**Social Media Platforms and Their Role in the Erosion of Democracy in the International System**

**Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In the 2010s, which the *Wall Street Journal* [called](https://wsjshop.com/products/decade-in-review-journal-report-dec-17-2019) the “decade of disruption,”[[2]](#endnote-1) democracy around the world seemed to be eroding in the face of new illiberalism and autocratic regimes. Today, for the first time since 2001, there are more autocracies than democracies in the world, according to the V-Dem Institute’s *Democracy Report 2020*. The number of electoral and liberal democracies dropped from 55% of all countries at its peak in 2010 to only 48% in 2019.[[3]](#endnote-2)

The decline in the number of liberal democracies is crippling the U.S-led liberal world order, weakening America’s post-Cold War hegemony and shifting power to authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia. Zakaria even claims “the American hegemony died.”[[4]](#endnote-3) It seems that illiberal democracies and authoritarian regimes are on the rise all across the globe. Even in the U.S., President Trump is favoring a new kind of hegemony – an illiberal one.[[5]](#endnote-4),[[6]](#endnote-5) This phenomenon can be explained by many reasons, such as the rise of xenophobic populist movements in reaction to immigration, cultural change, the decline in job and economic security after the 2008 economic crisis, and the opposition to globalization and the loss of sovereignty.[[7]](#endnote-6) For authoritarian regimes, the growth of national populist movements in Europe and America is proof that “the liberal idea” has “outlived its purpose,” as the public has turned against immigration, open borders and multiculturalism.[[8]](#endnote-7) Mounk and Stefan Foa mention that a striking number of citizens have started to ascribe less importance to living in a democracy. Recent elections around the world reflect a deep groundswell of anti-establishment sentiment that can be easily mobilized by extremist political parties and candidates.[[9]](#endnote-8)

In this essay, I wish to highlight the role of U.S.-based social media platforms in the decline of liberal democracies and the rise of illiberal and autocratic regimes across the world. At the beginning of the millennium, the Internet and social media platforms offered a fundamentally optimistic promise to connect people worldwide and to create an online world with no borders. They embodied the hegemony of the neoliberal ethos, with its combination of economic entrepreneurialism and respect for diversity and pluralism. According to Rosenberger, “Democratic countries view information as an empowering force in the hands of people: the free and open flow of ideas, news and opinion fuels deliberative democracy.”[[10]](#endnote-9) This optimism peaked in the second decade of the millennium, when social media played a key role in the Arab Spring revolutions and led successful campaigns against other repressive regimes. But as this promise developed, repressive governments began to perceive this model as a threat, “viewing information as a danger to their regimes and something the state must control and shape using censorship and the manipulation of information to shore up their power at home.”[[11]](#endnote-10) This revealed the double-edged sword characteristic of social media platforms: You cannot “bring the world closer together,” as Facebook’s mission states,[[12]](#endnote-11) and “help connect only democracy-­loving Egyptians. You are also connecting white supremacists, who can now assemble far more effectively or radical Buddhist monks in Myanmar, who now have much more potent tools for spreading incitement to ethnic cleansing” as Tufekci notes.[[13]](#endnote-12) Social media platforms are ideal for spreading ideas and reaching an audience that is no longer limited by access to expensive, centralized broadcasting infrastructure. They become an alternative voice for distributing information, but also a tool for populists and malign actors to spread “fake news” and disinformation. These platforms can also serve as a massive surveillance tool, violating democratic principles in liberal-democratic regimes and helping illiberal and authoritarian regimes. Like many technologies throughout history, the use of this technology – for good or bad – depends on the user. Carr states that “Internet technology is not discriminating – it can be used to enhance or undermine state power … the Internet then is neither empowering nor disempowering ... it is an *expression* of the interests and values of those who engage with it.”[[14]](#endnote-13)

Rosenberger claims that the new great-power competition will not necessarily take place on battlefields or in boardrooms. It will be waged on smartphones, computers and other connected devices where different actors shape people’s perceptions of reality, making the world more authoritarian and less democratic.[[15]](#endnote-14) Social media platforms have inherent flaws that help illiberal populists and authoritarian regimes undermine liberal democratic ones. I discuss some of these flaws in this essay, including the “filter bubble” phenomenon and the spread of fake news and disinformation through social media platforms. A filter bubble may block people’s exposure to material they did not chose in advance and prevent them from sharing common experiences, pushing them instead toward polarization and extremism.[[16]](#endnote-15) Fake news and disinformation have the potential to disrupt the usual mechanisms of political accountability, representation and legitimacy.[[17]](#endnote-16)

