

The Role of Social Media's Influence on Public Opinion

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## *Chapter 1. Introduction and Research Question*

Over the years, social media has found a way to penetrate into common people's lives and became a prominent source of information about different fields and entertainment. These technological changes had lured important people to identify social media as an interface to interact and share ideas with common people and to understand their perspective. Political leaders and government officials realized the impact, these social media platforms capitalize on their engagement with the common public. This made politicians and election officials enter in an era where campaigns and propagandas were allowed to be carried through social media platforms and reach out to the public in a more effective and improvised manner.

In the era of social media, electoral processes are increasingly centered on social media. Thus, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have a significant influence on how political content is created, distributed, and consumed. As time passes, the platforms collect unprecedented amounts of information about their users, which includes information related to their online activities, posts, shares, reads, likes, comments, keystrokes, movements, location, interests, etc. Consequently, social media platforms along with the devices they operate on, aggregate virtually every aspect of modern life. Globally, social media plays an important role in democracy and democratization processes. These social media outlets make democracy more challenging. It is a reflection on the hubris of good intentions, and an ideology claiming that computer code has all the answers the world has to offer. And it illustrates how "social media" has contributed to deteriorating democratic culture internationally, from the facilitation of Russian interference in support of Donald Trump's campaign to the exploitation of its platforms.

In modern times, many people become accustomed to the complex set of practices that exist involving live broadcast media and social media and switching between one medium and the other during the most important public events. This poses the question of whether these practices influence public opinion and political engagement. The impact of the vernacular narratives about the media on public opinion that is associated with media technologies, then influencing the way we interact with them. Technological determinism is a persistent and influential narrative presenting technology as the cause of social change.

***The objective of this study is to examine The Role of Social Media's Influence on Public Opinion.*** This issue will be studied from the perspective of the 2016 US presidential election. An

examination of how and to what extent social media influenced public opinion in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is discussed in this paper. In the scope of my analysis, I propose to investigate cases in which social media stories and groups that support certain views have exerted a direct influence on perceptions of election-related issues and figures. This paper seeks to demonstrate the difference between mainstream news sources (newspapers, TV, cable) and social media, through the content, perspectives, and ideas influencing elections.

In spite of the fact that all presidential elections are worthwhile, the 2016 election in the United States was especially notable. Mainstream media predictions that Hillary Clinton would become president collided with Donald Trump's election as the 45th president of the United States of America. There were plenty of intriguing surprises even during the primary elections, as Hillary Clinton faced an enormous challenge from Donald Trump. Throughout the campaign, media outlets covered the candidates from different angles but the way that they were portrayed varied from one media outlet to another. The partisan composition of the public's mediated and interpersonal interactions and information sources regarding the 2016 election. In the media, partisan views are selectively displayed, and it is more common to use like-minded media and then to meet opponents' viewpoints.

The publicizing of deceptive information attracted sharp recognition to the paths in which media standards and fabrications can be orchestrated by political leaders, often in methods that make conventional journalists complicit in the spread and addition of emotionally alluring (Phillips, 2018). The dissemination of deceptive and malformed data is an old-school tactic used to synthesize and continue to influence the movement, hindering the possibility of calm political discussions. The Russian agency, which intended to deliberately intrude in the 2016 US Presidential election (Summers, 2018).

In the American freedom of speech concept, it is presumed that misinformation and disinformation are the factors of the marketplace of ideas. In countries such as the United States, Russia, India, and other, external agencies are prepared to diffuse weapons of mass inducement mainly on defenseless nationals, with vulnerabilities and protruding atmosphere provided to a higher degree by social media outlets. This makes the pivotal character of data warfare in present day strife much more visible and compelling (Oates, 2020).

## *Chapter 2. Literature Review*

In light of recent criticism directed at dominant social media monopolies such as Facebook, Google, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and other similar services. Furthermore, how do they affect our information society as a whole, including what is the legitimacy of these platforms in improving social mobility and fostering an inclusive society? It is crucial to answer these questions that do not receive enough attention from the public and politicians, while mainstream media only addresses them marginally. Many factors are responsible for this lack of attention. There is an enormous amount of lobbying power wielded by social media companies. The connection between social media firms' interests, and those of the media in general. Inability of journalists to fully comprehend the underlying platforms. Perhaps most important, the politicians' unwillingness to publicly speak out against the business models of tech giants, a lack of adequate political support for protecting citizens' privacy (Berghel, 2020).

However, maintaining the individual data would not be necessary in order to achieve the primary research goal which was a methodology developed for the psychographic profiling individuals on social media and other indicators. The team at Cambridge Analytica realized they could combine this information with various data sources including social media platforms, web browsers, and a total of 5,000 information points are gathered on 230 million US adults, including purchases, voting results, and more. It was through this research that Cambridge Analytica was able to "micro-target" each consumer or voter which potentially expose participating Facebook users or their friends to certain security risks (Isaak & Hanna, 2018).

During the post-industrial era, research has been conducted on the participation of youth in politics as a microcosm for the discussion regarding the evolution of political engagement. The participation of the public in traditional democratic processes such as voting, joining political parties, and joining unions is declining in many developed countries, although the effects of this decline are still being debated. A major driving force behind the proliferation of these new forms of political action and expression has been the technological revolution brought on by the Internet. A major factor responsible for the effectiveness, speed, and ease of communication and information flows has been the rapid and ongoing development of the Internet. Several key aspects of political engagement have been affected as a result (Keating & Melis, 2017).

Searching for information on the Internet and via social media, specifically news, has been associated with a higher level of political engagement. However, social media are used for a wide range of purposes beyond finding information, the role of social media in influencing new models of citizenship is becoming more apparent among younger generations. The literature in this area has demonstrated the importance of political expression in influencing people to participate in politics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

In terms of political significance, the increase in the use of online social networks ("social media") is rooted in American political thought and reflects the importance we attach to these social networks. The American democratic process is founded on the notion that sovereignty is exercised by the people through republican forms of government, or rather, as James Madison stated, through "schemes of representation." (Wagner 2010). In this process, systems of information communication play an important role because they present information in a structured manner and enable people to understand it.

In the United States, social media changes the political calculus by influencing who controls information, how it is consumed, and how it is distributed. The findings of the study reveal that traditional media outlets continue to play an important role in amplifying and disseminating particular political claims e.g., Trump's immigration stance. Both seasoned and novice campaigns flagged how these techniques were overpowering their attempts to attract public attention in the very crowded presidential field (Oates & Moe, 2017).

Social media represent a fundamental change in the existing system structures and landscape of media for the communication of political messages. It establishes a multidimensional and largely unprecedented way for opinion leaders, politicians, and citizens to interact with one another. It is not new that technological advances are taking place, but what is new is what they are becoming. It is important to recognize that social media is not just another advancement in technology, but rather it represents an entirely new paradigm in the way people interact with each other. Rather than relying on dominant media sources to explain a limited amount of information, today's networkers are engaged on not only the news itself but also with entire communities of friends and associates without regard for borders or geopolitical boundaries. There is no gatekeeper or editor for this social network, and it's governed by new codes of conduct that are only now being devised (Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

It is no longer surprising that social media has become increasingly influential over politics, to such an extent that it has become a powerful tool for connecting individuals based on common political opinions. As discussed by Farrar-Myers and Vaughn (2015) there is no doubt that social media have played an important role in the last few social movements by allowing politicians to mobilize disenchanted groups of people. Several factors contribute to a candidate's political strategy, including the past performance of the candidate, government regulations, and the way in which the candidate communicates in their platform. In a presidential campaign, policies and intentions for the United States of America are emphasized, along with how those policies will be implemented.

