

WHY POLITICIANS SHOULD BE BANNED FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

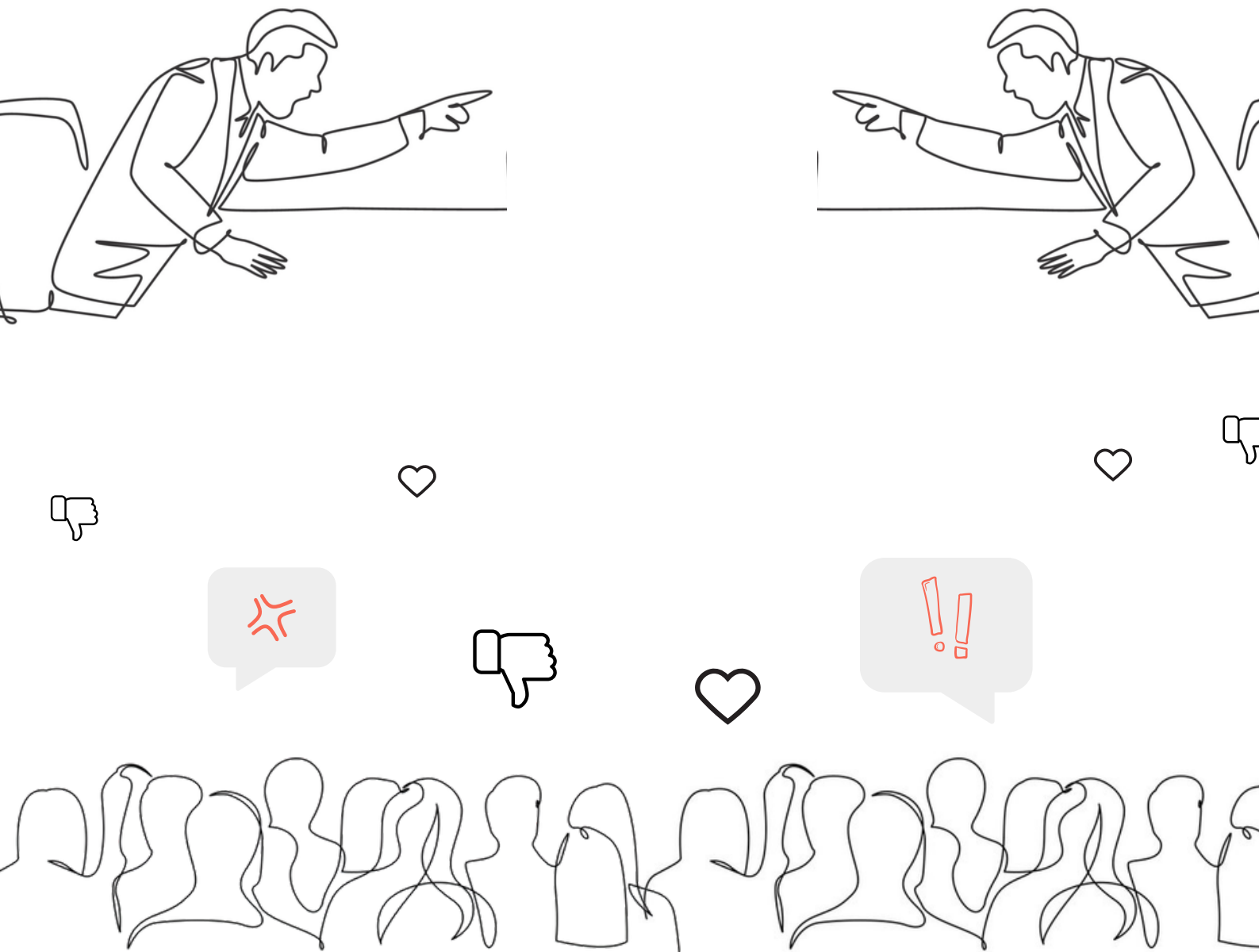
EXAMINING THE POLITICS OF CONTENT
MODERATION: CONTENT MODERATION
PRACTICES NEED TO CHANGE
ESPECIALLY FOR POLITICAL CONTENT

MONICA LOUIS
INNOVATION MINDSET
FALL 2022



"it's the very business model that promotes capturing our attention by catering to our anger and polarization that needs to be reformed."

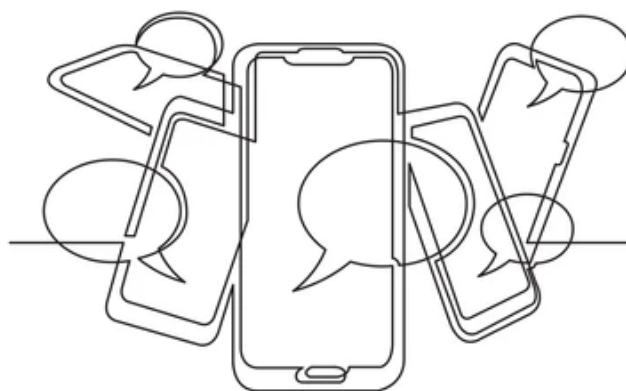
-Tristan Harris
co-founder of Humane Technology



Just as the clickbait title of this article got your attention, we find that our minds have been primed to pick up extreme and, often, negative headlines while scrolling through social media. While social media has played an essential role in helping us build communities and connecting us with the larger world, the diversity of online content has created divergent experiences for different groups using social media platforms. Personalized feeds designed by complex algorithms (we do not understand) have led to behavioral changes that didn't happen overnight and have permanently changed how we think and behave. These algorithms, designed to make our stay on respective platforms longer, have found that pushing extreme content into our social feeds is one way to achieve this. Fringe groups (such as anti-vaxxers) that otherwise would not get any media coverage are suddenly in the spotlight, and people who are usually able to discern fact from fiction, begin to believe the misinformation they see online.