Previous studies have examined different aspects of the impact of social media platforms on states and regimes, but have usually done this in a siloed way – for example, narrowly focusing on the correlation between social media and the rise of populism,[[18]](#endnote-17),[[19]](#endnote-18),[[20]](#endnote-19) or on the influence of social media in Latin America[[21]](#endnote-20),[[22]](#endnote-21) and in the U.S. 2016 elections.[[23]](#endnote-22),[[24]](#endnote-23) This essay contributes by looking at a broader picture. I describe the multifaceted impact of U.S.-based social media platforms in different countries, and seek to generalize and categorize this impact. These generalizations and categorizations not only help to explain how different countries experience the impact of social media. They can also assist policymakers in predicting what may occur in similar countries where the impact is not yet fully discernible.

The essay begins by reviewing social media platforms and their potential as a liberating mechanism, and examining what went wrong in the last five years. This is followed by a discussion of the variable impact of social media on different states. Why does the impact vary among different liberal states – for example, in Brazil compared to the United States? Why does social media have contrasting effects in authoritarian states – for example, bolstering the regime in Russia, while fueling a revolution in Egypt? I offer a theory to explain why the effect of social media platforms is not uniform, suggesting that the magnitude of their impact depends on the state’s capacity and its regime. I then examine the impact of social media in four case studies, each representing a different combination of state capacity (weak vs. strong) and regime type (liberal vs. authoritarian). I conclude by presenting the implications of my analysis for the future of the international system.

The Rise of Digital Multinational Corporations as Political Actors

A multinational corporation (MNC) is a company that has an organizational presence in two or more national jurisdictions,[[25]](#endnote-24) with its headquarters in one country (the home country) and its operations in at least one other country (a foreign, host country).[[26]](#endnote-25) Multinational corporations are profit-seeking organizations that aim to expand sales, acquire resources, diversify sources of sales and supplies, and minimize competitive risk.[[27]](#endnote-26) Many of the MNCs are extremely powerful and possess economic resources far greater than most of the member states of the United Nations. Some scholars contend that MNCs have become stateless corporations[[28]](#endnote-27) and non-state actors in the international system, detached from their national origins and acting globally in the interests of their (international) stockholders.[[29]](#endnote-28) As such, they owe no loyalty to any state, and can wield influence in multiple states and internationally due to their significant economic, political and social power. Other scholars claim that MNCs are still deeply embedded in their home society and reflect its social, economic and political values.[[30]](#endnote-29),[[31]](#endnote-30)

The stateless characteristic of MNCs is intensified in the case of digital MNCs – multinational entities whose primary business is in the digital and cyber domain. Digital MNCs differ from traditional MNCs in primarily engaging with consumers online, rather than through traditional retail distribution chains. They obtain preferred outcomes by using the electronically interconnected information resources of the cyber domain,[[32]](#endnote-31),[[33]](#endnote-32) which propel their rapid growth and accelerate their speed to scale.[[34]](#endnote-33)

The digital economy is becoming an increasingly important part of the global economy. In most developed and emerging economies, about three-quarters of the population use the Internet[[35]](#endnote-34) and up to two-thirds shop online.[[36]](#endnote-35) The rise of digital MNCs coincides with the economic shift from manufacturing and traditional businesses to an economy of algorithms, data and information.

Social network platforms are digital MNCs whose Web-based services allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile and create a list of other users with whom they share a connection.[[37]](#endnote-36) Social media networks are considered purely digital MNCs[[38]](#endnote-37) because they have fully digital products and services, which are intangible and transnational. Although many social media corporations are based in the U.S., some scholars view them as stateless corporations (also called metanationals) that are less attached to their home country.[[39]](#endnote-38),[[40]](#endnote-39)

Of the seven most popular social media platforms, Facebook owns four – Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Together with YouTube (owned by Google), they are the leading five social media platforms outside of China. The most successful social media application in grabbing, holding and processing human attention is WeChat, a China-based application that encompasses almost every aspect of human life.[[41]](#endnote-40),[[42]](#endnote-41) In some of the social media platforms, such as the micro-blogging service Twitter, the resonating nature of the content is more important than the number of followers or frequency of posting.[[43]](#endnote-42)