The Constitution asserts that candidates should remain true to their values, at the same time, they should be creative when it comes to engaging the public throughout a campaign. A platform cannot be translated digitally into a digital format because human interaction cannot be replicated in the digital form. Politicians have incorporated social media marketing into their campaigns and have seen great success as a result. Campaigning via social media is opening up new avenues for candidates and extending the scope of politics. There is more direct engagement between candidates and voters than ever before, but at the risk of their judgements and perceptions of each other (Nadler, 2016).

Using social media to create original content and build a strong brand is the goal of social media advertising. Through the use of different social media platforms, candidates can directly engage with and influence voters. In an era when digital technology is so prevalent, voters are unable to find a common ground that allows for human communication while media mobilization at the same time. Voters form perceptions of the candidate and other political issues based on social media activity. Accordingly, voters' interest in politics could be dampened or rekindled depending on whether or not they participate in online political activity.

### ***Fake news***

The issue of fake news has been a focus of attention since the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Before making any further progress, it is important to define the term fake news clearly. There is something controversial and complex about fake news issues because there are wide

variations in the way it is presented to the public debate nowadays. When it comes to "fake news," it can be challenging to distinguish between hoaxes, state-sponsored propaganda, manipulated content, or conspiracy theories. In order to clarify this terrain of thinking, scholars have endeavored to offer definitions of the concept. In addition, this can also be stated as "information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts" (McGonagle, 2017, p. 203).

Throughout recent years, "fake news" has become increasingly popular. This term is now being used both in academic discourse and in the media. This terminology is used in mainstream speech to indicate false stories, to stigmatize information presented from opposing perspectives, in some cases, even to discredit critical reports published by media organizations (Tandoc et al., 2018). For some time, fake news has been classified in broader terms and has been evaluated based on either the authenticity or the source of information (Shu et al., 2017). As a result of the 2016 U.S. presidential election fake news has been associated with both credibility and intent. Fake news, on the other hand, was defined as news articles that are intentionally false and have the potential to mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

A number of negative consequences can be observed at both individual and societal levels due to fake news sources, such as price fluctuations in stock, all-out epidemics, and events related to the 2016 United States presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In order to combat the damages caused by false news, many public discussions have taken place concerning potential solutions-such as the detection of false news by artificial intelligence technology, the fact-checking process by humans, and empowering the public through information literacy education (CHEN et al., 2021).

Although it is not clear to what extent stories of this nature contributed to the pattern of character attacks during the 2016 campaign, there were a lot of disagreements and accusations of character flaws among the candidates. Both candidates criticized each other's character flaws and questioned each other's abilities. Despite this, there is evidence indicating that fake news propagated by media outlets in the 2016 election cycle has a partisan bent, as 17 out of 20 stories reported on fake news favored Trump, while mainstream news stories supported Clinton more frequently (Stabile et al., 2019). The media portray women in a more negative light than men, the

Clinton campaign was unique, particularly in its aspects related to, it shed light on several aspects of gender bias and sexism that complicate women's election campaigns.

As an example of fake news, several social media platforms linked the rumor that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child sex ring with actual news stories about new Clinton e-mails. According to a number of Facebook posts in October 2016, Clinton was believed to be a member of an international sex ring enslaving children. It was shared on Twitter and soon became viral as a result of automated bot networks (centralized groups of Twitter accounts) and repackaged by Trump supporters, among whom were several members of the campaign (Robb, 2017).

Although the rise of fake news is concerning today, its context must be considered. Increasingly, media and news ecosystems are experiencing radical changes, mainly due to the emergence and rapid development of the Internet, a phenomenon that continues to have profound effects on the media and news sector. Factors that have changed the game in fake news production include the sophistication of its production; the scale at which it is created, how rapidly and effectively it is disseminated. As a result of technological advances, a broad range of actors are now able to produce content, especially fake news, in a variety of forms and to disseminate it widely and rapidly. Examples of this content include text, photos, videos, memes, bots, gifs, etc. (McGonagle, 2017).

### ***Social Media Engagement***

Modern media technologies have enabled citizens to access information regarding their elected representatives, government budgets at the national and state levels and even the judicial information. In uncertain times, they can rely on this method to make smarter and more informed decisions. Research into civic political engagement is at the core of political science and focuses on voting behavior and those forms of political participation that are more traditional: demonstrations, direct contact with elected representatives, or participation in political organizations. This core element of a democratic society remains the same, but discussions are emerging about new forms of participation introduced by the digital age (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016).

The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2017 and 2018 taught us a very clear lesson that social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other sites collect considerable data about public behavior. Participation activities on social media, no matter how big or small, will leave a digital imprint. This implies that mobilizations generate digital trails, which can be harvested to create large-scale data that is subsequently available for retrieval and analysis through appropriate algorithms (Karpf, 2019).

According to the results of Feezell (2017), this finding has two interesting implications. First, while the current media climate enables viewers with low levels of political interest to avoid news and information related to politics, a decent amount of political information is likely to be transmitted through social media to the uninterested in the absence of selective avoidance. On the other hand, this study demonstrates that exposure to inadvertent political information shared through social media affects the perceived salience of issues. Second, In light of these findings, it appears that the traditional media may not be as marginalized in the post broadcast environment as previously believed. While their capability to reach a wide audience via social media is influenced by factors such as network structure, usage patterns, and social media algorithms.

## *Theories*

### *Agenda-setting theory*

In 1922, Walter Lippmann published *Public Opinion*, which addressed agenda-setting. According to Lippmann, the mass media act as a connection between the public's perceptions of the world and the events that occur in it. In 1972, McCombs and Shaw introduced the concept of media agenda-setting by adding a new element on “what to think about” which focused on analyzing public agendas. Given the possibility that media-public agenda correlations could also be interpreted as causation in the reverse direction when dealing with journalists, In effect, public interest is anticipated or estimated, but that premise was rejected as implausible.

It is no longer accurate to assume that media influences the public agenda based on the assumption of Agenda-setting theory. Social media platforms have provided new opportunities for public engagement. Most Americans utilize social networking platforms, enabling them to share whatever they may be thinking with their friends, family, and complete strangers to view (Perrin, 2015). Traditional media and social media are the main types of media sources. Traditional sources

of news, particularly cable news programs, have been around for many years; yet they tend to be older and less interactive than modern platforms that are only available on internet-connected devices. Due to the widespread use of smartphones, people have been able to access social media platforms at the tip of their fingers (Smith, 2015).

### ***Spiral of silence theory***

The spiral of silence (SOS) is a theory proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974) that claims that individuals' willingness to express their opinions is influenced by perceptions of opinion. There is a limited extent to which the SOS can be observed in online environments. For instance, political polarization is increasing in the United States, using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to offer people the opportunity to select who they interact with on the internet, possibly resulting in the creation of a filter bubble that limits their exposure to information (Pariser, 2012).

According to Flegenheimer & Barbaro (2016), there is an interaction between congruence in opinion, fear of isolation and willingness to express support for the candidate, which varies with face-to-face and online settings. Evaluating the SOS theory in the context of one of the most contentious US presidential elections in modern time.

The term "Shy Trumpers." is used by Morning Consult in its analysis, those who are highly educated or engaged are much less likely to recommend Trump as president to another person. The data reveals that Trump does worse in phone polls than online polls among college-educated voters, whereas Clinton does better than both (Guilford, 2016). The difference between Trump and Clinton in SOS can be explained by their campaign rhetoric. At the time of his election campaign Donald Trump made remarks that commentators have characterized as sexist, racist, and otherwise defamed publicly. The casual supporter of Trump may have felt less comfortable expressing their support as they were afraid of being isolated, as referred as "Shy Trumpers" (Kushin et al., 2019).

