of citizens whose perceptions were affected due to the mentioned mix. The scenario is even more complicated considering that, in many cases, the campaigns have not disclosed data about how they used digital publicity.

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[38] Hernández et al., "Impacto de las redes sociales en el proceso electoral colombiano", 29–32.

[39] Hernández et al., "Impacto de las redes sociales en el proceso electoral colombiano", 27-28.

[40] José Peñarredonda, "Elecciones y datos personales, un estudio de las elecciones legislativas de 2018" (Fundación Karisma and Tactical Technology Collective, 2018), 12-17.

[41] MOE, "Irregularidades electorales en Colombia: Informe final *Pilas con el Voto* elecciones presidencia y Congreso 2018" (Bogotá: MOE, 2018), 59-61.

[42] Superintendencia de Industria y Comercio, "Como medida preventiva, Superindustria ordena bloqueo de aplicación Pig.Gi", March 28, 2018, https://www.sic.gov.co/noticias/como-medida-preventiva-superindustria-ordena-bloqueo-de-aplicacion-pig-gi-por-su-aparente-vinculacion-con-posible-tratamiento-ilegal-de-datos-personales-de-colombianos.

2.2.2. Increased citizen oversight, awareness and participation in democracy

Despite the harmful uses of social media during the 2018 presidential elections, social media also had positive effects. For instance, social media allowed citizens to have debates and discussions about the candidates. Furthermore, several civil society organisations led initiatives to help the voters understand and compare available political proposals. Two main benefits of social media on democracy are distinct in this case study:

- **Fighting social media with social media:** Building on the lessons learned about social media use during the plebiscite, the 2018 presidential elections featured a broad range of initiatives led by both civil society and State agencies, to use social media platforms to tackle adverse effects of its use. Two main actions stand out. First, projects aimed at fact-checking junk news spread on social media. Some of the pioneer projects about this issue were led by La Silla Vacía and ColombiaCheck.[43] This example was also followed by the Colombian National Civil Registry, which is the authority in charge of guaranteeing the transparency and functioning of the national electoral processes.[44]

  Second, initiatives to use social media as a means for citizens to denounce possible criminal activities during the elections also arose. This is the case of the campaign *Pilas con el Voto* (Mind Your Vote), run by the NGO MOE, as a space for citizens to report electoral irregularities. For the 2018 presidential elections, the MOE received 2119 cases of possible breaches from all the national territory.[45] Bogotá was the city with the most complaints, with 347.

- **A date with democracy:** One of the main consequences of the combination of polarisation, junk news and emotions activated during the 2018 presidential elections, was a low quality of democratic debate about the policies that the candidates were proposing. A broad range of initiatives emerged to inform citizens about the candidate's proposals to encourage their participation beyond the vote. One of them was *CandiDater*, a web-based platform ran by Vice Colombia. The project informed voters about which candidates were more aligned with their political views based on a tinder-like questionnaire.[46]

  Another example is *Si Fuera Presidente* (If I Were President), a digital platform created by Seamos and Change.org, to allow citizens to make proposals for candidates to include in their policy programmes.[47] *Alo Por Favor Colombia* (Hello, May I speak With Colombia?), was a similar citizen-led digital strategy spread through social media, that

[43] Pablo Medina, "In Colombia, a WhatsApp campaign against *posverdad*", 2018, https://wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/the-disinformation-age/in-colombia-a-whatsapp-campaign-against-posverdad/; ColombiaCheck, "Sobre Nosotros | ColombiaCheck", 2019, https://colombiacheck.com/sobre-nosotros.

[44] Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, "Reporte de noticias falsas", 2018, https://www.registraduria.gov.co/-Redes-Sociales,4329-.html.

[45] MOE, "Irregularidades electorales en Colombia: Informe final *Pilas con el Voto* elecciones Presidencia y Congreso 2018", 37.

[46] Vice Colombia, "Todo lo que debes saber sobre CANDIDATER", *Vice* (blog), April 10, 2018, https://www.vice.com/es_co/article/a3ynd8/sobre-candidater.