Liberal optimists have seen social media platforms as an expression of the liberalizing ethos of the Internet: tools for empowering citizens, enabling economic opportunities, increasing freedom of expression, spreading liberal ideas and providing an alternative communication platform for dissidents.[[44]](#endnote-43) This optimistic view was espoused by some of the founders of U.S.-based social media platforms and can be traced back to Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,”[[45]](#endnote-44) which was popular at the time these companies were established in Silicon Valley. Some of these corporations are moving from political neutrality toward adopting political stances and publicly challenging governments.[[46]](#endnote-45) Facebook’s founder Marc Zuckerberg, for example, has talked about replacing the “old” social infrastructure of the state, “which opposes the flow of knowledge, trade and immigration,”[[47]](#endnote-46) with a new global community.[[48]](#endnote-47) Zuckerberg also stated: “Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected.”[[49]](#endnote-48) Google’s Jared Cohen and Eric Schmidt wrote about the “game-changing” implications of the Internet for politics[[50]](#endnote-49) and predicted that governments “will be caught off-guard when large numbers of their citizens, armed with virtually nothing but cell phones, take part in mini-rebellions that challenge their authority.”[[51]](#endnote-50)

Social media has the power to enhance democracies by echoing public opinion. Shirky argues that social media can help increase freedom (just as the printing press, postal service and telegraph did in the past) and can change people’s political opinions by exposing them to other views echoed by friends, family members and colleagues.[[52]](#endnote-51)

At the beginning of the millennium, social media platforms were indeed credited for shifting power from authoritarian regimes to ordinary people seeking freedom and social justice.[[53]](#endnote-52) Singer and Brooking claim that social media “illuminated the shadowy crimes through which dictators had long clung to power and offered up a powerful new means of grassroots mobilization.”[[54]](#endnote-53) Castells describes the social media networks as “a mobilizing force” that can “topple an entrenched regime if everybody would come together.”[[55]](#endnote-54) These networks can compensate for the disadvantages of undisciplined groups by reducing the costs of coordination, while increasing shared awareness by propagating messages through their platforms.[[56]](#endnote-55) They also offer the promise of a more enlightened politics, as accurate information and effortless communication help good people drive out corruption, bigotry and lies.[[57]](#endnote-56) Indeed, social media platforms played a role in the 2009 civil revolt in Moldova, dubbed “the first Facebook revolution”;[[58]](#endnote-57) the 2009 unrest in Iran, dubbed “the first Twitter revolution”;[[59]](#endnote-58) the 2011 Russian “almost-revolution”;[[60]](#endnote-59),[[61]](#endnote-60) and the first wave of Arab social unrest in 2011,[[62]](#endnote-61),[[63]](#endnote-62) when “the Facebook-armed youth of Tunisia and Egypt” demonstrated “the liberating power of social media.”[[64]](#endnote-63) However, according to Singer and Brookings, these Internet-enabled democratic movements “represented a high-water mark” that was followed by “a countering wave of authoritarianism using social media itself, woven into a pushback of repression, censorship and even violence.”[[65]](#endnote-64)

Clearly, the use of social media has no single preordained outcome. Social media can support incumbent political actors within a country or help external authoritarian powers to disseminate propaganda and disrupt the democratic transfer of power through elections.[[66]](#endnote-65) It is also used by populists who pose a fundamental challenge to neoliberal ideology, spreading untruth and stirring outrage that affects voters’ judgment and fuels partisanship.[[67]](#endnote-66) The same platforms may also be weaponized and used to promote ethnic cleansing. In Myanmar, for example, a country that did not have time to develop a mature and professional media system, Facebook became a convenient vehicle for fake news and the spread of hate speech.[[68]](#endnote-67),[[69]](#endnote-68),[[70]](#endnote-69)

This double-edged sword represents the “dynamic nature of social media.”[[71]](#endnote-70) The “knowledge power” gained in recent years by social media platforms derives from the vast data they have collected and marshaled.[[72]](#endnote-71),[[73]](#endnote-72) According Susan Strange, such power includes “what is believed or known and the channels by which these beliefs, ideas and knowledge are communicated, or confined.” Power in the knowledge structure lies as much in the capacity to deny knowledge, as in the power to convey knowledge.[[74]](#endnote-73)