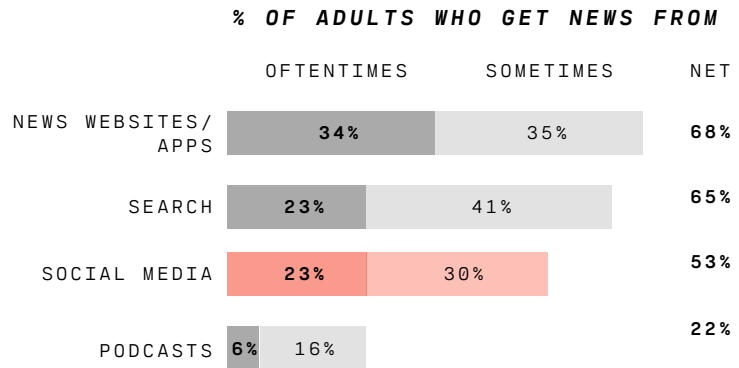
While the platform bears no responsibility for the content its users generate, many people believe that the failure of social media to regulate fake content alters civic engagement, thereby threatening democracy.

I believe platforms can instigate change in their culture by creating environments that might prevent the spread of abuse and misinformation. This article aims to examine social media's effect on political discourse. The importance of improving interactions with political content on social media, and what should platforms be held responsible for.



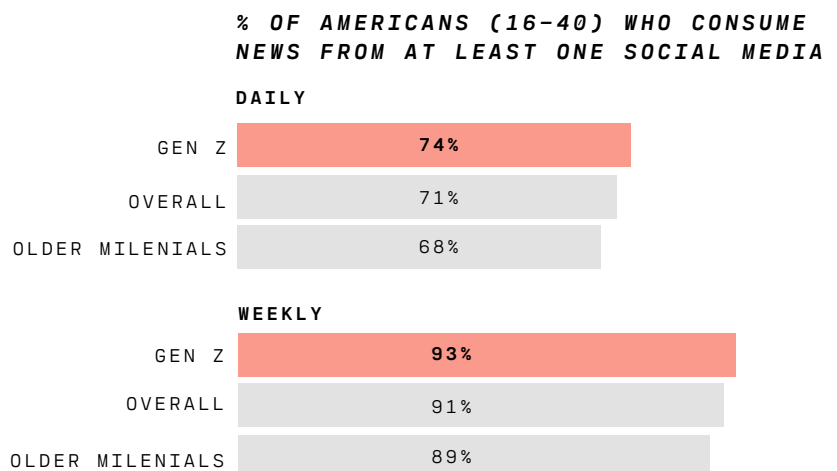
Social Media is going to take over Traditional Forms of Obtaining News

Social media has become a vital part of our lives. [53% of Americans](#) stated they use social media to get their news in 2020.



SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER, SURVEY OF ADULTS, 2020

Gen Z has the highest share of individuals using social media to obtain news.



SOURCE: AP-NORC POLL CONDUCTED 2022, WITH 5975 RESPONDENTS 16-40

With the rampant abuse and misinformation that pervades these platforms, and increasing numbers of users turning to these platforms for information and communication, it becomes essential to understand what platforms can do to create honest online communities.

Especially when these online groups have the power to influence the masses or individuals into extreme states of mind, such as [Facebook's involvement in Myanmar](#), Facebook posts were used to incite violence against Muslims in the country. Facebook's failure to regulate these hateful and fake posts spread misinformation about the minority group, leading to national outrage and thousands of deaths. This incident indicates how significant the problem of content moderation is on social media platforms.

All platforms use some form of content moderation. Without it, these platforms would be unusable, filling up with spam and irrelevant content. While content moderation exists, it must be more comprehensive and effective, and preventative rather than coming after public outrage. Platforms recognize content moderation is essential but are reluctant to invest or create better reforms. Partly because of monetary benefits, and partly because it's easier to avoid taking responsibility than facing reactions over moderated and unmoderated content.

According to Rep. Attica Scott, social media platforms are well aware of how misinformation and abuse disproportionately affect minority groups, but their lack of will to understand or research how actions can be taken to curb this makes it difficult for minorities on the platforms

An Under-Moderated World

Can you imagine a city without police? A quick look into the past will show us what happens to a town when law enforcement is absent—complete chaos. In 1969 police went on a strike in Montreal for 16 hours. In that period, six banks had been robbed, a hundred shops had been looted, twelve fires had been set, forty carloads of storefront glass had been broken, and three million dollars in property damage had been inflicted.



Social media looks like a city without law enforcement (especially in the early days). Even though platforms have been creating stricter community guidelines and better AI to catch hate speech, abuse, and misinformation, dedicating large portions of their revenue towards the cause (Facebook alone has committed 3.7 billion), neither the platforms nor the users have been left satisfied. Many forms of abusive and hateful content remain online.

Today social media platforms face a unique challenge: creating environments that promote self-expression while also deciding what content must be censored.

As hosts of user-generated content, these platforms are not responsible for the content being posted (Section 230). They are exempt from defamation and other laws and regulations that traditional media and television are subjected to. In other words, these platforms will assume no responsibility for what is being communicated.

I believe that social media platforms should take a preventive approach to abuse and misinformation, especially when they are aware of how their platforms are being misused. The current social media environment places minority groups at risk and creates a dangerous ecosystem for people to obtain news and form opinions. A recent study on Twitter found that fake news travels faster than real news on the platform. While it's hard to moderate content and hold people accountable, there are several different approaches platforms can take to tackle this problem (highlighted in the recommendation section)

For self-interested social media platforms, technological improvement to improve how content is shared and received may not be in their best interest. Especially when their revenue for advertising increases because of questionable content in the first place, platforms are able to maintain their large communities because they are not moderated sufficiently, and they are aware that improving conditions reduce their economic returns.