[47] ¡Pacifista!, "'Si Fuera Presidente': una plataforma para influenciar a los candidatos", May 21, 2018, https://pacifista.tv/notas/si-fuera-presidente-una-plataforma-para-influenciar-a-los-candidatos/.

committed presidential candidates to have one-to-one, ten-minute public conversations with citizens participating in the project.[48]

2.3.   Threats and crimes against social and political leaders since the signature of the peace agreement

The exclusion of social and political leaders in democratic spaces through threats and crimes has been a constant in the Colombian conflict for decades. In many cases, criminal groups act against the leaders as a way of exercising power over the whole group. Since the signature of the peace agreement with FARC-EP guerrilla in 2016, the menaces and offences against these individuals have increased, given territorial, economic and power disputes between different gangs that want to control the areas left with a vacuum of power by the demobilised combatants.

Given a broad range of difficulties in the process of data gathering, there are differences in the existing databases regarding the exact number of leaders threatened, attacked and murdered since 2016 in Colombia. However, the studies agree that the threats and attacks against leaders increase during pre- and post-electoral periods.[49] This has been the case for the current electoral year, starting on October 27, 2018, and running up to the local elections of mayors, governors, councillors and other regional electoral positions on October 27, 2019.

For instance, according to MOE, since October 27, 2018, and until August 27, 2019, there were 364 cases of violence against social and political leaders in Colombia. From this number, 91 people were killed. The number of crimes has increased since July 27, 2019, when the period for citizens to register as candidates in the elections ended.[50] Although in many cases the authors of the crimes are unknown, most of the time the offences are committed by paramilitary groups, followed by guerrillas, non-identifiable criminal gangs and even some military members.[51]

The State has reacted by prosecuting some of the cases, providing protection to some of the victims, giving some visibility to the phenomenon and creating a stronger regulatory framework for the protection of social and political leaders. Nevertheless, the State-led efforts have not been enough to tackle this pervasive issue that threatens the core basis of democracy in Colombia. In this scenario, social media use has influenced both the protection and threats of social and political leaders. This is examined in the next subsections.

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[48] Aló, ¿por favor Colombia?, "Aló, ¿por Favor Colombia?", 2018, https://www.aloporfavorcolombia.com/.

[49] Patrick Ball, César Rodríguez, and Valentina Rozo, "Asesinatos de líderes sociales en Colombia en 2016–2017: Una estimación del universo", 2018; CCJ, IEPRI, and AECID, *¿Cuáles son los patrones? Asesinatos de líderes sociales en el post acuerdo*, 2018, http://iepri.unal.edu.co/fileadmin/user_upload/iepri_content/boletin/patrones6.pdf; Carlos Guevara, "Panorama de las personas defensoras de derechos humanos y líderes sociales en riesgo en Colombia, 2018 - 2019" (Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz – CAPAZ, 2019).

[50] MOE, "Informe sobre violencia política desde el inicio del calendario electoral" (MOE, 2019).

[51] CCJ, IEPRI, and AECID, *¿Cuáles son los patrones? Asesinatos de líderes sociales en el post acuerdo*, 29-55.

2.3.1. Online intimidation and massification of the terror

Offline methods, such as the use of paper pamphlets, have been used broadly to spread threats and fear in Colombia. Social media has allowed the amplification of these mechanisms and created new means to create pressure and disseminate terror. Two main situations are identified:

- **New media, new threats:** The first scenario of harmful use of social media has to do with the emergence of new sources of risk for political and social leaders. With the rise of social media, the digital data of social and political leaders has become a dangerous source of information that allows criminals to identify, follow and threaten their victims more effectively. Moreover, sometimes digital devices with GPS systems given to victims by the State to enhance their protection have been infiltrated by illegal groups to monitor their moves and spy on their conversations.[52] In other cases, the digital information of journalists and human rights defenders to make visible the threats against social leaders has been stolen.[53] These perils have also encouraged self-censorship.

- **Massive spread of fear:** Anonymous content disseminated through social media can, in seconds, spread threats and rumours against social and political leaders. The threats affect the safety of leaders, and also create a general alarm in their families and communities.