### ***Weaponization of social media***

An increasing number of foreign disinformation campaigns use social media as a convenient tool for spreading disinformation. Recent examples of technology abuse and the manipulation of public discourse have become more apparent on social media, automated voting and other methods of Internet manipulation will not be restricted to a single election.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election was a watershed year for political propaganda spreading across social networks via computational techniques. Operators of the platforms did not comprehend the nature of the threat at first. The first time Facebook was asked about the potential contribution of the Russian government to the Trump campaign, the company described such foreign interference as negligible (Howard, 2021).

Regulation of emerging online threats poses a serious challenge to lawmakers and regulatory agencies worldwide. A prime example might be the kind of weaponization of social media in regard to Cloud-based platforms that was demonstrated during both the U.S. Presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (Cartwright et al., 2019).

In light of this, the question arises as to whether social media could be changed in such a way that there would be a better balance between benefits and harms. Amongst the drawbacks of social media for society is the weaponization of social media to disseminate foreign misinformation, among other things (Oates, 2020).

An essential reason for selecting the issue of social media influence on public opinion and analyzing it through the lens of the 2016 presidential election was the amount of time and effort spent in shaping the character and outlook of each candidate on the social media platforms and the contrasting election result. The 2016 presidential election marked an important advancement, where the manipulation and abuse marked an innovative milestone. In this election, the manipulation did not occur with the electoral process or the electoral vote ballots, but with the electors themselves and the social media platforms that served as an interface for information dissemination and social engagement. Many scholars have published their research regarding the 2016 election and why this was marked as one of the most controversial one. In this paper, I will be looking at the 2016 election with a different pair of lenses, where a line of social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Google connected three different dots, such as Social media engagement, fake news and weaponization, which helped in reflecting the influence of these three factors on the public opinion and what measures were taken by each candidate's social media campaign personnel to accomplish their advancements.

It is important to clarify that my thesis and analysis are not based on any theoretical paradigm. Particularly, the theories stated are merely examples of how the literature discusses social media and its effects.

### ***Chapter 3. Methodology***

As a case study method, it involves intensive examination of a single unit or several subunits within one unit of analysis in order to gain an understanding of what happens specifically in that case in an effort to explain the overall pattern of cases. In this case study, I will focus on analyzing the 2016 election in order to highlight how powerful social media companies have played a major part in the process of modernizing democracy. In the United States to demonstrate just how important these companies are in relation to influencing public opinion.

In terms of why this topic is so important, as illustrated above, the purpose of this paper is to provide a thorough analysis of how social media influenced the behavior of the public on a wide range of issues. Social media influence is multidimensional in nature and requires the combination of different levels of analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data has been examined. To achieve this goal, I reviewed a range of scholarly analyses in order to identify those that most clearly articulate the topic of my thesis to elucidate the research question, role of social media's influence in public opinion.

According to the Pew Research Center's analysis, the number of posts on Facebook and Twitter by Congress members has expanded significantly over the past four years. Based on the median number of posts a member of Congress made on Facebook during the first five months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2016, the member of Congress created 48% more Facebook posts and 81% more Twitter tweets. In addition to receiving substantially more engagement, these posts also received a substantial number of reactions, favorites, and shares, which measured in an overall sense (Shah et al., 2020).

Perhaps the most critical aspect is to demonstrate the need for more than one theory to be consistent with the concept of impacting public opinion. It is deliberate to establish that certain criticalities regarding mass media and social media must be conveyed in order to support a specific hypothesis. In other words, public opinion is shaped in enormous part by the media outlets that encompass social media, which affects the issues, which are deemed most important at given times. In addition, focus on certain details of these issues. Thus, a theory of agenda-setting, focuses on the combined influence of the media on public knowledge and understanding of critical events.

In the United States, political polarization is increasing, resulting in social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allowing users to choose who they interact with online, which may result in a filter bubble that limits exposure to certain information. Using reference groups in comparison to majority opinion as a predictor of one's willingness to express an opinion is of critical importance. The public may not be able to make a wise decision based on what they know or based on their personal opinions during democratic elections. Spiral of silence, (SOS) theory suggests that an individual's willingness to express opinions is dependent on the perception of an opinion climate. According to the SOS, FOI is the phrase "fear of isolation" considered one of the key mechanisms explaining why people repress unpopular opinions. In a democratic society, the theory has significant implications.

In analytical sections, the analysis will examine how social media was used by both domestic and international actors to influence American elections, each of which pertains to a different aspect of the research question and the study case. The first domestic level will focus on the influence of fake news and the gender bias against women in politics. The campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was particularly characterized by fake news and raucous gender discussion. Just prior to the 2016 election Mainstream media stories received fewer views than fake news stories on Facebook. During the period, 8.7 million people shared, responded, and commented on fake news on Facebook, compared with 7.3 million for mainstream media (Silverman, 2016). Nevertheless, this highlights how common it is for fake election news to spread, as the social media platform has been criticized for allowing false content to propagate throughout the 2016 presidential campaign.

The second level of analysis will examine through the perspective of locals and candidates on how social media was involved, along with some statistics and analyzable charts demonstrating the increasing engagement of mass media and social media during and before elections. The use of social media during election campaigns has become one of the most prevalent methods of communication between candidates and the public. The Internet has enabled platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to be used by candidates to raise their visibility over the public, mobilize their supporters, and influence public opinion.

Social media insights into the ways in which political communication is influenced by different platforms can be increased by adjusting the messages to the peculiarities of the various platforms. The way content is designed affects how and whether people pay attention to it, as well as how that content can be used by those audiences in the digital sphere. Researchers found that online campaigning largely maintained the status quo, with politicians largely replicating traditional messages and campaigning methods on their web sites and engaging with users in limited ways.

In the third level of analysis, there will be a discussion of how foreign intervenors weaponized social media during election times. The design of social media makes it possible for foreign intelligence operations to identify key groups, penetrate and manipulate them. It has been shown that Russians were interested in creating wedge issues in the 2016 presidential election in order to polarize or manipulate Americans, and they had effective ways to do it via social media with Trump supporters. Social media today is a powerful tool for manipulation and polarization. There's no way to trace or curtail this kind of activity in a reasonable manner since it's ingrained deep down in the nature of social media.

In the present day, it is so effortless to pretend as another, to earn trust, to polarize, and even to compel people to change behaviors. US companies like Facebook have created low-cost weapons for foreign adversaries, business logic and ingenuity have resulted in a weapon deployed against American citizens (Oates, 2020).

According to Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), the media play an important role in connecting us in complex modern societies. Essentially, a civic agenda is a series of priorities that form the basis of a social or political system. Issue agendas in social media are shaped by citizens who are often passionate and long term interested in particular issues (McCombs et al., 2014).

That social media companies emphasized social media market data and studies exerted by the trade outlets, and experts' own imported sightedness of communications and engagement on these platforms. Campaigns have been examined using information provided by these outlets' digital ads regarding targeted audiences, tracking the involvement around their context such as funds raised, email list sign-ups, running experimental exams to see what content gave best outcome, reading comments and working to actively indicate generic advantages of these outlets

(Kreiss et al., 2017). Technological exercises are limited by actor's views of what technologies can perform, features that conceptually frame what can be done using them, and patterns that evolve and arise in regard to technologies (Evans et al., 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015).