The Rules are Changing & Getting More Complex



Launch of Social Platforms

2000-2009

Launch of FB (2004)

Launch of YouTube (2005)

YouTube and Facebook are Global (2009)



Launch of Standardized Community Guidelines

2010-2019

Facebook releases its first set of Community Standards in English, French, and Spanish (2010)

Twitter launches first transparency report (2012)

Facebook launches first content moderation report following document leak (2013)



Mis-information Explodes Online

2010-2019

Terror linked content and online radicalization become a major issue on platforms (2014)

YouTube reverses policy to allow certain violent videos (2014)

Twitter changes content moderation following harassment case against start of rebooted ghostbusters (2015-2016)

FB launches fact checking program (2016)

YouTube releases first transparency report (2018)

Twitter allows its users to appeal its content removal decision (2019)



Content Moderation Expands Internationally with the rise of Hate Speech and Election Misinformation

2020- Present

Covid-19 Misinformation spreads on social media

Twitter and Facebook start labelling Trump's posts

Facebook launches specific policies on Holocaust content, organized militia, conspiracy theories

putting misleading information front and center—adds fuel to politically contentious fires and escalates social issues to the level of crises.

-DUSTIN CARNAHAN

The last years have seen significant shifts in the policies directed towards moderating content. Things have changed drastically for Twitter and Youtube, where initial policies were short (Twitter's less than 600 words) and unclear (Youtube asked users not to cross the line- what constitutes crossing the line still, in many ways, remains undefined). Today the policies and guidelines are much more detailed and span several hundred pages. Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube turn to these policies when the public confronts them in the face of scandal.

Despite these extensive new rules, the people using these platforms still need to be aware of what content moderation looks like. The rules need to be clearly defined, making it easier for the users to follow these guidelines and to hold these platforms accountable for their lack of enforcement. From my interviews with individuals using social media to obtain news, I found that more than two-thirds of those interviewed needed to be made aware of how content is moderated and what policies were implemented to help create safer and honest environments on these platforms.

Political ideologies are now tied to a person's morality, core character, and values. This is why polarizing political messaging on social media has played a crucial role in shaping people's political opinions, translating to increased divisions and sometimes extreme offline behavior. Specific policies and methods must be made to address these issues.

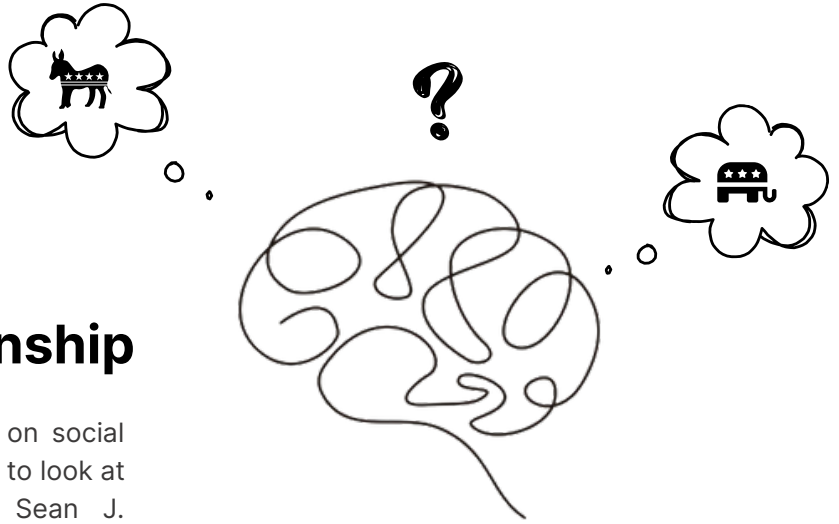
The Evolving Landscape of Politics and Media



Political misinformation has always been around but never so widely spread. Before the advent of social media, individuals would gather around their televisions to observe political discourse or grab a newspaper to catch up on the times. Changes became more pronounced with the birth of the internet; digital technology helped people view static documents and communicate and share the views of politicians easily and more frequently. At the same time, the mechanisms that were used to display information on the different mediums saw a shift. Barack Obama's social media strategy revolutionized how other politicians after him would use social media to mobilize, recruit and influence voters.

Social media platforms differ from other digital channels because of how individuals interact with content. The existence of influencers and followers creates an interesting space where followers begin to identify with influencers on a personal level, enabling influential individuals (such as Trump) to post abusive or fake content but still be supported.

Politicians spreading false and misleading information to achieve their goals is not a new problem specific to social media platforms. "During the second Iraq War, the Bush administration claimed that Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction, planted false stories about heroic U.S. soldiers in the mass media, and heavily limited critical coverage of war casualties and anti-war efforts" (Kumar, 2006; Snow & Taylor, 2006). Similarly, with the Trump administration's role in spreading, and amplifying disinformation, it becomes important that social platforms use the lessons from these precedents.



Humans on Partisanship

Before going further into why politics on social media is hazardous, it would be notable to look at the study by Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood from Stanford University that highlighted how deeply political identities are linked with our identities. The pair handed out 1000 student resumes to people and let them decide whether or not the student deserved the scholarship. The resumes were designed to give clues about the race and political affiliation of the students. The survey results were quite shocking. It was found that while race mattered, it was second to political affiliation. Democrats and Republicans chose applications aligned with their political views 80% of the time. While it would make sense for the student's grades to be the primary factor in making a selection, activating political identity made grades tertiary in the decision-making.

A similar effect was seen in an experiment by Annemarie S. Walter and David P. Redlawsk. They found that when they presented 2000 participants with moral violations by different individuals, the nature of the moral offense was secondary in evaluating the violation. It was instead the political allegiance of the violator that determined the punishment. Walter and Redlawsk found that Democrats were more prone to giving other democrats a pass, and Republicans were more likely to give other republicans a pass.

Our political identities are powerful. So powerful that we will align ourselves with causes or individuals blindly because we believe in the group we identify with. This 'us' versus 'them' attitude is not new. Tribalism is a concept that has existed for tens and thousands of years in the history of human evolution. Kinship with a tribe allows us to bypass using the cognitive effort required for thinking beyond a tribe. Instead of trying to identify a person by their unique characteristics, it's much easier to use tribe as a way to determine a perceived enemy or ally. While this partisan influence on moral judgments is undoubtedly a cause for alarm, it also shows us that as soon as a moral or political issue becomes associated with a specific party, the result can yield polarizing results.