2.3.2. Support, visibility and defence

Social media employment has also been a valuable source to provide support to social leaders, amplify their messages and sufferings and create mechanisms to prevent crimes against them. Two categories are distinctive:

- **A leader in my place:** Since 2018, a broad range of citizen-led social media strategies have arisen, aimed at supporting social leaders. These initiatives have mostly emerged in Colombia's biggest cities. Some projects' ambition is to expose the urgency to protect the leaders and to pressure the State to take further measures to tackle the situation. This is the case, for example, for demonstrations organised through social media.
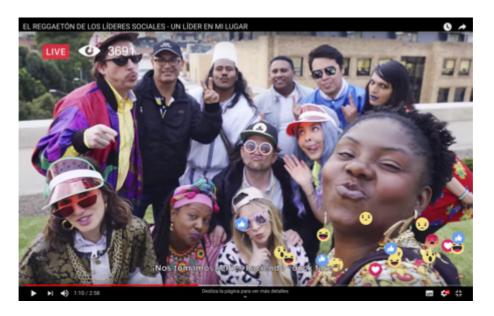
  Other initiatives aim to amplify the messages and voices of the civic leaders, which have been indifferent to a broad range of citizens in the country who are not directly affected by violence. For instance, the campaign #*UnLíderEnMiLugar* (#ALeaderInMyPlace), has inspired journalists, influencers and TV hosts to offer their platforms for leaders to speak about their situation. A video on the YouTube channel of Daniel Samper Ospina, who created the initiative, sparked the actions by gathering civic leaders and social

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[52] CCJ, IEPRI, and AECID, p. 189.

[53] Redacción Colombia2020, "Están robando información a los periodistas que cubren el conflicto", *El Espectador*, September 10, 2018, https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/pais/estan-robando-informacion-los-periodistas-que-cubren-el-conflicto-articulo-857126.

media influencers in a music video denouncing the threats and crimes against the leaders. 'Perhaps you will see them if they are digital', were some of the song's lyrics, entitled 'The reggaeton of the social leaders'. *Figure* D shows an image of the video.

Figure D.   Image from the video 'The reggaeton of the social leaders'.

Source: Daniel Samper, 2019.[54]

- **New mechanisms of protection:** Social media has also been used by the civil society to trigger strategies to prevent the crimes against social leaders. In some cases, hashtags such as #MiPecadoFueSerLíderSocial (#MySinWasToBeASocialLeader) in social media platforms are used to make visible menaces against the leaders. In others, web-based applications such as Colidérate (Let's Lead Together), provide options to alert close networks if a security breach is taking place and provide information for leaders about how to handle the risk and report threats to authorities.

3.   Conclusions and Recommendations

This brief presented an exploratory analysis of how social media use has positively and negatively influenced Colombian democracy in three cases. The beneficial and harmful effects portrayed spark several questions about the nature of democracy in the era of social media. The uses examined also show that, although emotions, viralisation of the content, polarisation and collaborative approaches converge in the different situations analysed, the employment of social media in democratic scenarios is dynamic.[55] This means that the risks and safeguards continuously change and there are more yet to come, such as the spread of

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[54]   Daniel   Samper,   *El   reggaetón   de   los   líderes   sociales*,   #HolaSoyDanny,   2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZORIqVo_RL4.

[55] *Cf.* Cortés and Peñarredonda, "Politics (on WhatsApp) is dynamic: Disinformation and the spread of political 'chains' in Colombia".

deepfake videos of political candidates or the creation of collaborative initiatives that mix AI systems with human moderation to tackle junk news more quickly and effectively.[56]

More research is needed to enrich the results presented in this brief. Still, the findings are used in this concluding section to offer evidence-based and actionable policy recommendations for civil society organisations, State agencies, tech companies, and international cooperation, to minimise the harms and maximise the goods of social media use in Colombian democratic spaces.

3.1.   Adopt a multi-stakeholder strategy to approach social media use

One of the main lessons in the different cases analysed, is that there is not a silver bullet initiative that a unique stakeholder can implement, once and for all, to unleash the power of social media to foster a more open and transparent democracy amid the Colombian conflict. In contrast, there is a need for a collaborative multi-stakeholder coordinated strategy that gathers different actors to implement a diverse set of projects with the same overarching objective.

There are many examples in Colombia of how this collaborative approach can help devise ideas and strategies to cope with the challenges that social media poses to democracy, while harnessing its power to enhance democratic processes. To name one case, RedCheq, a network of a diverse set of allies led by ColombiaCheck, was launched in 2019 to examine the veracity of junk news spread in social media platforms during the Colombian regional elections.[57]

Likewise, during the 2018 elections, many presidential candidates signed an ethical agreement led by the National Council of Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence, a multi-actor advisory commission. The deal obliged the candidates to condemn violence against the other contenders and use social media responsibly and with tolerance, and to encourage their supporters to do the same. A study of MOE shows that this strategy appeared to be effective in tackling hate speech during the elections, with a decrease in hate conversations after the pact was signed.[58]