The knowledge power presented by social media platforms may take many forms. Facebook, for example, knows more about a person than the government does.[[75]](#endnote-74) Zuboff calls this “surveillance capitalism.” The company that pioneered this is Google, which analyzes a person’s queries, photos and emails,[[76]](#endnote-75) capturing every bit of useful information it can,[[77]](#endnote-76) in order to “organize the world’s information.”[[78]](#endnote-77) In 2002, Google discovered it could use the collateral data the company collects to profile users by their characteristics and interests, and then match advertisements to individual users.[[79]](#endnote-78) Facebook is becoming the world’s biggest seller of display advertising[[80]](#endnote-79) by analyzing every bit of data about its users.[[81]](#endnote-80),[[82]](#endnote-81) Over the years, Google and Facebook have improved their product offering (selling ads) to their actual customers by reducing user privacy and gaining more access to a person’s data.[[83]](#endnote-82) In the competition for surveillance revenues, the advantage goes to firms that can acquire vast and varied streams of data. Therefore, social media platforms are expanding both the scope of surveillance (migrating from the virtual world into the real world) and the depth of the surveillance (accumulating data on the personalities, moods and emotions of individuals). [[84]](#endnote-83)

Facebook uses its algorithms to anticipate human behavior and create “prediction products”[[85]](#endnote-84) that make humans easier to manipulate. The aim is to modify their behavior,[[86]](#endnote-85) erode their free will and steer them in a defined direction by using person-directed campaigns.[[87]](#endnote-86)

The knowledge power possessed by social media corporations and shared with other companies[[88]](#endnote-87) helps them to profile and micro-target their users in order to sell more ads. This knowledge power was also harnessed to reshape popular perceptions around the 2016 U.S. elections and the UK’s EU membership referendum.[[89]](#endnote-88),[[90]](#endnote-89) For example, a voter-profiling company, Cambridge Analytica, used a Facebook application to gather detailed information on 50 million people and micro-targeted those individuals. The company then sold this capability to various political campaigns.[[91]](#endnote-90)

Another aspect of the social media corporations’ knowledge power is reflected in their significant role in today’s media industry. Greene calls Facebook, Twitter and Google “the Fifth Estate” because they have replaced the traditional news outlets as the new media magnates[[92]](#endnote-91) and have become the sole dominators of a vast majority of media channels.[[93]](#endnote-92) Many major news companies choose to be part of Facebook’s “instant article” initiative to get people to read news on Facebook instead of a newspaper. This gives Facebook the power to shape public life, including what content is produced, where audiences go and which news and information citizens see.[[94]](#endnote-93) A free and unbiased media has always been a pillar of liberal states, shining a light on government performance through two mechanisms that Bailard termed “mirror-holding” and “window-opening.”[[95]](#endnote-94) The perceived trustworthiness of the news media in liberal states has given these states advantages over non-liberal ones.

In 2012, Facebook declared that its mission is to expand and strengthen relationships between people and to help expose people to a greater number of diverse perspectives.[[96]](#endnote-95) Instead, in only four years, the opposite happened. Facebook became one of the reasons for the divisions among people.[[97]](#endnote-96) This can be attributed to two main factors: the filter bubble phenomenon and the rise of fake news.

Facebook’s algorithms tend to reinforce the filter bubble[[98]](#endnote-97) that shields people from dissenting information and only delivers content that confirms their views.[[99]](#endnote-98) This is because social media networks are part of the digital “attention economy” that focuses on the interplay between money and attention. The more people are engaged with the content on these platforms, the more they will want to stay connected to them. This, in turn, results in greater exposure to commercial ads, which generates income for the social media platforms. In order to keep people engaged, Facebook tends to expose them to the most popular posts and to confrontational and angry news items that make people more extreme in their views.[[100]](#endnote-99) This is a distorted interpretation of what Negroponte termed “The Daily Me” – a customized news package, with each individual entirely in charge of selecting what they see and hear.[[101]](#endnote-100) Facebook encourages political society to self-segregate into communities of like-minded, intensifying connections among members of the same group (also called “homophily”), while increasing the distance among different groups.[[102]](#endnote-101),[[103]](#endnote-102) When there is only a limited argument pool and people’s views are constantly corroborated, they gain confidence and become more extreme in their beliefs, causing group polarization.[[104]](#endnote-103)

Allcott and Gentzkow define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” This type of news is prevalent because it is cheaper to provide than precise reporting and because consumers enjoy partisan news.[[105]](#endnote-104) A fake story shared by millions becomes “real” as people believe that “if it’s going viral, it must be true,”[[106]](#endnote-105) and the most inflammatory material will travel the farthest and fastest. Vosoughi et al. found that false stories on Twitter, for example, spread significantly faster and more broadly than true ones. Falsehoods are 70 percent more likely to be re-tweeted. This is because the novelty of false stories attracts human attention and encourages people to share them. The social media advertising market also creates financial incentives to disseminate fake news because the wider distribution of false stories makes them more profitable.[[107]](#endnote-106)