Why is all of this important on social media platforms? The adoption of technology and social media has enabled us to access an abundance of information, with almost half of the world's population on some form of social media and the vast majority of its users using these platforms to obtain news. It is essential for platforms to be careful about content but also understand human behavior. Recognizing the effect of partisanship on an individual and combining it with platforms like Facebook that have created political echo chambers for users is a problem that needs to be addressed.

You can't choose what you see on social media

Behind every feed or recommendation is an algorithm that curates content for you. It determines the posts you see and the order you see those posts. Ideally, you should be in control of the content you consume. The algorithm tracks clicks, hovers, and the time spent watching content to understand what rabbit hole to push you into. Most times, these recommendations are harmless. You go on a spree watching animal videos on youtube. Or tap your feet to the dance challenges on TikTok. Sometimes, however, these recommendations have consequences.

If social media platforms kept the needs of their users at the forefront, we would have a vastly different version of social media today. Unfortunately, platforms view monetary gain as the highest motivator when it comes to designing people's feeds and new platform features.

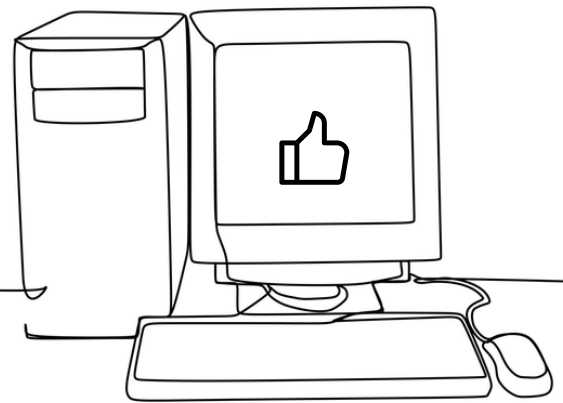
Knowledge Power of Platforms

In recent times social platforms have gained "knowledge power" which comes from the vast amount of information these platforms have collected. The knowledge power is used to micro-target users to sell ads. In addition, it is also used to create "prediction products" which can make it a lot easier to manipulate people.

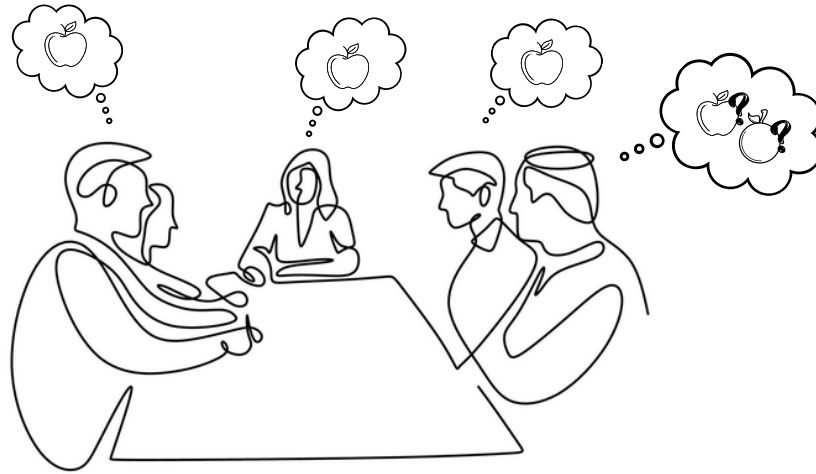
The knowledge power of these platforms can take many forms. Facebook for example has even more information about us than the government does.

"social media has been corrupted by the perverse business model of maximizing engagement. That's what has to change."

-Tristan Harris



In 2007, when Zuckerberg shot down the proposal to create the "Awesome Button" now known as the like button. He argued that the button would decrease engagement, and serve as a way for people to avoid having conversations with one another online. Months later, after a lot of research was put into developing the like button, it was found the number of likes on a post would allow the platform to place posts with higher likes at the top of people's feeds, this would lead to the highlighted post getting even more likes. Through tracking a person's likes, which facebook graciously did, as a way to collect data both on the site, and off the site (if facebook was open in another browser tab) the platform was able to curate more specific content for users.



Decision making in the presence of a social network

Apart from creating a craze to get the most likes on a post, and increasing feelings of anxiety and negativity. The like button has had some part to play in how social media platforms curate polarizing content.

It would be unclear to argue about the implications of a simple like button without going into the implicit biases that affect humans. While we may believe ourselves to be logical and rational individuals, research reveals that in the presence of a social network, signs of logic and rationale are sometimes bypassed.

Research shows that we tend to seek out people similar to us, homogeneity bias, on social media; this means we will follow or network with individuals with the same beliefs as us. When we throw the like button into this, we now have an environment where platforms can see the posts we like and only show us similar content.

Another bias that is exploited by social media is the popularity bias, where the algorithm recommends what is popular to users. If one post garners a large share of likes in your circle, this post will appear on your feed. This can fuel an existing cognitive bias where if many of your peers like a particular post, so you may also try to conform to the post's ideas to fit in with your peer group.

It should also be noted that a person is most influential when just learning about a topic. This would suggest that the algorithms are the most detrimental to children and teens discovering concepts and forming core opinions about these topics that are new to them for the first time.

This can be seen with [YouTube's involvement in Brazil's elections](#). Research revealed that YouTube's search and recommendation system systemically redirected individuals to far-right and conspiracy channels on the platform.

While Jair Bolsonaro was a marginal figure in national politics, he became a star on YouTube, later he went on to become the president of the country, even though YouTube maintains the algorithm does not favor any particular type of content.

