The Woman in Purple: On the Dangers of Social Media Mystification

By

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American poet Allen Ginsburg opens his masterpiece Howl with the lines

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night

Presently, there seems to be a feeling that multitudes of social media users are being destroyed by madness, starving hysterically naked while looking for an angry fix of Shares, Likes and Re-Tweets, burning for a heavenly connection to those insidious yet starry dynamos of Facebook and Twitter. It is this concern, among other, that has brought us here this evening to discuss how domestic and international politics are shaped by social media.

At the heart of this debate lays the view of social media as a corrupting influence on the minds of its users, as the undoing of public discourse and the erosion of the very foundations of democracy. In my comments today I will attempt to make four arguments.

First, that social media have never been a democratic tool, nor aspired to be one.

Second, that every technological medium has been viewed as corrupting, dangerous and undemocratic.

Third, that when the pendulum of public discourse swings violently, we must be on guard and seek to uncover underlying interest.

Fourth, that social media's influence on opinion formation may be limited at best

I will, however, also attempt to highlight the impact social media does have on political systems.

Social Media as Democratic

We often assume that we are the consumers of social media platforms. It is *we* who publish information online, it is *we* who follow our friends and it is *we* who Like and Share and Re-tweet. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. The consumers of social media platforms are advertisers. *We* are the product being sold. Facebook was never meant to serve solely as a tool for networking with friends and colleagues. It was meant to make profit. Facebook's profit making stems from its ability to provide advertisers with an incredibly sophisticated advertising tool- one that tailors advertisements to users based on swarms of data collected on each of us.

To do so, Facebook must gather as much information about us as possible-including our interests, political views, sexual orientation, leisure activity, religious beliefs and artistic taste. Thus, it must ensure that we stay on Facebook as long as possible and that we share as much information as possible, information that is analysed and monetized. Every Like, every Comment and every Share is translated into dollars and cents. The best way to elicit information from us is to allow us to engage with friends, colleagues and acquaintances. The same is true of Google which is not a search engine but an information aggregate as is Twitter.

Facebook, Twitter and the likes never aspired to be democratic. They were bestowed with this role following the Arab Spring. It was the limited use of social media during these protests that shrouded social media with the aura of

civil society organizations. It is this aura that now leads us to demand that social media companies verify the information posted on their platforms, that they prevent the spreading of rumours and lies and that they prevent malicious actors from misusing these platforms.

Yet social media are not civil society organizations, they are profit seeking companies like the Ford motor company or Head and Shoulders shampoo. Set against this backdrop, the demand that Facebook and Twitter serve as democratic organizations seems almost ludicrous. It is akin to demanding that the Ford motor company democratically provide cars to all citizens or that Head and Shoulders not discriminate against the various forms of dandruff it fights.

And yet, there are resounding calls that Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms all transition from profit making companies to publishing corporations that adhere to ethical guidelines.

The reason for this is the fear that social media have an immense impact on how opinion is shaped. It is supposedly through posts and Tweets that we come to know the world and construct a sense of reality. When opinion is shaped by Tweets originating from journalists, newspapers and activists we feel that social media is inherently good. When opinion is shaped by trolls, fake advertisements and misinformation we feel that social media is inherently bad.

Every Technological Medium has been viewed as Corrupting, Dangerous and Undemocratic.

The view of social media as bad, or even dangerous, has been strengthened in recent months given the emergence of a new rhetoric, one that focuses on the words "fake news", "foreign meddling" and "echo chambers". Yet the question that we must ask ourselves is the following- are social media so powerful that they can, with the publishing of a Post, shape our political opinion?

The fear of social media as a corrupting medium is not unique. Every mass medium has been greeted by euphoria, fear and regulation. During the 1940's, television was seen as a tool for mass education. Journalist Edward R Murrow imagined it as a tool for enlightenment. Yet by the 1950's, television procedures and executives were testifying in Congress following revelations that television shows were orchestrated drama rather than factual reality. Television was now seen as having a great influence on the morals and values of young people. Shows that celebrated promiscuity were seen as "magic bullets" that could at once impact the behaviour of youngsters. By 1954, Congress was holding hearings on comic books and their influence on juvenile delinquency. This decade also saw that House Un American Activities Committee that wished to weed out Communists from Hollywood given that films could, again, act like magic bullets and at once subvert the entire nation. Hollywood was thus the undoing of democracy.

Is the debate about social media any different from the TV scare? Or the comic book scare? Or even the Red Scare of the 1950s? After all, the debate today is also fixed on a Red scare, a Russian menace that spreads through online virility.