Fake news is not a new phenomenon and dates back many centuries. However, it has gained importance due to the rise of social media platforms as news outlets, where content can be produced and relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking or editorial judgment.[[108]](#endnote-107) This trend has been reinforced by the continuing decline of trust and confidence in the traditional mass media.[[109]](#endnote-108) Extreme examples of fake news spread by social media networks can be found in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where the dissemination of hate speech contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims[[110]](#endnote-109) and anti-Muslim riots, respectively.[[111]](#endnote-110)

Social media has become a platform where fake news and filter bubbles combine to produce people who are incapable of engaging with each other and lack a shared body of accepted truths. Fake news finds fertile ground in a divided electorate with clear in-groups and out-groups, where people are ready to accept any statement as long it is consistent with what they already believe.[[112]](#endnote-111) YouTube’s recommendation algorithm, for example, is responsible for 70 percent of the total time users spend on the site.[[113]](#endnote-112) The algorithm typically recommends videos that echo the political bias of its viewers and what they choose to view. It then feeds them videos containing viewpoints that are more extreme than the ones they currently hold.[[114]](#endnote-113),[[115]](#endnote-114) Along with conspiracy theories and hyper-partisan viewpoints, these videos feature content that is false, misogynist and misleading, including content from hate groups – even when viewers have shown no interest in such content.[[116]](#endnote-115),[[117]](#endnote-116) This facilitates manipulation and the spread of fake news that may amplify divisive social and political messages.[[118]](#endnote-117)

Paul and Matthews call this phenomenon the “*firehose of falsehood* – an unremitting, high-intensity stream of lies, partial truths and complete fictions spewed forth with tireless aggression to obfuscate the truth and overwhelm and confuse anyone trying to pay attention.”[[119]](#endnote-118) They claim it had an impact in recent years on the democratic elections in Ukraine, Italy,[[120]](#endnote-119) France, Germany and the U.S., and on the Catalan independence referendum in Spain.[[121]](#endnote-120) For example, “firehosing” in the U.S. electoral process included attempts to influence public opinion[[122]](#endnote-121) and promote political protests.[[123]](#endnote-122),[[124]](#endnote-123) In the final three months of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post* and *NBC News*.[[125]](#endnote-124)

The knowledge power of social media platforms to micro-target individuals is particularly vulnerable to abuse in an environment of fake news and filter bubbles. Some scholars claim that authoritarian and illiberal states started using social media platforms in recent years as part of the international balance of power. That is, they are using these platforms to counter attempts to liberalize the world and to replace global democratic norms with authoritarian practices as part of what Miller calls “the boomerang effect”[[126]](#endnote-125) and what Benson describes as the “handicapping the enemy” strategy.[[127]](#endnote-126) These states may use the Internet, and especially the social media platforms, to spread fake information for hostile purposes, in order to exercise their “sharp power.”[[128]](#endnote-127) They apply the same principles internationally that they use to suppress political pluralism and freedom of expression at home.[[129]](#endnote-128) This can stifle productive discussion in democracies, deepen domestic polarization, exacerbate ethnic tensions, rekindle nationalism, weaken public confidence in both journalism and elections[[130]](#endnote-129),[[131]](#endnote-130),[[132]](#endnote-131) and diminish the overall influence of the Western-led international system.[[133]](#endnote-132),[[134]](#endnote-133)

Authoritarian and illiberal regimes use social media together with artificial intelligence as a monitoring tool. This enables them to collect and analyze vast amounts of data on entire populations, while yielding better results and requiring fewer resources than human-dependent surveillance methods. Once citizens learn to assume that the regime’s fake information is true, they alter their behavior without the regime having to resort to physical repression.[[135]](#endnote-134) Another effective form of censorship today involves meddling with trust and attention, undercutting the credibility of valid information sources by using “bot-fueled campaigns of trolling and distraction, or piecemeal leaks of hacked materials, meant to swamp the attention of traditional media.” [[136]](#endnote-135),[[137]](#endnote-136)