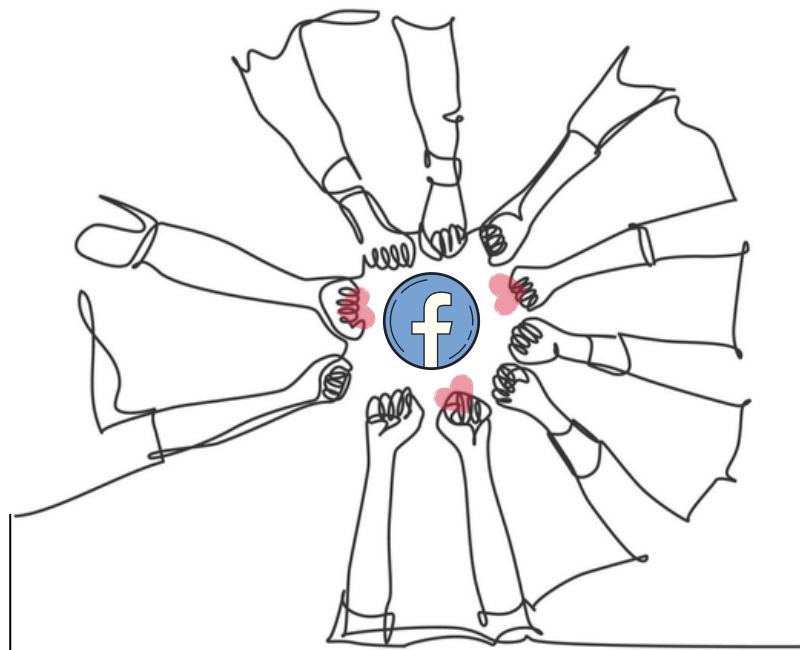
Content recommendation is, therefore, a form of content moderation, platforms get to decide what part of the picture you see based on the opinions the AI has formed of you.

How is Social Media ruining Politics? A look into the Echo Chambers

In 1949 Activists petitioned for the Fairness Doctrine, which was created to ensure diversity in content. With growing fears of monopolizing TV broadcasters, the concept of the Fairness Doctrine was that democracy benefits from a multitude of views, and so broadcasters too should provide equal airtime for differing perspectives. While the Fairness Doctrine was eventually abolished and had its own set of problems. Diverse perspectives are something that social media platforms hardly show us when it comes to political content.

Social media platforms use flow states to keep people engaged and moving from one post to another. If you click on one post, related content will show up, creating a rabbit hole but also filter bubbles.

Social media platforms make more money the longer users stay on their platform and view more ads. Research shows that when individuals see content, they identify with, they ignore it. However, when individuals see content that is polarizing, they tend to spend more time on the platform clicking through it. This behavior pushes platforms to throw polarizing content into our feeds. However, the way social media is structured does not facilitate the engagement of polarizing topics. The polarization is merely to get reactions that further enable the use of the platform rather than serve as a tool for discussion.



What does all of this mean for Politics? Political discourse requires a narrative, and people need to understand the policy and ideologies of candidates. All of this can not be summarized in a tweet or Instagram post. As candidates race to find ways to engage with potential voters, they end up throwing out information that is all buzz with little content. When a user stumbles onto a post containing misinformation or abuse, it triggers more similar posts to show up in their feed. Repeated exposure to these ideologies has the potential to change people's perceptions and make them believe them as the truth.

This argument is not made to say social media is all bad for politics. It has been a great tool to mobilize voters, as seen with the 2020 elections, where social media was a big part of mobilizing Gen Z voters.

Because of the way these platforms are currently structured it becomes extremely difficult to have conversations with people from multiple perspectives. It has been observed that exposure to diverse perspectives is a way to mitigate biases. So why haven't platforms leveraged their technology to craft more diverse perspectives in our feeds? Instead, social media platforms have become spaces with communities of like-minded individuals, this exacerbates the spread of misinformation and abuse as research shows that when we see people within our "communities" sharing a belief, we will also adopt the same ideology (bandwagon effect) because people in the social circle have the same ideology.

The Effects of Social Media on hate crimes



If we look into the past, we will see quite a few examples of online content fueling offline violence. Gamergate was a notable example; in the fall of 2014, harassment under the guise of discontentment with “unethical journalists” turned into a movement where thousands used social media platforms to harass, threaten, and dox outspoken women in the gaming community. Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn had their lives turned upside down from the threats and growing online violence. Online harassment certainly didn’t start with Gamergate, but the destruction it caused to the lives of the women it targeted, brought the issue into the national spotlight. Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor at Syracuse University, believes this event highlighted the dangers a lack of moderation can have on social media platforms.

The Center for Research on Women identified that online gender-based violence is a rising human rights concern, and failing to address technology to deter these acts of gender-based violence is missing an opportunity to prevent negative behavior offline.

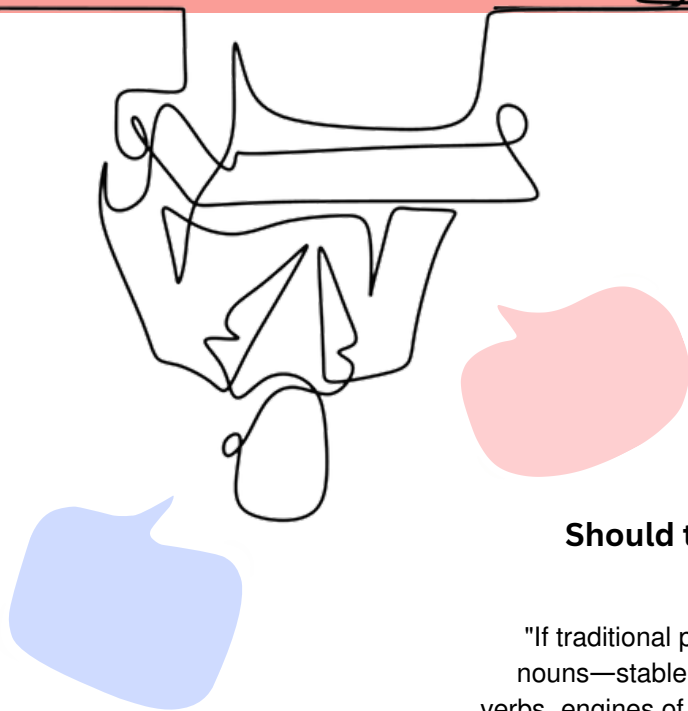
Researchers at the University of Warwick studied every anti-refugee attack in Germany in a two-year span and analyzed the attacks across a number of data points. They discovered an interesting trend where towns that had higher Facebook usage also had higher levels of violence directed at refugees. The study concluded that Facebook and other online communities use subtle methods of distorting the user’s reality and reshaping societies.