Some would say yes, the social media scare is different because of the fact that social media reduces the diversity of information one accesses. Unlike television, movies or comic books, social media algorithms narrow our world view to that of an ant. Gone are the days in which we consumed news from multiple sources including newspapers, radio and television. On social media, we become engulfed by filter bubbles, or echo chambers, that ensure we only see information that adheres to our political orientation, interests and habits. Such filter bubbles, we are told, polarize public opinion, lead to political radicalization and shake the foundations of the town square.

Yet here again, there may be nothing new under the sun. For did certain classes not always read certain newspapers? Or watch certain channels? Or listen to certain commentators? It was the Right Honourable Jim Hacker who described newspapers as echo chambers saying that in the UK

The *Daily Mirror* is read by people who think they run the country; *The Guardian* is read by people who think they ought to run the country; *The Times* is read by the people who actually do run the country; the *Daily Mail* is read by the wives of the people who run the country; the *Financial Times* is read by people who own the country and the *Daily Telegraph* is read by people who think the country ought to be run by another country.

We may have, therefore, always existed in echo chambers re-enforced by class, occupation and chosen media channels. Besides, isn't academia an eco-chamber? Or the civil service? Or a labour union?

When the Pendulum of Public Discourse Swings Violently, we must be on the Guard and Seek to uncover Underlying Interest.

Importantly, the pendulum of public opinion is always in motion. After a decade of Tory leadership, New Labour is elected. After a decade of New Labour, David Cameron is elected. This is the natural progression of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. Yet it is when the pendulum of public opinion swings violently that we must seek to identify possible interests.

Consider how Twitter and Facebook were framed by the media between 2011 and 2013. They were viewed as *the* tools of democratic aspirations. From Libya to Cairo to Damascus, the spirit of democracy and revolution was propelled through Tweets and Posts.

Now consider the framing of Twitter and Facebook in today's media landscape. They are tools for mass surveillance, mass deception and mass stupidly as fake news travels as fast real news. Rumours turn fiction to fact and fact to fiction while Tweets and Posts may be weaponized as a tool for foreign interventions.

Who stands to profit from this framing? Why has pendulum of swung so violently?

First are the old media. You remember them- the old gatekeepers who ensured we only accessed accurate information, who were guided by objective ethical guidelines and whose professionalism was above reproach. The journalists who legitimized the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the journalists who had scores of stories regrading Harvey Weinstein's sexual misconduct and the journalists who knew of human rights violations in Guantanamo Bay long before they were made public.

The old media has been stranded on the Island of irrelevance for some time as social media became the new gatekeeper of information. Remember that, embarrassingly, old media had to migrate to social media. The Guardian had to publish stories on Facebook in order to reach readers. Now the tables have turned and old media is again on the rise. The past year has seen the largest growth in old media subscriptions in more than a decade. Notably, it is millennials who are flocking to old media sites and are paying for newspaper subscriptions. They too want to access to "accurate" and "objective" information.

Second, governments have profited from the new framing of social media. Western governments have a new/old menace- a Russian menace. In light of a menace, government must take swift action. Social media accounts must be monitored, privacy must be curtailed and shadow courts must be allowed to

issue secret indictments. Even Russia has gained something going from a bankrupt country tittering on the verge of financial collapse to being viewed as a global information superpower.

Finally, politicians have found a new scapegoat. All government mishaps can be blamed on social media.

Social Media's Impact May be Limited

The last argument that should be made is that the influence of social media on opinion formation may be more limited than we assume. Consider for instance that our Facebook "Friends" are not really our friends. Rather, they are colleagues, acquaintances, family members, former lovers, high school compatriots and other echoes of our past lives. Thus, one's online Friends are likely to be much more diverse than one's offline friends. Subsequently, we may actually be exposed to a broader range of ideas, opinions and facts online.

It is equally important to bear in mind that we do not exist solely online. After logging onto Twitter and Facebook we drive to work and listen to the radio, hold discussions over lunch or near the water coolers, converse with friends over dinner and spend holidays with our families. Each of these exposes as to diversity of opinions and each has an influence on our political opinions.

Age also seems to play a crucial role in how social media shapes opinion. Some studies suggest that younger generations, known as digital natives, have an intuitive sense for identifying false information, ads made to look like news and websites that spin fiction. It is thus older generations that could be more susceptible to online opinion manipulation. Yet older generations are also more likely to be critical of the information they read.

Lastly, each social media user is exposed to a unique online experience. This is because social media feeds are personalized by algorithms. One user may go online and view three Tweets: one by President Trump calling North Korea a menace, another by Theresa May calling for action against North Korea and another by the Times describing North Korean military drills. This user would assume that war is imminent. Another user may first see a video of a cat playing the piano, then a dog jumping for joy and finally a Tweet by Trump calling North Korea a menace. This user would assume that "it's just another day at the office".