Not only authoritarian and illiberal states use fake news to deepen domestic polarization, radicalize and rekindle nationalism; this also occurs within democratic countries. Some liberal countries are experiencing a rise in populist leaders, fueling a drift towards a national-populist, illiberal, even autocratic regime. Shahbaz and Funk argue that populism and far-right extremism exploit social media platforms to “build large audiences around similar interests, lace their political messaging with false or inflammatory content, and coordinate its dissemination across multiple platforms.”[[138]](#endnote-137)

Persily explains that populists aim to disintegrate the power in established institutions and to fill the void with “an unmediated populist nationalism tailor-made for the Internet age.”[[139]](#endnote-138) Gerbaudo claims that social media is attractive to populists as an outlet for countering the perceived pro-establishment bias of mainstream news media. The filter bubble helps disgruntled individuals to congregate in online crowds on social media platforms and to mobilize militant support for anti-establishment candidates.[[140]](#endnote-139) The unregulated social media platforms are thus converted into instruments for political distortion and societal control.”[[141]](#endnote-140)

Social psychologists have shown that over the decades, tension and violence between social groups can reinforce the tendency to make judgments based on group stereotypes, which promotes nationalistic attachment and support for nationalistic leaders.[[142]](#endnote-141) The 2016 U.S. presidential election is one recent example of the rise of populist voices that spread fake news on social media platforms. One study found that people who changed their minds and voted for Trump were not guided by concerns for their economic status, but instead followed their underlying racist and misogynistic thoughts.[[143]](#endnote-142) Other examples include the Five Star Movement’s role in Italian elections, the participation of the Pirate Party in Iceland’s polls, the election of President Bolsonaro in Brazil, President López Obrador in Mexico and the “keyboard army” in the Philippines.

In conclusion, social media can play a positive or negative role: It can be a liberalizing tool, used to spread information and knowledge, but can also be a tool of suppression, used to disseminate distorted information and fake news. Social media platforms can be employed by grassroots movements and freedom fighters, but also by authoritarian regimes. What differentiates the effect that social media platforms have on different states? Why do they spark revolutions in some states while supporting the rise of populist candidates in others? Why do they disrupt democratic elections in some states, while supporting the regime’s anti-democratic measures in others? We explore the variable influence of social media platforms in the following section.

The Variable Impact of Social Media Networks

Although social media platforms are accessed throughout the world, they seem to have a different impact on the political system in liberal-democratic countries as opposed to authoritarian regimes.

A regime is liberal-democratic if it adopts liberal principles, policies, methods and attitudes towards citizen rights and privileges, granting them to all equitably. The acquisition of political power in a liberal-democratic regime is achieved through constitutional, legal and democratic means. An authoritarian regime, in contrast, is characterized by a strong central government that permits people only a limited degree of political freedom. In such regimes, the government manages the political process and all individual freedoms without any interceding constitutional accountability.[[144]](#endnote-143) Linz outlines four salient characteristics of an authoritarian regime: limited political freedom with strict government controls on political institutions; a controlling regime that justifies itself to the people as a necessary evil; strict government-imposed constraint on political opponents and anti-regime activity; and a ruling executive with vague, loosely defined and shifting powers.[[145]](#endnote-144)

While the distinction between liberal-democratic states and authoritarian regimes can help to explain the variable impact of social media on the political system, a more powerful explanation emerges when we add state capacity to this equation. State capacity helps in distinguishing between “weak” and “strong” states. Strong states perform well, delivering all kinds of political goods. This is mainly due to their effective set of institutions and their ability to control the means of violence within their territory. Weak states lack the effective political institutions and resources to implement their policies, protect their populations from violent conflict and deliver political goods.[[146]](#endnote-145),[[147]](#endnote-146). The worse a weak state performs in providing the various political goods, the weaker it becomes. Berwick and Fotini identify three aspects of capacity the strong state develops: the ability to secure resources (“extraction”); administrative ability and efficiency to coordinate collective action (“coordination”); and the capacity for interaction between higher levels of the state and lower-level agents (“compliance”).[[148]](#endnote-147)

Social media platforms may, for example, intensify partisanship and discredit the compromises and subtleties of liberal democracy, boosting politicians who feed off conspiracy and nativism. But what differentiates the effects of social media in a strong liberal democracy (like the U.S.) from social media’s impact in weak liberal democracies (like Hungary, Brazil and Poland) are the power of checks and balances, the legacy of the democratic process and the institutions in each state. The framers of the U.S. Constitution aimed to restrain tyrants and mobs, and engendered a political system that today is plagued by partisanship and gridlock. In states without such constraints, the partisanship may help engender and sustain an illiberal, winner-takes-all style of democracy [[149]](#endnote-148)

I suggest a new and innovative approach to explain the variations in the effects of social media platforms on states. I consider only U.S.-based social media corporations that wield power, usually acquired through data collection and processing. The model I present includes four classifications – polarizing, intensifying, radicalizing and destabilizing – each representing a different effect that social media has on states, depending on the particular state’s capacity and political regime:.