A report on the attack on capitol hill on January 6th highlights the largely unchecked ecosystems on Facebook that have played a part in radicalizing extremists. The disinformation and misinformation on the platforms resulted in individuals being held hostage and experiencing violence.

The political significance of understanding how social media platforms can be used as drivers of hate crime is important, as mentioned earlier political identities are now being used over race in making decisions. Politically motivated hate content can create a false perception that others in our community hold extremist ideas, thereby increasing the acceptance and spread of harmful content.

Do platforms need to create distinctions between political content and regular content?

Campaign messaging is getting lost in the sea of content on social media. Its flow into this current is changing the tone and content of political messaging and what people expect from their leaders.



Should there be restrictions on how politicians use social media?

"If traditional print and broadcast media required candidates to be nouns—stable, coherent figures—social media pushes them to be verbs, engines of activity. Authority and respect don't accumulate on social media; they have to be earned anew at each moment. You're only as relevant as your last tweet".

-NICHOLAS CARR

Platforms vs Politics in Recent Times

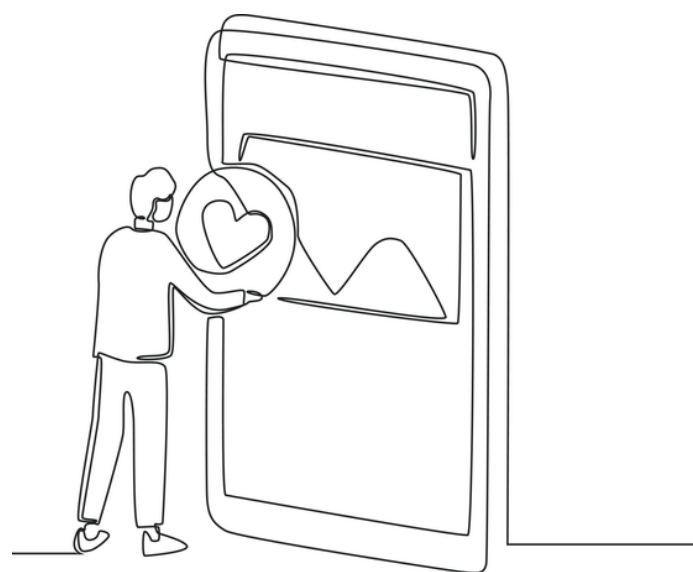
Due to the controversy from the 2016 elections (Democrats arguing that the platform needs to enact stricter guidelines and Republicans arguing that the platform was regulating and censoring content too much), Facebook adopted prior to the 2020 elections as a means to further avoid controversy and create some form of moderation.

Facebook added labels to more than 180 million posts through the period between March and November of 2020 and took down around 265,000 posts for violating the guidelines on voter suppression.

Did the labels succeed? Many civil groups notably expressed that Facebook made the labels useless by labeling all election content the same way, not taking into account the amount of harm certain posts would cause. Generic labels are not the way to stop the spread of misinformation, and news outlets claim that Facebook too knew these labels did little to curb the misinformation on the platform.

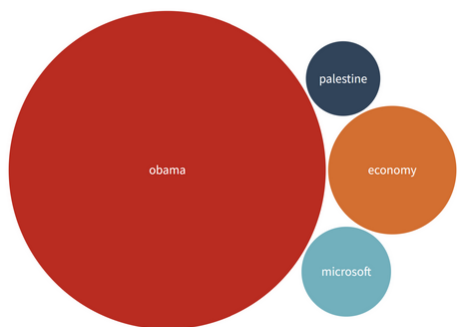
Labels hold the power to change people's perceptions and platforms are not utilizing these labels the right way. Currently, they are just another way for platforms to avoid responsibility, by asserting that they took action to tackle misinformation but when in fact the method did not serve to create any real change.

Labels need to be actionable, highlighting why a post is harmful and why the post is labeled as misinformation. When more data is provided it helps the people consuming the news understand the context and intent better leading to better outcomes.



Visualizing Social Media Data: Some Experiments

Political Content is shared the most on social media , of which fake sources are shared more than legitimate sources



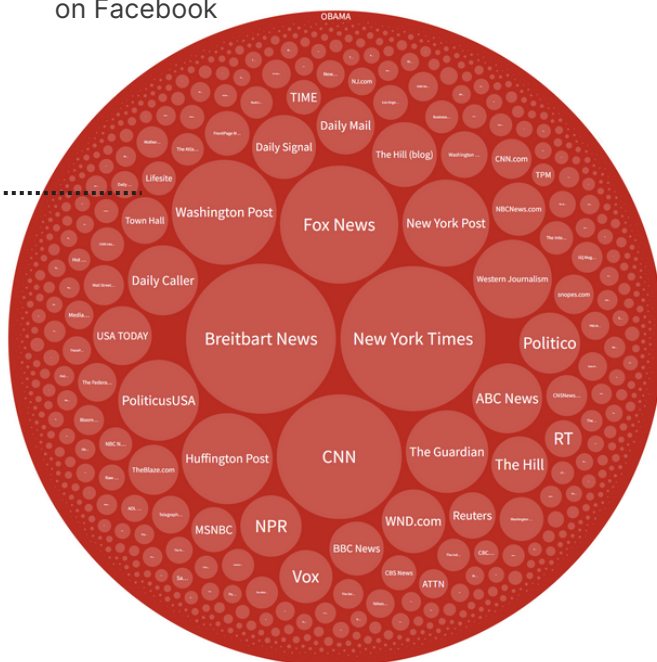
Visualizing news sources shared across Facebook in 2015. The news sources were tagged by category (news related to Obama, economy, Microsoft, and Palestine were the top categories)

News shared about Obama had the highest share on Facebook

News from Breitbart Dominates the Platform

Clusters the sources for news shared in each category, we see that Breitbart news articles were shared more over any other source (202,096 shares).