Thus, we cannot say that all information reaches all social media users in the same way or has the same influence on all users. As each feed is personalized, so is access to information and so is opinion formation.

In Summary

There is much we still do not know about the extent to which social media influences opinion formation. Current calls to regulate social media, and ensure accuracy of information, are akin to the manner in which previous mass mediums have been treated with suspicion. There are also those who stand to gain from the demise of social media.

What we need is a) more research b) to avoid the temptation of hyperbolic discourse and c) to better understand how offline interventions influence online behaviours. Studies suggest that media literacy, critical thinking and digital literacy will be far more successful in preventing audience manipulation than government regulation of social media. That is because literacy will help prevent all forms of online manipulation and not just those spread via Twitter, Facebook and the likes.

Social Media's Impact on Domestic Politics

Thus far I have argued that social media's impact on opinion formations is somewhat limited. I have also attempted to separate hype from fiction. But the fact is that most of the people in this room still believe that social media has an immense influence on domestic politics. I would now like to highlight three ways in which social media can indeed affect domestic political environments.

To do so, we must return to 2007 when a young student at Harvard University launched a social network named "the Facebook". Facebook was not the first social network to be launched online. Nor was it the first network to connect individuals on a global scale. Yet Facebook was the first network to demand that users import their offline identity online. One could not open a Facebook account without using a university email, his name and uploading a profile image. Before Facebook, people separated between their offline and online persona. After Facebook, our online self became a digital extension of our offline self.

One would have expected that this merging of offline and online personas would prevent people from sharing hateful, violent, derogatory and racist comments on Facebook. One would have expected that there would be a barrier of shame and normative compliance that would actually limit hate speech on social media. As we now know, that is not the case. Social media are a breeding ground for hate groups. Within closed quarters members of hate groups enter a digital vortex of bigotry and ignorance that often translates into offline violence.

Yet is this vortex created by social media? Or has it merely migrated online?

The answer seems to be both. The sentiments expressed online are forged by offline events. As former President Obama Tweeted, people are not born to hate. They learn to hate. And after they do so offline, they can use the online

world to find a community of hate, one in which their prejudice is validated and stoked through a bonfire of profanities.

Alarmingly, studies suggest that hate travels much faster online than compassion.

The violent re-emergence of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of discrimination are a direct threat to the cohesiveness of societies and democracies everywhere.

However, we should also be cautious not to ascribe too much power to social media. Consider the term "echo chamber" for a moment. The term suggests that through social media one enters an environment that validates his world view. Yet the word "echo" also suggests that this validation grows louder and louder as time goes by. A social media user who begins to read fascist commentary will be bombarded with increasingly more violent content and as the sound of hate becomes defining he will alter his political opinions and affiliations.

But that is not the case. Studies tell us that attempts to use social media to influence one's political stance on an issue or his political belief usually end in failure. Using social media to change someone's behaviour is equally vexing.

What emerges is that social media has become a powerful veil. We focus our attention on social media, on echo chambers, on filter bubbles until we completely neglect our offline societies and political structures. Rather than understand the motivation to vote for Trump we obsess over the use of social media to support Trump. Rather than engage with people's prejudice and their fowl rhetoric, we analyse big data sets. This "social media mystification" is as dangerous to the political landscape as Donald Trump himself.

The second impact of social media on domestic politics lies in our ability to gather information and gauge public opinion.

It has been estimated that nearly 50% of all online comments posted in response to newspaper articles are generated by Bots, or computer software. Similarly, it is estimated that Bots flood social media with political comments on an everyday basis and, especially, during times of political importance such as elections or referendums. These manufactured comments shape our ability to asses the national mood and the direction in which the demos wants to steer the nation. This is critical given that people, by nature, wish to belong to the majority.

On the day of Brexit, Twitter users were flooded with thousands of Tweets in favour of leaving the EU. This may have caused Twitter users to believe that many Brits were in favour of leaving the EU thereby leading these users to vote in favour of Brexit themselves.

This is also true of governments. MPs, political strategists and high ranking policy makers routinely canvass social media so as to gauge public opinion and formulate policy in accordance. The menace of Bots can lead these decision makers to falsely assume that people are in favour of a certain policy. This policy will then soon find its way to the Cabinet office.

By creating a false sense of reality, social media impacts political reality.

Finally, governments own use of social media has had a dramatic influence on domestic politics. Governments migrated online as part of a supposed celebration of transparency. Unlike the secretive governments of the past, 21st century governments are supposedly open as they publish policy papers, respond to online petitions, answer citizens' questions on Facebook and live stream deliberations from the House of Commons.