Similar deals, both against fake news and political violence during the elections, have been endorsed by diverse candidates, civil society organisations and State institutions for the 2019 electoral campaigns. Still, there are many more multi-actor joint and collaborative efforts needed. Some actionable recommendations for these kinds of initiatives include:

- **Increase actions to tackle online polarisation and junk news during non-electoral periods:** The effect of misinformation, breaches of data privacy, polarisation

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[56] Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deep fakes: A looming challenge for privacy, democracy, and national security", *California Law Review*, no. 107 (2019); Gianluca Demartini, "Users (and their bias) are key to fighting fake news on Facebook – AI isn't smart enough yet", The Conversation, September 22, 2019, http://theconversation.com/users-and-their-bias-are-key-to-fighting-fake-news-on-facebook-ai-isnt-smart-enough-yet-123767.

[57] RedCheq, "¡Nace RedCheq!", ColombiaCheck, 2019, https://colombiacheck.com/investigaciones/nace-redcheq.

[58] Hernández et al., "Impacto de las redes sociales en el proceso electoral colombiano", 22.

and crimes and threats against leaders is much more pervasive during electoral periods. However, this influence builds on polarisation and hate speech nurtured during non-electoral times. Hence, it is recommended to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to boost actions to commit different actors, not only candidates, to foster a transparent use of data, fight against junk news and hate speech and condemn violence against social and political leaders in non-electoral times.

Although it has proven effective that political leaders sign deals committing to condemn junk news and violence during elections, inviting citizens to also endorse these pacts and committing to everyday easy actions to tackle harmful use of social media, could be even more effective and create further awareness around the situation. Some of the activities could include verifying the source, date and information of content received in social media before spreading it, and creating social sanctions to political leaders when engaged in hate speech, such as unfollowing their accounts.

- **Create multi-actor networks of protection, support and monitoring of threats:** One of the cases examined that particularly needs a cooperative strategy between different stakeholders is the protection of social and political leaders. Initiatives such as a collaborative platform to report threats and crimes against social leaders could help surpass the current challenges regarding the availability of data about the cases. Likewise, the creation of networks of protection supported by social media platforms to coordinate citizens, civil society organisations and State institutions on an early warning system could help prevent the materialisation of some menaces.

- **Address collective emotions:** A cross-cutting issue in the three examined cases is the power of emotions to shape public opinion and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, there is not yet a public multi-stakeholder conversation and policy in Colombia on how to handle the influence of emotions on democracy. There is a need for collaborative approaches, to help address emotions that may lead to polarisation, such as fear, hate, intolerance and anxiety, all very common in the Colombian context due to the conflict. This may include, for instance, policies led by State agencies educating people on how to handle these emotions, supported by citizen-led arts-based, behavioural and cultural projects that help communities to address trauma, understand and manage collective emotions and foster reconciliation.

3.2.   Harness the power of civil society

In the Colombian democratic system, the ultimate source of power is the people. Yet, although there is a vibrant conversation in the country about political innovation and digital democracy, civil society initiatives on the use of social media to support democracy are still scarce and atomised. The following recommendations are suggested to support civil society's efforts on social media and democracy:

- **Think and act collaboratively:** As is the case with a multi-stakeholder approach, citizen-led digital democracy projects have a more significant impact when they are implemented between several organisations. This may be a challenge, given diverse

agendas, competition for resources and transactional costs on partnership management. Still, the fruits in the long-term could pay off the short-term caveats. Initiatives that might be particularly useful if several organisations lead them are the ones intended to tackle filter bubbles and echo chambers when the alliance is comprised by individuals of diverse and even opposed views, that come together to engage in online dialogues and spread content to depolarise digital spaces. These kind of initiatives led solely by the civil society organisations could be helpful in contexts where other actors such as State agencies are not trusted.

- **Do not preach to the choir:** During the plebiscite's campaigns, a common difficulty faced by many citizen-led social media initiatives was that they did not reach people with different views. It is recommended to adopt a user-centred design approach when devising digital democracy projects, to understand better the audiences the initiative should reach and how to reach them.