This indicates that when a post related to a campaign surface on twitter, actors following that campaign could view it in theory, in contradict to Facebook posts. Campaigns anchored this affordance to twitter in order to examine the impact of the message. Intended viewers and communicative patterns differ on these media outlets, and as such so do communications framed to target and proclaim to users of specified platforms. Capabilities differ as well, which indicates that political leaders take advantage of various platforms, and their defined abilities. For instance, the image or text capability of Instagram, compared to twitter providing dual screening and broadcasting experimental runs to scale engagement, versus the paths that Facebook provides in a broad list construct and standardizing. Lastly, it is evident that communication regarding campaigns on social media is embedded within a large set of policies. Campaigns incorporate various sets of social media outlets as a part of their larger goals based on the campaign's timing and as this kind of analysts need to be susceptible to policies as whole (Kreiss et al., 2017).

Every now and then, the information broadcasted in the local media or newspapers cause and increase the generation of messages and debates on issues, but the agenda of these media or newspapers play a minor role in influencing people to share about these issues on social media. It is very infrequent that these citizens directly view these events and share about them on social media. This kind of reporting or sharing is done mostly when there are any sports events or political events taking place (McCombs et al., 2014).

The social media issue agenda does initiate noise into our contemplation of media and people relationship, which can be defined in other words that, social media issue agenda is too transparent and has messages with largely diversified origins (Salman et al., 2016). Walter Lippman mentioned that the media has an interface for displaying images to the public. Presidential campaigns of 1968, 1972 and 1976 were investigated by McCombs and Shaw. In their research, they anchored on two factors: Awareness and information or data. Researching the agenda-setting working of the mass media, they worked on examining the connection between the important issues described by one faction of people and the exact context of the media interaction during the campaign. Mass media has exhibited a strong impact on what electors considered to be

the prominent concerns of the campaign, conclusions provided by McCombs and Shaw through their investigation. The primary conjectures and headlines are the fabrication of public awareness and context of significant issues by news media. There are two basic assumptions, which form the fundamentals for most of the research on agenda setting: First one Reality is not exhibited by the press and mass media; they refine and redefine it. And the second public tends to pursue those few issues as more significant ones, which are broadcasted and presented as important by the mass media or newspapers (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Two distinctively compelling outcomes arise from this investigation. The main point is that even if the current media atmosphere empowers the public to have little political interest, political headlines and information can be avoided. The media probably eliminates selective avoidance and presents political data to the uninterested (Feezell, 2017). This is a common relevance with previous research by Messing and Westwood (2014) and Anspach (2017), which exhibits that social affirmation of news intends the public to read a part of the news, which they would willingly avoid. Many are attributed to the excessive selective contribution of information because it leads to the divided nature of people, the information-rich public is getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer information wise. However, it can be seen that subjection to incidental political data shown through social media, effect's issue's importance, though to the stage at which it may help to connect the segregation through extensive learning and understanding remains obscure. Second, these outcomes project that the mass media is not as insignificant in the post broadcast atmosphere as thought earlier, even though their approach to common people through social media outlets is largely interfaced by network design, circulation patterns, and social media algorithms.

The outer perception of the current investigation may also be challenged by the character of the research design and especially, the origin of the news being shared. This investigation exhibits that an inoffensive university connected community can draw out an agenda setting impact through social media. However, as the origin was neither a known expertise nor a dedicated side leader, perspective can arise that the impact shown is not certainly a task of social media and the two-step stream of data, but rather is, excessively identical to that of data spread through a conventional news organization. As this may be a fact, investigation exhibits that solid social affirmations make the public more willing to attend to news (Messing & Westwood, 2014). In this

regard, information shared by a comparatively inoffensive source such as the group used here provides a moderate examination of agenda setting through social media.

Agenda-building has overturned traditional assumptions regarding the salience of politics; it has shifted the focus from policymakers to policies itself. Theoretical and empirical findings presented an alternative approach to agenda building, the outside initiative model. The outside initiative model applies to situations where an outside group the formal structure of government first formulates a grievance, second seeks to spread interest in the issue to sufficient groups in the populace to gain public attention, and third, exerts enough pressure on decision makers to place the matter on their formal agenda for serious consideration (Cobb et al., 1976). The increasing prominence of nongovernmental organizations in raising public issues and competing for public attention has transferred the agenda building process to the people instead of the policymakers. The theory of agenda building, according to Denham (2010), outlined agenda building encompasses three distinct but overlapping approaches: research utilizing varying conceptualizations and foci, policy agenda building, media agenda building, and public agenda building. In terms of policy agenda building, the focus is on how issues are formulated, expanded upon, and subsequently included in the policy agenda. Media agenda building refers to how media agendas are developed which in turn is determined by institutional imperatives and negotiates with information sources. As a final point, public agenda building is referring to behavioral responses to interpersonal and mass communication.

#### ***Chapter 4: Analysis***

##### ***The role of mass media and social media as well as their differing approaches in the 2016 election***

Politicians have instantly recognized the power of mass media in shaping public opinion. Concurrently with mass media well known as a major factor influencing public opinion, social media has gained prominence in recent years as a major factor. Media outlets like Facebook and Twitter, which are subsets of mass media, contribute to the shaping of opinion by enabling users to voice their opinions and provide information on a varied range of topics irrespective of prior

knowledge regarding the subject matter. In addition to the unfiltered generation of information and opinion, as well as the unique communication skills that social media provides, as a result of social media influence in the American political sphere, public opinion is further polarized. Information media is one of the key factors affecting public opinion. Throughout history, mass communication has been evolving, from the creation of newspapers to the invention of television. Sources of mass communication have always worked towards educating and informing people about current events; although these purposes are generally understood as the primary functions of mass media, other potential uses are also recognized (Robbins, 2019).

Social media is now becoming increasingly popular as a news resource exponentially in the last decade. Among the reasons social media is being studied more is to find out if it has any effect on participation in politics. Also, social media may have an adverse effect on democracy and elections in the future. In the United States, the consumption of news online has increased, and Americans feel more informed as a result of online news sources (Purcell & Rainie 2014). Millennials and Gen Xers have become increasingly dependent on social media for political information in the past few years, surpassing traditional sources like cable television, local television, national broadcasts, and print outlets (Mitchell et al., 2015).

A new set of issues associated with social media and elections emerged during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Additionally, there has been an increased focus on social media and participation in politics due to the increased use of different platforms. With the 2016 election campaign, Donald Trump aggressively used Twitter to spread his messages, the dissemination and sharing of 'fake news' on social media like Facebook and Twitter, as well as attempts to influence the election via social media by entities outside of the U.S. (Curry, 2018).

Even though she was the first woman to run as a presidential candidate for a major political party, Clinton did not receive the same level of excitement for her campaign as her previous predecessor, Barack Obama. First female presidential contender, Clinton had not done much more than reiterate what many voters already know. There was a negative reaction among the electorate toward Trump due to his own behavior, and not necessarily a consequence of something that Clinton did during the campaign (Blackbourn, 2016).

In the 2016 presidential election in the United States, there were significant issues related to political campaigns and social media. A larger focus was also placed on social media and

political participation as a result of the increased use of different platforms. Followers' and politicians' opinions are frequently debated on social media. Comparatively, Clinton's campaign use of social media strategies demonstrated how professional election campaigns should run, in contrast to Trump's unprofessional method of political communication (Curry, 2018). First and foremost, Donald Trump used Twitter extensively during the campaign. By utilizing this strategy, Donald Trump was able to bypass the limitations of the mainstream media and communicate directly to the general public. Although his tweets reached beyond Twitter, the media regularly reposted, published or discussed them with commentaries or analysts. In this manner, the messages were communicated to Americans outside of Twitter and to people who did not follow Trump on Twitter if they used Twitter.

### ***Social Media Usage By Individuals***

#### ***Fake news***

During 2016, a significant portion of the debate on fake news conflated misinformation with disinformation. The term misinformation describes misleading information that is being created or disseminated without the intention to manipulate or mislead. In addition, disinformation is defined as the deliberate delivery of dishonest information to people for the purpose of confusing them or manipulating them (CHEN et al., 2021).