*Destabilizing effect in weak authoritarian regimes:* Social media platforms can help to erode the coercive power of weak authoritarian states by facilitating the coordination and mobilization of dissidents and grassroots movements in resisting the government’s tyranny. This can ultimately lead to regime change or, in extreme cases, to the deterioration of the state’s foundations into a failed state scenario. A recent example of this destabilizing effect, which resulted in regime change, is the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, and particularly the revolt in Egypt that culminated in the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.

*Radicalizing effect in weak liberal regimes*: The use of social media as a disseminator of fake news in the election process in weak liberal regimes may support the rise of populist candidates and diminish democratic institutions. This could steer a state that lacks sufficient checks and balances and a strong democratic tradition toward regime change, a nationalist populism or even an illiberal or authoritarian regime. Recent examples of this radicalizing effect are the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

*Intensifying effect in strong authoritarian regimes*: Social media platforms become a tool in a surveillance system, helping to suppress civil rights and enhance the state’s sharp power vis-à-vis liberal democratic states. Recent examples include the struggle of U.S.-based social media platforms against new laws in Russia that give the state the power to surveil Russian citizens, China’s use of social media to oppress its citizens and Russia’s intervention in democratic elections in several liberal-democratic states around the world.

*Polarizing effect in strong liberal regimes*: The use of social media platforms by internal populist forces or by external malign forces can weaken domestic authority, support the rise of populism, deepen polarization in a partisan political system and contribute to the diminution of democratic institutions and ideas (such as multilateralism and globalization). The domestic system becomes polarized, but the state’s established system of checks and balances and strong democratic tradition preserve its liberal character. Recent examples include the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the UK Brexit referendum.

In the following sections, I employ four case studies – one for each classification – to illustrate the model and describe the effect that social media platforms have on different states.

The Destabilizing Effect in Weak Authoritarian Regimes

In just over one year, starting in December 2010 in Tunisia, a wave of unrest swept through the Arab region, leading to the overthrow of four Arab heads of state: Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi in August 2011 and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012.[[150]](#endnote-149) Power seemed to be shifting from authoritarian regimes to civil society actors in this first wave of Arab social unrest, and social media platforms were credited with influencing this shift.

Many reasons have been cited for the Arab Spring – youth bulge, declining economic productivity, rising wealth concentration, high unemployment and low quality of life, to name a few. For years, however, authoritarian rule alone had been insufficient to motivate protest. Howard and Hussain explain that digital media (including social media platforms) helped shape events and outcomes by spreading protest messages, connecting frustrated citizens and helping them realize they shared grievances and could act together to do something about their situation.[[151]](#endnote-150) Etling et al. contend that the “Internet may be the only avenue left for citizens in authoritarian regimes to influence government, fight corruption or defend their rights.”[[152]](#endnote-151) Stein outlines six different ways in which the Internet and social media platforms may help social movements: by providing information, assisting action and mobilization, promoting interaction and dialogue, making lateral linkages, serving as an outlet for creative expression, and promoting fundraising and resource generation.[[153]](#endnote-152)

The use of social media platforms is part of each stage of any uprising in the Internet era. In the *preparation phase,* activists use social media platforms to find each other, build solidarity around shared grievances and identify collective political goals. In the *ignition phase,* which involves some inciting incident, social media helps publicize the incident and enrage the public (such as pictures of Khaled Mohamed Saeed, who was beaten to death by police in Egypt, or Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in Tunisia). In the *street protests phase*, the call for protests and the locations are coordinated digitally. In the *international buy-in phase*, pictures, tweets and videos from the uprising gain international interest and buy-in. Usually, this pressures the rulers of the state to enter the *climax phase*, when the state either cracks down and protesters are forced to go home (Bahrain, Iran), rulers concede and meet public demands (Egypt, Tunisia) or the groups reach a protracted stalemate (Syria).[[154]](#endnote-153)