- **Pursue new sources of finance:** A common challenge to civil society initiatives intended to enhance social media use is to secure economic support. Often, digital projects need a pilot stage that requires seed capital before producing any impact. This is usually not aligned with many grants and funding opportunities available, which typically want to support already proven ideas. The situation is even more difficult considering that, more often than not, this kind of initiative does not produce revenue, so relies on external sponsorship to happen and sustain in time. Nevertheless, this could create an opportunity for organisations to find creative ways to finance the initiatives and even make them self-sustainable. For instance, one of the issues discussed during the workshop was the need for informing citizens about the legal risks and consequences of hate speech and their data privacy rights. This may be a prosperous scenario for generating consultancy offline and online services to educate citizens and enterprises about their rights, duties, legal consequences and possible actions.

- **Partner with academia:** Academia has a strategic role to play in studying, analysing and theorising the way social media is changing democracy, so as to devise and implement specific evidence-based policies and educational strategies. Hence, it is suggested to nurture partnerships between civil society and academia in projects that use participatory action research to help address challenges on the use of social media in democratic scenarios, while engaging in processes of critical thinking and reflection on the situations being dealt with and the approaches used. These collaborations should also consider that the language of academic publications in many cases differs from the one used by policy-makers, civil society organisations or international cooperation. Consequently, it is recommended that academics increase the creation of information targeted to a broad range of audiences so they can apply more effectively the insights produced in academia.

3.3.   Encourage State action beyond regulation

Regulation is usually a suspect word in Colombia whenever State action is discussed. However, in the world of the Internet, that word often raises many eyebrows because it usually involves limiting the right to freedom of speech or means prohibiting conducts that

are difficult to enforce. This section proposes recommendations for State agencies to implement or complement already existing norms or devise policies to attain a stronger impact of the current measures:

- **Increase the prosecution of online offences:** The first recommendation is strongly related to a question about *what reality is*. In many cases, it is common to find a view that the digital world is separated from the offline one, as if a citizen could have both a digital and an analogue persona. In the words of a participant of the workshop: 'The crimes committed in social media platforms do not lose their capacity of being crimes just because there are carried out in the digital sphere. Digital impunity needs to stop'. For State action, this means that there should be a stronger effort from Colombian agencies to enforce already existing rules for offline scenarios in offences related to the use of social media. For instance, by increasing the prosecution of online hate speech, murder menaces, and breaches to the regulation on campaign publicity for electoral candidates, such as paying influencers for promoting a candidate without disclosing the information about the disbursement.

- **Enforce data protection policies:** The biggest asset in social media is personal data. There are many current State efforts and regulations to protect the data rights of the citizens, such as the 2012 Law on Data Privacy and the prosecution of complaints against candidates for breaching citizens' data rights. Still, in many cases, the actions are not enough, and the citizens don't even know their rights, while the lawbreakers are not dissuaded nor punished. Therefore, it is recommended that the State implements more efforts to increase public literacy on data rights and quick reactions to investigate and sanction the wrongdoers.

- **Educate for digital democracy:** The public educational policies in Colombia need to address more effectively the challenges of social media use for democracy. Many citizens do not know how the Internet works, nor how the echo chambers are produced or how filter bubbles shape their preferences. Furthermore, the digital divide is still very high in the country. Thus, when many Colombians are introduced to social media, they do not have enough data literacy to understand the role of algorithms, artificial intelligence or junk news, so they can be easily deceived with disinformation. This creates a pivotal burden on the State, to make sure that the educational system, inside and outside classes and for younger and older populations, prepare individuals to understand social media and make responsible decisions on how to use it.

3.4.   Nurture socially-responsible tech companies

Social media is the product of a broad range of tech enterprises that offer services that allow people to communicate more effectively. The way these corporations have shaped online algorithms, data privacy policies and strategies to attract users and increase the employment of their products has also influenced some of the beneficial and harmful effects of social media in the cases analysed. Social media companies could help to positively influence democracy if they:

- **Increase transparency:** Just recently, and due to severe breaches of data security, social media companies have started to create and implement rigorous data privacy policies. Yet, there is a necessity to increase transparency on how companies collect, store, use and share the data collected from users. Moreover, the terms and conditions of social media platforms are usually lengthy and complex. A broad range of users do not understand or even read them. There is a need for companies to educate their users on the obligations and rights of employing their products, so they can understand what they are accepting when they sign the terms and conditions.

- **Understand and address the effects of social media use on democracy:** Companies also have a responsibility in researching, understanding, managing, mitigating and sharing the knowledge acquired about the risks that the use of their products may imply for democracy. Therefore, they should invest more in researching how their products affect democratic decisions and educating the public on their findings so more responsible use of social media is nurtured.