Breitbart has a reputation for featuring content that is misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist according to academics and journalists.



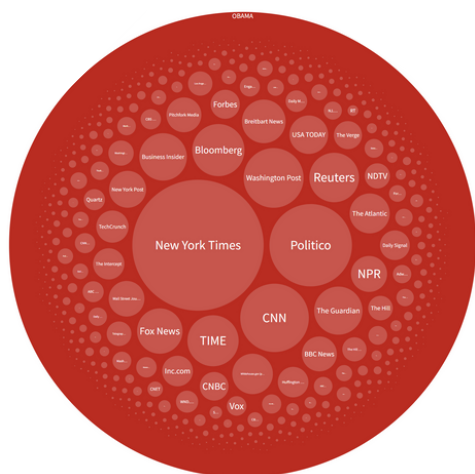
News sources shared on Facebook

Comparing Audiences

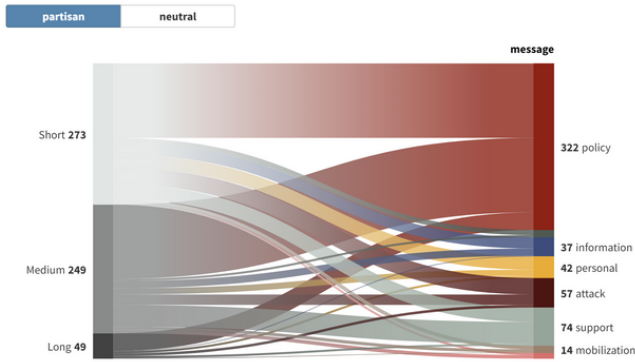
when we look at news sources shared for political content on LinkedIn, the New York Times is the top source.

Social Media platforms have varying audiences and should understand and take measures for demographics that are more prone to sharing misinformation.

As we see in these visuals, Facebook and LinkedIn sharing behavior is different because the people who use these platforms are different.

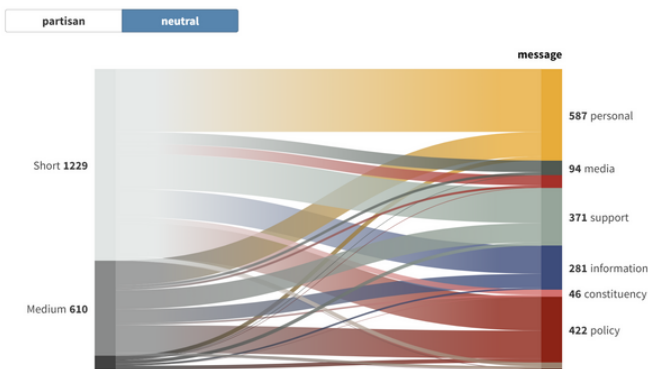


News sources shared on LinkedIn



Messages about Policy come with a Partisan Bias

While looking at the bias (partisan and neutral) of posts by politicians we can see more partisan messaging for messages that contain policy.



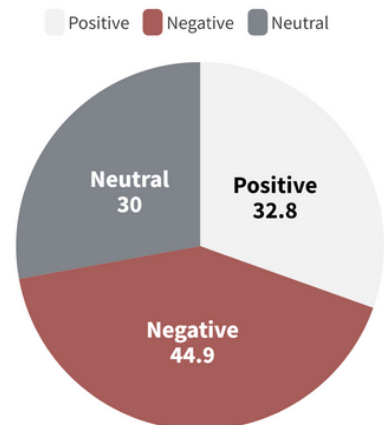
Neutral messaging should be the way opinions about policy are communicated in order to have conversations, however, the tone of these messages could be an indicator of why political content ends up being polarizing.

Political Headline with a Negative Sentiment are found more and get more Engagement

News Headline shared on social media was analyzed by sentiment (Positive, Negative, and Neutral) The analysis was done with the help of python, there are so limitation in the accuracy of sentiment tagging. However, in this pre-liminary analysis, we can see Negative headlines occur more.

When comparing the negative headline with the engagement we see that they also have the most comments

Prevalence of Negative Political Headlines



Engagement (comments) for Negative Political Headlines on Social Media

What can Platforms Do?

The big question! While banning political content and politicians from social media is not realistic, nor is it the right course of action. There are steps or other research platforms that should undertake to address the disparities.

(i) Using empathetic messaging to drive discussions instead of removing posts.

When a platform detects a post containing hate speech, empathetic nudging can be used to dissuade users from posting content. In an experiment to reduce racist hate speech, researchers used warnings, humor, and empathy to influence behavior.

It was found that empathetic messaging increased the retrospective deletion of hate speech.

Nadine Strossen also asserts that individuals should take charge of the situation instead of allowing the government or big tech companies to moderate our content. She discusses the need for compassionate messaging to deter online hate speech.

A method to deploy compassionate messaging by platforms could be in the comments section. From my interviews with individuals using social media, 40% asserted that the comments section is where they turn to get more information and determine whether a post is fake.

The comments section has some role in shaping opinions, and platforms could use these spaces to ensure the discussions for polarizing posts can serve to educate and inform instead of further divide



(ii) Specific Rules, based on Community

different societies have differing needs for moderation based on their attitudes and the governments present. Social media platforms can not use universal solutions while thinking about addressing these issues.