In the context of an online environment, the major challenge may be identifying what factors are likely to make people susceptible to believing false content. Social media has been criticized as a potentially fertile ground for the dissemination of fakes. The congressional committees have requested Facebook, Google, and Twitter executives to provide information about their efforts to counter false news (Popken, 2018; Shaban et al., 2017). During his testimony to Congress, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said Facebook would use artificial intelligence to detect fakes. In addition to the content features from text and images, AI systems can identify social context features such as users, generated posts, and networks that could have an impact on the likelihood that a story is false (Shu et al., 2017).

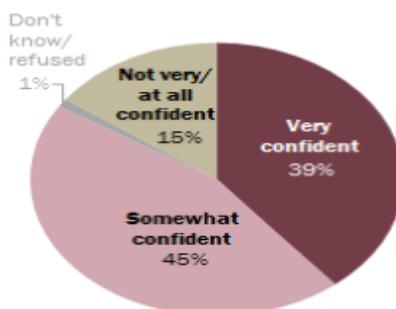
On the other hand, creators of false content usually change their methods of creating their content in order to improve the apparent authenticity and circumvent detection to make it more

difficult to detect. Incorporating these strategies results in a competition between technologies that can detect fake news and those that do not. False news is being combated with artificial intelligence, which has been characterized as a technological arms race (Cole, 2018; Susarla, 2018). Many countries have also established fact-checking agencies as concerns rise about the harm caused by false information. The use of artificial intelligence algorithms and fact-checking is not an effective way to combat fake news. As humans spread false information more often than robots, it is important to consider individuals when dealing with the threat of false information (Khan & Idris, 2019).

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**Majority are confident in their ability to recognize fake news**

*% of U.S. adults who are \_\_\_ in their ability to recognize made-up news*



Source: Survey conducted Dec. 1-4, 2016.  
 "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion"

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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Note: Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 1,002 adults in the continental United States between Dec. 1, 2016, and Dec. 4, 2016, in this report.

Americans seem fairly confident that they can recognize fake news even though they sense these stories are causing confusion, with about four-in-ten (39%) feeling very confident about their abilities to spot false reports, and another 45% feeling somewhat confident. On average, about a third of Americans (32%) agree that they often view political news stories that are made up online.

Though it is difficult to determine the precise extent that people actually view news stories that have been fabricated, mainly because many people neither recognize nor distinguish false stories from the real ones. These statistics present broad perspectives on how the public views this type of story (Barthel et al., 2016).

Based on the study, examined the characteristics of fake news articles content during the 2016 presidential election and how these content characteristics predicted social media outcomes. In general, these sites are less concerned with creating falsehoods out of thin air than with presenting a partisan interpretation of events. It is important to clarify that while some of this content contained fabrications, the majority of stories were mostly true but partisan, which was also the format that received greater resonance on social media. The 2016 election campaign was marked by partisan bias, clickbait, sensationalism, and misleading content that were used to target voters in which produced a media narrative that showed a negative view of Hillary Clinton. Thus, the results show that partisan, sensational, and fabricated content during the 2016 election was driven by antagonism towards the Democratic candidate, and not by support for the Trump campaign. An in-depth look at what aspects of content gain traction on social media. There is a strong correlation between Facebook and Twitter engagement levels and partisanship, with stories that provide a slant to either side of the political divide getting far more engagement than those that do not (Mourão & Robertson, 2019).

Unsolicited accounts impact users by contributing to their assurances with fictitious data. During the 2016 United States presidential election, it was estimated by Policies that nearly 1.4 million twitter users interchanged information with Russian fake accounts, either by retweeting or liking posts or by becoming followers of these accounts, presuming that the data provided by these accounts is authentic without examining the reliability of accounts. If followers do not examine the reliability of the data spread by these fake accounts and take the information to be valid, this un-authentic information can hugely impact their perspective. When these followers or users reinforce their political perspective with fake information, it can end up in further divisiveness, as these users will slander perspectives from users with contrasting beliefs. This is because they are fed with the fake data, which in turn is influencing their choices. Fake accounts also strive to devalue person's belief networks, specifically using media bombs, whose functionalities can differ

from sending immediate replies to messages on twitter to ideologically endorsing or elevating desired websites on search engines on google (Robbins, 2019).

It is also possible that heuristics are responsible for creating 'fake news', which is another recent concern linked to social media and politics. Social media platforms especially Facebook and Twitter have been criticized for spreading false and misleading information since the 2016 election. Essentially, it is a matter of whether this information can influence the outcome of an election in favor of one candidate over another. A combination of web referral data and a post-election survey was used by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) in order to examine the issue. During the survey, respondents were presented with 15 election news headlines in which they were asked if they saw or heard about them. In addition, the headline was accompanied by a question asking if it was true or not. The 15 news headlines were selected at random from a database of true and false headlines from the campaign that had been created by the research team. The stories were equally weighted to include both beneficial and detrimental information about both candidates. Furthermore, the researchers included what they called "placebo" headlines so that it was possible to substitute candidates' names.

Several implications can be drawn from this research. The first thing I noticed was that social media engagement does not reward misinformation or sensationalism. These findings helped ease fears that fantastic, fabricated articles are getting more clicks than factual informative content. Hence, success stories such as "The pope shocks the world and endorses Donald Trump" represent outliers rather than the norm. Furthermore, there is a curvilinear relationship between social media outcomes and the strength of partisanship; that is, such a relationship peaks at a moderate degree of partisanship and then declines as stories become more biased. An effective method of fake news sites is to layer partisan, sometimes misleading, interpretations on top of true events, although there is a limit to the number of layers that can be applied (Mourão & Robertson, 2019).

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## Majority say fake news has left Americans confused about basic facts

*% of U.S. adults who say completely made-up news has caused \_\_\_ about the basic facts of current events*



Source: Survey conducted Dec. 1-4, 2016.

"Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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Note: Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 1,002 adults in the continental United States between Dec. 1, 2016, and Dec. 4, 2016, in this report.

According to Pew Research Center, the majority of Americans believe that fake news affects public opinion. A majority of U.S. adults (64%) feel that fabricated news stories make it difficult to find the basic facts about current events. A large proportion of Americans believe this opinion regardless of their income, educational level, political affiliation, or any other demographic characteristic. The results of this study were obtained from an online survey conducted from December 1 to December 4, 2016, of 1,002 U.S. adults<sup>1</sup> (Barthel et al., 2016).

As evidenced by the Pizzagate and Hillary Health Scare stories analyzed, two patterns are obvious: news fabrication and Photo manipulation. Pizzagate, which lacks any basis in fact, is an example of fabrication. While the Hillary Health Scare involved the manipulation of images of real events created a false narrative sensationalizing a brief, near-fatal episode that Hillary had experienced. In addition, when false information supports pre-existing beliefs, it could become deeply entrenched especially if it provokes moral outrage and is impossible to correct (Konnikova, 2018).