3.5.   Increase the international support to domestic and global concerns

Many challenges to democracy from social media use, such as junk news and polarisation, are being experienced in many countries worldwide. International cooperation is an important ally to tackle these difficulties. The following proposals are recommended for this type of actor:

- **Foster more spaces to share best practices and lessons learned:** Given that every country has distinct dynamics and particularities, there shouldn't be a cookie-cutter strategy on how to handle social media use in democratic spaces. However, there are many innovative approaches to manage the situation that could provide insightful perspectives to other cases, such as the use of online bots in the United States to decrease online polarisation.[59] International cooperation should foster more spaces to share lessons and best practices between different stakeholders and countries.

- **Rise strategic finance:** As previously mentioned, financing initiatives on social media and democracy is key to advancing understanding of the diverse phenomena about this issue and devise evidence-based strategies. Thus, it is recommended to increase the strategic finance of international donors for projects that address the use of social media in Colombian democratic spaces, especially the ones that use exploratory approaches and, thus, are underfinanced.

The recommendations proposed are only preliminary suggestions to trigger a broader conversation on social media use and democracy. Likewise, the proposals aim to spark a multi-actor approach to address challenges common to a diverse range of stakeholders. Their coordinated work could help devise more effective strategies to seek the common

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[59] Build Up, "Building The Commons", February 27, 2018, https://medium.com/@howtobuildup/building-the-commons-dc60e6ee7b69.

objective of creating a more inclusive and transparent democracy in the midst of the Colombian conflict.

Annex: Key Terms

This section includes definitions for keywords used throughout the document, relevant to understanding the effects of social media use in the cases examined and the policy recommendations. When appropriate, the meanings provided also include explanations on how they apply to the context of Colombia or in democratic scenarios.

- **Artificial intelligence (AI):** This concept is embedded in the definition of intelligence, which is commonly understood as the ability to learn, process information and make decisions. Artificial intelligence refers to the ability of a machine-based system to gather data, interpret it, learn from it, and use it to solve certain problems and carry determined tasks with flexibility.[60] Colombia is party of the OECD recommendations on artificial intelligence. The cited document identifies principles for the responsible stewardship of trustworthy AI, as the need for a transparent disclosure around AI systems. Likewise, the text makes recommendations for the States party, such as to invest in AI research and development.[61]

- **Echo chamber:** An echo chamber describes a situation that happens in an online network discussion, in which the group divides into clusters of people with similar beliefs and ideas. The ideas in the subgroups are then amplified and reinforced by interaction with like-minded individuals. Echo chambers influence democracy given that, in some cases, they contribute to the polarisation of citizens into extremes, affecting their tolerance for other ideas and the information they receive.[62]

- **Filter bubble:** Online algorithms in many platforms usually personalise the digital experience of users, by providing content based on the information that the person has already explored, so as to predict the user's consumption patterns. A filter bubble is a term first coined by Eli Pariser to describe a situation in which this online personalisation of content only provides individuals with information that reinforce their beliefs and isolates them from other points of view.[63] Filter bubbles pose challenges to democracy depending on the understanding of the nature and value of the definition given to democracy. For instance, for a liberal understanding of democracy, filter bubbles may limit the freedom of choice of individuals.[64]

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[60] Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Siri, Siri, in my hand: Who's the fairest in the land? On the interpretations, illustrations, and implications of artificial intelligence", *Business Horizons* 62, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 15–25, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.08.004.

[61] OECD, "Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence" (2019), https://www.oecd.org/going-digital/ai/principles/.

[62] Jonathan Bright, "Explaining the emergence of political fragmentation on social media: The role of ideology and extremism", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmx002; Marta Barrios, Lina Vega, and Luis Gil, "When online commentary turns into violence: The role of Twitter in slander against journalists in Colombia", *Conflict & Communication Online* 18, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

[63] Eli Pariser, *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you* (London: Viking, 2011); Tien T. Nguyen et al., "Exploring the filter bubble: The effect of using recommender systems on content diversity", in *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on World Wide Web* (Seoul, Korea: ACM, 2014), 677–86.

[64] Engin Bozdag and Jeroen van den Hoven, "Breaking the filter bubble: Democracy and design", *Ethics and Information Technology* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 249–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-015-9380-y.