Research shows that they type of government (democratic, authoritarian) can have an impact on positive and negative effects. Keeping in the varying needs will be crucial to determine what platforms should do.

(iii) Complicate the Narrative

Algorithms are currently designed for profit, if these systems were instead designed to better inform and educate our views, it allows people to have meaningful conversations on these platforms. As mentioned earlier in the article diverse perspectives enhance people's decision making especially when it pertains to political content. When platforms choose to show us similar posts and profiles, it furthers the confirmation biases we have.

In an experiment in Columbia's Difficult Conversations Lab, researchers found that the environment in which conversations occurs plays a huge role in the outcome. They observed that adding complexity to the narrative helped the participants have more open minds even when they both had opposing views.

(iv) Standardize adding Sources

In the same way, labels have the ability to inform, adding sources to political content can be a way to help users immediately discern if a post is an opinion or fact. We have so many features that are added to posts, location tagging, and facial recognition of the users in the photo, but there is no space on posts that show if the post is backed by evidence. While it is not required to add sources, having a space where individuals can add a source, would be highlighted on the post gives a way for individuals to quickly fact-check.



v) Provide more transparency

While providing transparency alone is not a solution, greater transparency can help individuals make more informed decisions. When platforms provide more data it allows researchers to conduct independent evaluations. When companies are internally aware of issues regarding misinformation and hate speech on their platforms but do not report these findings, it prevents researchers from understanding the full story.

Nora Benavidez civil rights and constitutional lawyer urges platforms to “show their receipts” when social media companies disclose their business models and moderation practices it allows the people using the platform to be aware of how and why the content they share can have a negative impact on the larger community.

viii) Re-vise how political content is promoted

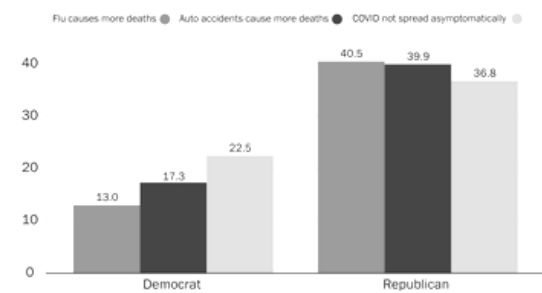
In a society where distrust and polarisation are increasing, treating political content the same as other content on social media might take away from the importance of these conversations. By taking into account the biases that affect humans on partisanship and social networks should be taken into account when social platforms try to be moderators of political conversations.

vii) Give Politicians more guidelines for use of platforms

The effects of misinformation and abuse from influential figures, such as Trump, have a huge effect on how that information will be shared by followers. A study by researchers at Cornell found Trump was the single largest driver of Covid-19 misinformation.

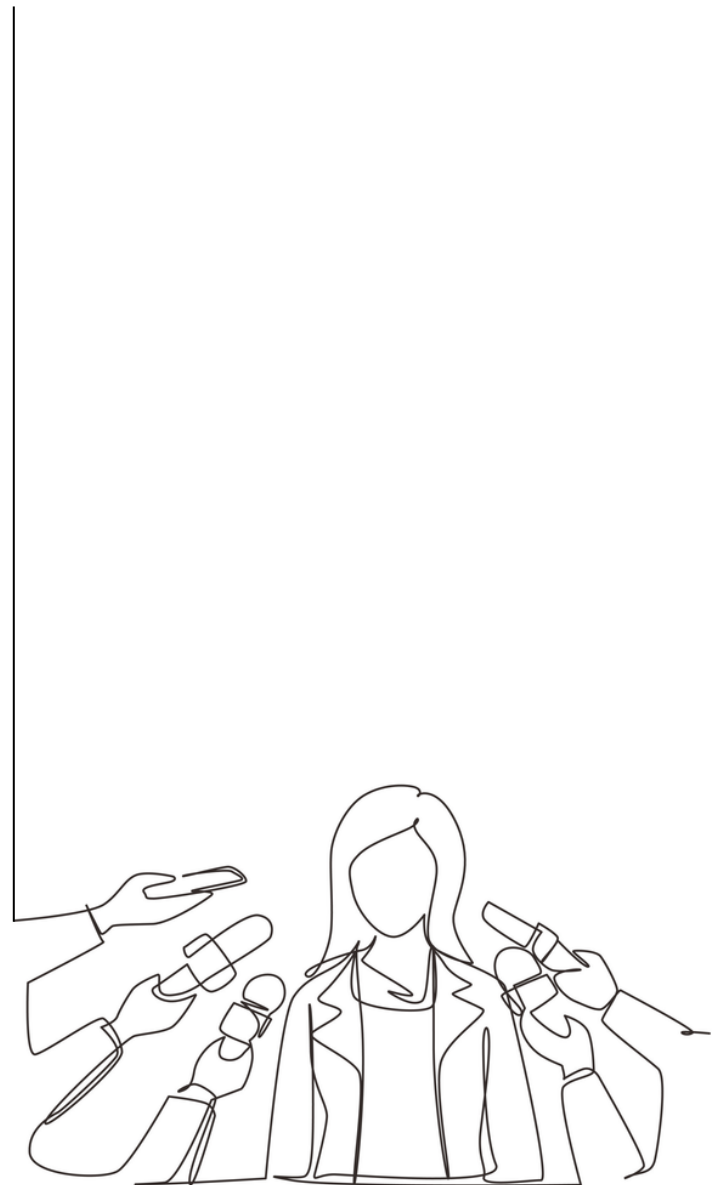
Political affiliation deeply affected how people perceived the pandemic.

Figure 2. Partisan differences in COVID-19 transmission and how deaths compare to other causes



Source: Franklin Templeton-Gallup Economics of Recovery Study, 5,012 responses from Sept 4 to Sept 13, 2020.

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similarly, Political candidates who are targeted online, with disinformation campaigns and abuse could also require guidelines on how to take action. The difference in time where a post remains active could have drastic effects for a political candidate on election results.

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