A preliminary examination of the effect of 'fake news' on political decisions offers an interesting first indicator of the problem. Firstly, researchers found the rate of false recall to be significant when looking at placebo results. It has actually been found that recall of the placebo

headlines was identical to recall of false information headlines that were actually broadcast during the 2016 election. According to this analysis, the participants overestimated their recall of false information, which was likely much lower. Secondly, social media did not rank as their number one source of information about the election. Thirdly, a minority of Americans view the most popular fake news stories. Lastly, as for the effect of these stories on electoral outcomes, 0.7 percent of Clinton voters would have had to switch to Trump for it to have been effective. In other words, despite the concern about fake news being a dominant storyline in the 2016 election, its impact did not appear to be as severe as those narratives seem minimal at best (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Partisanship has been demonstrated to be a significant predictor of whether individuals believe stories favorable to Trump and disparaging of Clinton. Therefore, finding that Republican stories constitute the vast majority of fake news could have a significant impact, since Republican voters could be more likely to believe them. According to some evidence, believing fake news has the potential to affect voter decisions (Blake, 2018). There is no clear indication that fake news played a role in the 2016 election, By a margin of less than one percentage point, Clinton lost to Trump in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, states that are attributed to his victory, could lead one to rationally conclude that even a small amount of influence could have had an adverse impact on the election (Blake, 2018).

Detecting the phrases incorporated with fake news headlines which unfairly criticize Hillary Clinton as infirm or predacious are in large numbers, compared to the phrases incorporated with Donald Trump's authentic scandals. Identically, Twitter flagged that certain phrases related to fake news of Clinton have been viewed nine times more when compared to the headlines in relation to actual news about Trump's disorderly conduct with women (Stabile et al., 2019). Women invariably get exposed to negative media coverage than men, and especially with the consideration that, though Clinton's cabinet was distinctive, it exposed different perspectives in which female candidates running for office are far more complicated than male ones, because of gender stereotyping and sexism (Lawless, 2009).

The observation regarding Pizzagate and the Hillary Health Scare, as proportion to the contesting, but the impropriety of Trump's recorded remarks in regard to women, directs that there can added repercussions against women for not complying with gender stereotypes which have

disbarred them from taking up designations of power and potentiality than for male who act poorly in abiding to gender norms of male prerogative and sexual superiority (Stabile et al., 2019).

### ***Social Media Usage by local / Candidates***

#### ***Social Media Engagement***

The essentiality of marked individual political leaders in molding social media strategies was seen across the interactions. Researchers stated that their social media use is been directed from the understanding of their leader: who they are in agreement of their public character, political history, strategy stances, thought process, temperament and comfort with social media engagements According to director of global politics and government outreach of Facebook Katie Harbath, demonstrated the relevance between political leader and social media personality in terms of "authenticity"; I understand that political leaders who have most prosperity, and this is something we convey into them every time we converse with them, Be authentic, be real. "Facebook employees indefinitely conveyed that political leader who were the most "legitimate" performed better in increasing their interactions on social media (Kreiss et al., 2017).

The researchers demonstrated that they intend to use social media in a way that conveyed the authentic message of their political leaders. While Alexander (2010) convincingly states a point that viewers can never discriminate between authentic and contrived personality at the given measure of polity. investigators usually spoke regarding their candidates in terms of originality and pressured the importance to fit their own work to the voice of their political leaders.

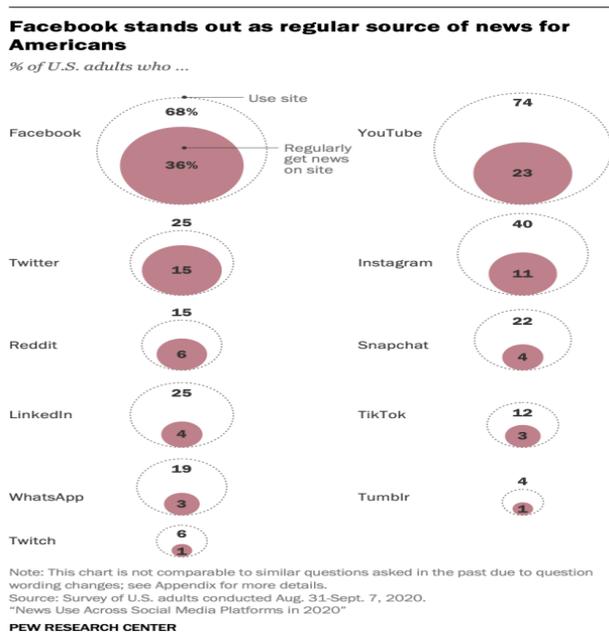
As a result of Facebook's wide potential audience, candidates were able to use it for a variety of purposes, such as advertising in online publications and engaging general and targeted audiences and attracting new supporters. As Caroline McCain, social media director stated:

*I think Facebook was the most important for us. Facebook was by far our largest channel. Facebook is the least insular. I think in DC a lot of people think Twitter is so important. Twitter was important, Donald Trump made it important. It still is not as big as Facebook. It's not; there's clearly industry data to speak to that. Facebook was our biggest source of traffic. It was our biggest source of engagement and so if we ever had something, Facebook always came first in my*

*mind in terms of where to go with something. It was our most diverse audience. It was, I think, on our Facebook page we actually had more men than we did women, which was unusual. Typically, that's reversed. We had a really great cross-section in terms of age and slightly more men than women (personal communication) (Kreiss et al., 2017, p. 9).*

Scientists illustrated the ways they could use the social media outlets to integrate needed and important information about followers, which they could then use for agendas of catering aimed advertisements to like-minded viewers. As Maiorana, of the Huckabee campaign, detailed, "Facebook stands as a most essential platform for us. It can be described as a place to construct, enhance data, with a slight of interaction that has been reviewed, we can specify like-minded audiences and target them, deliver messages to them, and fundraise from them" personal communication (Kreiss, 2016).

Fisher et al. (2019) discovered that followers of political leaders are younger than average nationals and prefer to "listen plainly from a political party or leader than to have their perspectives refined by other individuals."(p.243). As a result of social media integration, actors who are less interested and knowledgeable about politics are more likely to engage with political news directly through these social media outlets than in traditional mass media (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018).



Note: The Pew Research Center conducted a survey of U.S. adults between Aug. 31 and Sept. 7, 2020.

In a Pew Research study, of the 11 social media sites considered as regular sources of news, Facebook ranked first, with approximately a third (36%) of Americans claiming to get their news from it frequently. YouTube is the second most popular news source, where 23% of U.S. adults regularly view news. About 15% of U.S. adults use Twitter as a regular source of news.

The voice of others plays a very significant role in this process. Voice is the prominent factor in Noelle Neumann's (1993) model of public opinion, and it sits at the most essential state of the spiral of silence theory. As people become more certain to believe that they hold the majority view (the large number of like-minded people), the greater inclined they are to voice their opinions. While, conversely, the opposite view becomes increasingly apprehensive about expressing one's opinion, resulting in increasing silence. According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), these are the processes by which public opinion is formed.

The pollsters were not aware of last-minute changes in the choice of vote or those who decided at the last minute not to vote (Gelman & Azari, 2017). In this context, the Shy Theory or Lying refers to cases when respondents are unwilling to provide candid responses, as a result of a Spiral of Silence theory. In other words when voters refrain from expressing their opinions to pollsters. In addition, Clinton supporters appear to be more inclined to admit that to pollsters as compared to Trump supporters (Zeedan, 2019). Trump voters are shy people who are afraid to share their opinions for fear of judgment. Trump supporters as well as Democratic skeptics have thrown around the notion of a shy voter quite often (Stanton, 2020).

According to Kreiss (2016), the one who demonstrated that Twitter is in use by social media campaigns for the consultation with viewers and mass media personnel during high profile gatherings. There is an already proven research pattern regarding the implementation of various media platforms for the outputs and activities based on political knowledge, political engagement, and polling (Prior, 2007), stating that regardless of the information read offline or online, it impacts the perspectives of the issue's prominence. The choice of the information at any given individual stage is refined by various media platforms, even during the times, where the primary place of origin of the information remains unchanged. Similarly, New York Times newspaper edition strongly conveys to the audience by bestowing journalistic cues and a healthy knowledge on "public affairs coverage", but viewers of its online impression were filtering the context in a style that caters their characteristic interests (Stier et al., 2018).