- **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs):** The software, hardware and systems that enable the access, production, storage, management and dissemination of information. This includes a broad range of technologies such as television, radio, mobile phones and the Internet.[65] The influence of technology on the way information is shared and communicated in democratic scenarios is receiving increased attention worldwide.[66] The most common information and communication technologies in Colombia include television, radio, mobile phones, and laptop and desktop computers.[67]

- **Junk news and fake news***:* One of the main features of social media is its power to spread content to millions of users in just seconds. That content may not necessarily be accurate information in all the cases. A few years ago, the term 'fake news' acquired increased popularity to refer to misleading content spread in social media with an appearance of veracity. There are growing critiques of the use of the expression 'fake news' to refer to the mentioned misinformation, given that it has become a politicised concept.[68] Instead, there is a rising use of the phrase 'junk news' to name the cited practice, which emphasises the virality of the content instead of the misinformation it contains.[69] This is the term primarily adopted in this brief. In Colombia, junk news with content that may influence democratic decision-making processes has been widely spread in social media.

- **Political polarisation:** This term describes a separation of public opinion in opposite ideological extremes. Using data from the Americas Barometer, the Observatory of Democracy at Andes University claims that political polarisation in Colombia is not about ideologies of left and right, but about specific issues such as the peace agreement with FARC-EP.[70] Likewise, studies in Colombia have shown that subgroup discussions between like-minded individuals in social media have contributed to boost online polarisation.[71]

- **Sentiment analysis:** Also called opinion mining, sentiment analysis is a technique for examining and processing data by using systems to identify and categorise people's opinions, emotions and sentiments included in images, texts, sounds and other sources of data. Sentiment analysis of content shared on social media during the peace process with FARC-EP and elections has become increasingly popular in Colombia, given the

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[65] Jen Gaskell et al., "Uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding", WOSCAP (LSE and Build Up, 2016).

[66] Eran Fisher, "E-governance and e-democracy: Questioning technology-centered categories", in *The Oxford Handbook of Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[67] Hootsuite and We Are Social, "Digital 2019: Colombia".

[68] Dimitra Liotsiou, Bence Kollanyi, and Philip N Howard, "The Junk News Aggregator: Examining junk news posted on Facebook, starting with the 2018 US midterm elections", *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1901.07920*, 2019.

[69] Tommaso Venturini, "From fake to junk news: The data politics of online virality", *Data Politics: Worlds, Subjects, Rights*, 2019.

[70] Observatorio de la Democracia, "¿De qué va la polarización en Colombia?", 2019, https://obsdemocracia.org/publicaciones/noticias/de-que-va-la-polarizacion-en-colombia/.

[71] Acosta, "Gestión de pasiones y polarización en las redes sociales. Un análisis del aplicativo grupos en Facebook"; Barrios, Vega, and Gil, "When online commentary turns into violence: The role of Twitter in slander against journalists in Colombia".

role played by emotions in citizen's decision-making processes and to shape the public opinion.[72]

- **Social, civil or community leaders:** Community-based individuals that carry out a public defence of positive collective interests of their communities or groups. Their communities recognise them for the work they implement.[73]

- **Social media:** Although this is an evolving concept given the speed at which social media changes, this expression refers to the broad range of platforms, applications and websites, mostly enabled by the Internet, that allow users to interact with each other in online networks by creating and sharing content.[74] By 2019, 68% of Colombians were active social media users. To date, the most popular social media platforms in Colombia are, in order of popularity, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter.[75]

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[72] Jhon Adrián Cerón-Guzmán and Elizabeth León-Guzmán, "A sentiment analysis system of Spanish tweets and its application in Colombia 2014 presidential election" (2016 IEEE international conferences on big data and cloud computing (BDCloud), social computing and networking (socialcom), sustainable computing and communications (sustaincom)(BDCloud-socialcom-sustaincom), IEEE, 2016), 250–57; Víctor Gil, Lina Montoya, and Isabel Puerta, "Sentiment analysis on post conflict in Colombia: A text mining approach", *Asian Journal of Applied Sciences (ISSN: 2321–0893)* 6, no. 02 (2018).

[73] CCJ, IEPRI, and AECID, *¿Cuáles son los patrones? Asesinatos de líderes sociales en el post acuerdo*.

[74] Jonathan A. Obar and Steven S. Wildman, "Social media definition and the governance challenge - An introduction to the special issue", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015.

[75] Hootsuite and We Are Social, "Digital 2019: Colombia."

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