The motive for this migration was not to democratize government. If that had been the case, we would have probably already known what Brexit really means. Thus far we have simply been told that Brexit means Brexit. In a truly Orwellian fashion governments migrated online so as to frame transparency as the most cherished values of our times. Like governments, we too are asked to live transparent lives online. To share our successes but also our failures, our heart breaks, our disappointments and our fears.

Thus, governments alongside tech giants have created a new jail, a new panoptiocn, in which we are continuously surveilled by Big Brother. Yet what is ingenious about the social media Big Brother is that we yearn to be surveilled. We post, and Tweet and Selfie all the while begging the warden to watch our online life, to Like us and Share us. And the more we upload, the more we embrace transparency, the more information Big Brother gathers and the more he can predict our every thought and action.

Through Facebook and Twitter governments now have at their disposal one of the greatest and most sophisticated surveillance mechanism in history. They know our sexual orientation and political affiliation even if we have never mentioned these online. Governments ability to amass, and analyse, such vast quantities of information about their citizens is a direct threat to democracy and individual liberty.

In the hands of governments social media are weapons of math destruction.

[Transparency is thus not as a cherished value but as a tool for mass deception](#) as the open government is in fact the secret government, one that routinely hides information from us under the guise of national security.

Finally- International Politics

Finally, I would like to offer an example of how social media influences international politics, or diplomacy. Recent years have seen the mass migration of foreign ministries and diplomats to social media in a practice generally referred to as digital diplomacy.

Originally, social media was to be used as a tool for overcoming the limitations of traditional diplomacy. For instance, in 2011 the US launched a virtual embassy to Iran. This web based embassy was to replace a physical embassy given that the US and Iran have no diplomatic ties. Through this virtual embassy, American diplomats were meant to engage in conversations with Iranians, explain America's policies in the Middle East and build the foundation or renewed diplomatic ties.

Yet the Crimean Crisis of 2014 saw a dramatic shift in how social media was used in diplomacy. During the crisis, various governments began to use Facebook and Twitter to disseminate strategic narratives online. The goal was to win over online audiences and gain their support. Russia hoped to legitimize its takeover of Crimea. The UK and the US sought to legitimize the international isolation of Russia.

Narrative is one of the defining words of our time. It is emblematic of modern life given that a narrative focuses on storytelling, not factual reporting. This was soon evident on social media when Russia tweeted that it had no troops in Eastern Ukraine. When NATO Tweeted satellite images of Russian troops, Russia Tweeted images of toy soldiers.

And so, social media was used to depict different realities. If you followed Russian social media accounts, you learned that Neo Nazis had taken over the Ukrainian government. If you followed UK social media channels, you learned

that Russia was on the prow, that the good old days of George Smiley and John Le Care had returned.

The use of social media for storytelling, and winning over publics, fractured reality in diplomacy. Since 2015, the contestation of reality through social media has become more widespread. According to Russian digital diplomacy, the Republic of Crimea exists as a part of the Russian Federation. According to US social media accounts, there is no such place. Crimea has no flag, no borders and no sovereignty. Similarly, Russian social media accounts argue that Aleppo has been liberated from terrorists while according to the UK Aleppo has been reduced to rubble by Syrian and Russian forces.

What emerges is a fractured reality in which the Republic of Crimea exists and does not exist simultaneously while Syria is bombarded and liberated simultaneously. Elsewhere on social media, Turkey has both strengthened its democracy and fallen under totalitarian rule while Iran has both met its nuclear commitments and violated them.

The question that follows is why is this process so problematic? First, diplomacy cannot function in a world without reality. Countries cannot recognize a semi-existing Republic nor can they diffuse tensions if a crisis both exists and does not exist. Second, contested realities contribute to the sense of instability and confusion now felt by people around the world. It is a world that seems more and more out of balance given the proliferation of alternative facts and news. Finally, contestations of reality contribute to global tensions by alleging that one side is hiding information, or manipulating public opinion or conspiring by hiding its true actions. Thus, social media comes to undermine diplomatic relationships rather than facilitates them.

In diplomacy, the word of the year is not post-truth but post-reality.

I'd like to end this talk with a short story that underlines my key message today. It is told that during the 1970's a British Feigen Minister visited Lima, the capital of Peru. During a formal reception, the Minister drunk so much that he dared ask a woman in purple to Tango with him. The woman refused on three grounds. First, it was not a woman at all but a man. Second, the man was wearing purple because he was the Bishop of Lima. Third, the music playing in the background was not a Tango but the Peruvian national anthem.

Let us no longer treat social media like a mystical woman in purple. Let us recommit ourselves to critically examining both online and offline worlds and work towards rebuilding the bridges in our societies that have been so utterly disseminated over the past two years.