Media represents the second most important factor in forming a public opinion. Actors tend to blend their personal views and opinions with those, which are refined through the perceptions of social media into an undivided entirety that seems to have originated from their views and perspectives (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). There are two mechanisms that media works with. Primary, they construct common knowledge (Clemente & Roulet, 2015). Through intensifying the valency between the actors of a disintegrated audience, most of them, who do not interact (Moy et al., 2001; Cattani et al., 2008). As Adut (2008) emphasizes, we all consume similar things in the newspaper, while minding that, others are also consuming the identical content, which in turn construct generic commands about events. Also, the Media pledges mastery and saliency. There is a norm that whatever is produced in the media is capable of being told and, in being told, obtains contingency. Media poses an essential force for examining the climate of perspectives at the public level.

Social media was used in 2016 US elections more than any other election in American presidential history. Many of the debates happening on the Television were co-presented by these social media outlets (McCabe, 2016). Innovative measures were aggressively being taken to scale the public opinion and send the related information to the campaign personnel. A new tool was launched during the GOP debate on 10 March by Facebook, which provided users with a platform to interact and contribute their perspectives in real-time, while the debate was happening, campaign people can see a graph of the results. The head of news, politics, and elections for Twitter Adam Sharp, stated that this is the first time in the presidential debates that people are exhibiting their emotions and they are being heard ( Ruskell, 2015).

For instance, the study indicates that fear of isolation originates not specifically from the majority's perspective, but also from the perspectives of friends and family. By sharing information only with the set of people who are like minded and not paying attention to the set of people who think differently (Moy et al., 2001). " people no longer will have their quasi-statistical capability to appropriately examine perspectives of the environment"(Noelle-Neumann 1993: 124). In this scenario, the community breaks apart into two different groups, where every group emphasizes to be predominant over the other. "Two different persuasions" arise (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Latest studies regarding the spiral of silence emphasizes that social individuals intend to portray themselves to the chosen media, and these platforms predominantly have a larger impact

on their prospect to convey their message (Tsfati et al., 2014). As the field media is intended at, and altered to, field actors, it tends to appear largely in regard and express a solid expression for conformity. The perspective they exert is viewed as a dominant one at the field level, specifically when they are recognized as the ones close to the essential actors of the field (Lounsbury & Rao, 2004). Thus, social media generates two antithetical impacts on the spiral of silence mechanism: individuals prefer data or news which is aligned with their previous views, but simultaneously, social media improve their possibility to cater to the majority's interest to increase their reach.

However, it will stand as an open concern, if political leaders alter their media messages to the issue preferred by a huge audience or specific social media crowd. In comparison to Druckman and colleagues (2010), who disclosed long-established plan of actions on social media campaign sites, invariably assert that social media portray an inconsistent communication constellation: political leaders are confined in an interactive circumstance that deviate their postings to the issue preferences of their very active communication group.

In the field of campaign resources, they have to designate their social media policies or protocols depending on the defined polling value of various outlets, which are connected not only to actors but also the kinds of engagement that experts trusted they supported. Pattern associates with and impacts how and if the content reached respective viewers, and what those viewers can predominantly do in a social media platform. Actors demonstrated that Instagram is highly volatile when it comes to political engagements, but it also lacks the capability to entertain foreign links, during most of the happenings, it did not act as an interface that invariably transformed that political engagement in to polling impact and resources (Stier et al., 2018).

Political leader's campaign messages, more than three contentions refer to social media that pose a campaign climate different from that of mass communication stages. Primary, we have to put into consideration that social media's essential use is not only to talk about the issues which are significant to masses, also to exert different other functions in election campaigns, For example, recognizing three responsibilities: escalating issue positions, exhibiting serviceable personality characteristics, and enhancing name recognition (Kobayashi & Ichifuji, 2015). Jungherr (2016) described a four-part classification which differentiates between organizational uses, efficient campaigns in the information space, resource collection and issuance, also for symbolic uses. A substantial part of effective online campaigning relies on the engagement of

followers, as well as the coordination of campaigns (Lilleker et al., 2011; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013).

Campaign has to normalize the complete range of platform features on social media outlets to provide a consistent message, showing that this is the "state of the art". Also, the demographic characteristics, political values, and interests of social media users differ significantly from the characteristics of a representative sample of national citizens. In relation, political leaders need to be indicated to discuss subjects. There are quite a few policies related to the internet that are more important to social media actors than to the people who watch mass media and report campaign events. In addition, leaders themselves use online media for a variety of purposes and appeasements (Hoffmann & Suphan, 2017; Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014). An important function of the internet is the convergence of public and private functions. The different works of campaigns and interactions with desirable audiences by a selected set of political leaders, can be assumed that the subject's importance in the messages leaders post on social media do not necessarily reflect the topic's relevance to mass audiences. On Twitter, most follower's accounts are public and easily reachable even for the users who do not have an account in twitter. Its application revolves around issues and the feature retweet provides the reach of political data beyond the direct follower through network and two step flow process (McQuaid, 2010).

### ***Social Media Usage By International Actors***

#### ***Weaponization of social media by Foreign Actors/states***

The report broadcasted in January 2017 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence is one of the most well-known and well-attested reports concerning Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. According to this report, which is highly confidential, Russian interference in the election has been directed at the current Russian president Vladimir Putin. It is also defined in the report that this interference was aimed to destabilize people to undermine trust in the democratic process in the United States and undermine Secretary Hillary Clinton's electability and presidential prospects. It should be noted that the Russian election interference operation had a number of components, the primary and most important part is the hacking and disclosing campaign, which was ran against by a Russian military intelligence firm.

This organization is known as the General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate. DNC officials' personal email accounts were hacked by the GRU; they did it by invading DNC servers and predominantly disclosed the data accumulated to multiple platforms, including the Guccifer 2.0 persona, WikiLeaks and DCLeaks.com. Aside from the servers that were hacked and released, none of the underlying computing devices were destroyed in the hacking-and-releasing campaign. In contrast, the Russian media outlets, RT and Sputnik, have begun broadcasting a dissemination campaign in English in support of presidential candidate Donald Trump. Furthermore, the Internet Research Agency, an NGO intimately associated with Russian intelligence, launched a social media campaign during the 2016 election. Up to two million dollars was invested in anti-Clinton and pro-Trump advertisements on major social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The creation of a large number of fake accounts on social media outlets was used to connect with voters. Across outlets, more than 120 groups and trolls were initiated by the IRA while working their election interference agenda (Xiao, 2020).

The challenges faced by social media companies remain but are insignificant in comparison to the capability of governments to weaponize social media both domestically and internationally. The manner in which social media companies categorize their users into community groups, for example, on Facebook through friends, or based on hashtags on Twitter provides an accessible avenue for manipulating these groups. Add to that the manner in which social media companies sell audience data to advertisers by identifying critical factors through the interactions of their users such as friends, posts, clicks, likes, shares, etc. Which have unprecedented power to manipulate domestic as well as foreign audiences. Even though the scandal surrounding Cambridge Analytica has caused outrage for its method. The social media business model is still largely based on the same ability of identifying and manipulating social media users (Oates, 2020).

There appears to be little resentment towards this practice. It would appear that social media companies argue that if social media becomes the fifth dimension of warfare, then it is unfair to impose its consequences on the nature of social media itself. According to the author Vaidyanathan (2018), argues that social media has been designed as the perfect platform for dissemination, with social media companies taking minimal precautions in order to prevent misinformation's spread. The arguments presented by Zuckerberg and other social media executives are at the very least misinformed, and at the very worst, they are disingenuous. As

evidenced by the fact that social media platforms are being weaponized and the lack of rights of recourse for foreign nationals against U.S. companies, in spite of the fact that media platforms are left unregulated and largely unresponsive, their choice is not to significantly change their business models. There is no doubt that shareholders in companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google would oppose greater regulation of their platforms.

It is necessary to return to the concept of the fifth dimension of war, that is information warfare, in order to completely comprehend the role of social media companies in warfare. The addition of it to the other dimensions of land, sea, air, and space makes five dimensions. There is no doubt that information warfare is not a new concept, but the digital realm has dramatically changed and augmented it. Taking advantage of the nature of social media, foreign intervention operations have the possibility of identifying key groups, infiltrating them, and manipulating them. It has become increasingly clear that Russians were involved in the use of wedge issues in 2016 as a means to polarize and manipulate U.S. citizens and were capable of manipulating Trump supporter's social media was particularly useful in this regard (Jamieson,2018). This means that social media company design has no longer been viewed as a matter of pros and cons. As analyst Vaidhayanathan (2018), points out the design of Facebook makes it an ideal platform for information warfare. Due to the nature of social media as it is today, such activities cannot be detected or curbed as it is an inherent feature of the platform. Therefore, the ingenuity of American corporations combined with business logic created a weapon that is used against citizens of the United States.

The information war conducted by Russia followed a two-fold strategy. First, a series of efforts were made to rally rightwing support for Trump by pretending to be U.S. citizens and sharing pro-Trump material on Facebook. Secondly, there was a high degree of demoralization of Clinton supporters and a reduction in support for the Democrat. It included a large social media campaign aimed at discouraging African American participation at the elections and encouraging leftist support for Third Party candidates.

Additionally, hacked messages have also been made public following the hacking of the DNC and Clinton campaign emails. Trump's retweets were attributed to Russian trolls. This is an impressive level of success for a foreign propaganda campaign conducted on such a large scale as an American Presidential election. The overwhelming amount of fake news in the election

campaign is not primarily due to Russia. Russian sources have been attributed to a relatively small number of fake news stories. Also, domestic misinformation proliferated far more in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election than Russian misinformation. During his campaign, Trump himself circulated a lot of false news stories.

Last but not least, news articles that become viral are likely to bring in a lot of advertising revenue, which contributes to the spread of fake news. As a matter of fact, most of Russia's propaganda mimicked messages that were already widely spread during the campaign. A wide array of right-wing media organizations such as Fox, Breitbart, talk radio has tremendous influence on US public affairs, including the Trump campaign. In a large variety of rightwing media outlets, provocations against the IRA had already become a comprehensive part of programming that aimed to provoke the rightwing. There is no doubt that such interventions of the Russian side have only added to the already cacophonous sounds of incendiary rhetoric and misinformation ( Way & Casey, 2019).

The argument contends that Russian trolls' effectiveness was directly attributable to their redundant nature, a fact that re-enforced Donald Trump's campaign themes in an unequivocal way. It is not clear, however, that Trump needs Russia to make his message stronger in light of the billions of dollars he receives in free media (Jamieson, 2018).

### ***Chapter 5: Conclusion***

There are three main findings from this study that are of great importance. First, that the impact of fake news on the election results was minimal. There was far too little difference in the 2016 US election between the winning candidate and the losing candidate. This suggests that even a marginal effect can have a significant impact on a candidate's or party's election outcome.

Second, candidates and politicians recognize the importance of social media. Resulting in a decrease in the focus of their campaigns on traditional campaign rallies, Which served as a platform for candidates to spread information and encourage the public to believe and support candidates through social media.

Third, the social media business model is widely employed, and the companies have never been questioned. In this regard, it is an additional advantage for information warfare which serves enemies to weaponize social media.

Social media provided a platform for political leaders to individualize their campaigns and aim at specific or targeted communities of electors with a predefined reality. examine the impacts of such political micro-aiming, which destroyed day to day endorsement costs on Facebook during the 2016 US presidential campaign. We scale the power of social media campaigns with the help of disparity in endorsement costs dictated to approach desired audiences, described by political history, location, and demographic traits. There are two basic concerns addressed: how effectively did each candidate's social media campaigns pursue each community of followers? How huge was the impact on electors? we can conclude that micro-aimed political endorsements on social media outlets had serious and long-lasting impacts when conditioned on location, thought process, ethnicity, and sex. Subjection to these endorsements compelled voters to not change their predefined polling objectives, specifically among the people who exerted a determination to vote for Donald Trump. It can also be stated that micro-aimed endorsements decreased turnout in aimed liberals, contrastingly increased turnouts, and reliance for Trump in the moderates (Liberini et al., 2020). Internet functionalities, such as search engines and social media outlet workers, exert prominent regulatory functions in the social media universe. They dictate the utility, approachability and importance of context and thus convulse huge authority over the diffusion of fake news. This decodes the reason behind the excessive criticism of social media's role and the compulsion to suppress and intercept the stream of "fake news". It includes the reason behind the controversial German Act to enhance enforcement of the law in social networks places so much prominence on social media platforms' commitments to immediately work with and give an account of accusations about unlawful context. This law has been denigrated for its impact on the human's basic right of free speech (McGonagle, 2017).

The circulation of data and the apparatus for democratic engagement have been predominantly altered since the introduction of digital media, specifically social media. Social media outlets such as Twitter have been largely complemented for its endowments to democratization of public discussion on civic and political concerns. Also, there are many studies and findings that exert with the conditions of abuse of these social media platforms. The

distribution of illusionary, fake, and specious data targeting to orchestrate public opinion stands as prominent features among risks. There's one field where the ideological assaulters such as Russians and other nations personnel, were partly successful in influencing the public was in the 2016 Presidential US election through deceptive and false information campaigns. Technology personnel have been reluctant in recognizing network trolling and very less were aggressively taking part in spotting and knocking it out from the bottom (Badawy et al., 2018). I have disclosed the issues that deceptive and fallacious information causes when spread during or before elections but justifies mentioning it again here that without the co-operation of state-of-the-art computing tools, there wouldn't be much to combat against penetrating and single-minded misinformation campaigns run on social media outlets-foreign or domestic.

The 2016 Presidential election in the United States was a largely controversial one, as both political leaders of Democratic and Republican party Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump respectively, experienced solid contrasting resort and resistance with controversial social media campaigns, personal attacks, and savagery at campaign rallies. This had led to an atmosphere where voters were reserved in exhibiting their resort for a leader or candidate (Kushin et al., 2019). The spiral of silence theory in public opinion, demonstrated by German scholar Elizabeth Noelle-Neuman states that the public are less willing to openly endorse a political leader, if they tend to experience that their candidate is uncherished. This unlikely behavior of not exhibiting support to the unpopular leader, can lead to that candidate being less accepted - the spiral of silence. The tendency of Trump voters in not exhibiting their support openly on platforms and online, can lead to a scenario of less acceptance of Trump in public opinion polls (McKinley et al., 2020).

After going through the thorough analysis regarding the influence of social media on public opinion and how this can be used to manipulate and orchestrate the view and perspective of electors. It can be stated indefinitely that democracy's future poses a big threat. Additionally shedding light on the enhancement of media in selective broadcasting and micro-aiming information at the most vulnerable and desired audience has helped them in steering the results of government orders, election polls in the desired manner. This also shows its extreme impact on younger generations, where they are sourcing their data from these social media channels and are in a confused state of what are the facts and what is fiction. Change in present regulations of social

media and their realm of free speech is the initiation of change in the kind of future we need to avoid. These social media outlets acting as nation states in their own capacity need to be capacitated under the constitution to regulate the ability and the scale of chaos exhibited by them.

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