Egypt was ruled under Mubarak (1981-2011) by an authoritarian regime backed by a dominant party – the National Democratic Party.[[155]](#endnote-154) Mubarak utilized the dominant party, the bureaucracy and the state’s security organs to implement and enforce his policies.[[156]](#endnote-155) He resigned only 18 days after the beginning of the uprising that started in January 2011. Scholars are divided on the role social media platforms played in the Egyptian uprising. Clarke and Kocak show that Facebook and Twitter contributed meaningfully to mobilize the Egyptian uprising’s “first movers” – the demonstrators who participated in the protest on January 25, 2011. These platforms were important in producing this outcome through three discrete mechanisms: 1) movement recruitment, 2) planning and coordinating a leaderless protest and 3) providing live updates. The success across these three dimensions helped convince many other Egyptians to join in subsequent protests, thus setting in motion a revolutionary cascade that resulted in the ousting of Mubarak from power.[[157]](#endnote-156) Elpe also underlines the significant role Twitter played in initiating, organizing and executing a powerful political movement in Egypt, mobilizing people who had no political background.[[158]](#endnote-157) Howard and Hussain note that YouTube and other video archiving centers allowed citizen journalists, using mobile phone cameras and consumer electronics, to broadcast stories that the mainstream media could not or did not want to cover. [[159]](#endnote-158)

A different point of view is expressed by Tarak Barkawi, who criticizes the credit given to “Western technology” rather than the “ordinary Egyptians, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, who toppled the regime.”[[160]](#endnote-159) He argues that the West imagines itself to have been the real agent in the uprisings and denounces such “fantastically Eurocentric” narratives. “To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak,” Barkawi writes.

Mason agrees that social networks allow people to assemble and protest, but insists that the revolutions in the Arab world “have been social, political and real - not virtual.”[[161]](#endnote-160) Shirky adds that protests, when effective, are “the end of a long process, rather than a replacement for it.”[[162]](#endnote-161) According to Ben Moussa, social media platforms were not stand-alone tools in the Arab Spring and were only effective because they operated in synergy with a huge array of media. “Even when the Internet service in Egypt was completely shut down or severely curtailed, the revolutions continued as people resorted to other more conventional media and offline societal networks.”[[163]](#endnote-162) Salanova agrees that, in the end, *Al-Jazeera* and other international media “amplified the message, attracted the majority of the population to join the revolts and put pressure on the authoritarian states by engaging international audiences.”[[164]](#endnote-163) Black notes that state surveillance of social media platforms compelled activists to use alternative media and tools of communication rather than social media such as Facebook and Twitter.[[165]](#endnote-164)

The Egyptian uprising is not the only example of social media’s prominent role in political upheaval. Mark Pfeifle, a former U.S. national security advisor, wrote in regard to the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran: “Without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy.”[[166]](#endnote-165) He also called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Tunisian blogosphere provided a forum for open political dialogue on regime corruption and the potential for political change.[[167]](#endnote-166) In Sudan’s 2019 uprising, social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and Facebook) provided people with an alternative source of information and an opportunity and avenue to organize and rebel against their government.[[168]](#endnote-167) This enabled dissent to spread from regional cities such as Atbara to Khartoum and elsewhere much faster.[[169]](#endnote-168) Social media platforms also helped diaspora communities (for example, the Sudanese diaspora of five million expatriates) to stay updated about events in their home country and to play an invaluable role in uprisings by sharing updates and fostering solidarity.[[170]](#endnote-169)

Again, some scholars downplay the impact of social media in these events. Esfandiari wrote regarding the Green Movement after the 2009 elections in Iran: “Simply put: There was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran.”[[171]](#endnote-170) Etling et al. agree that Twitter did not necessarily play a role in organizing the Iranian protests.[[172]](#endnote-171) Similarly, Adai et al. attribute less importance to social media’s role in rallying local audiences and focus instead on the “bridging function” of social media platforms, which allows them to inform international audiences and mainstream media.[[173]](#endnote-172)

In the years after the Arab Spring, there were fewer revolutions in weak authoritarian regimes. This may be attributable to the fact that social media platforms can also be effective in bolstering authoritarian regimes, and not only in helping political activists achieve their demands.[[174]](#endnote-173) Authoritarian regimes can be as quick as activists in using new social media tools for their own interests, as a means of monitoring and controlling societies with continually improved mechanisms.[[175]](#endnote-174),[[176]](#endnote-175) The Iranian regime has developed one of the world’s most sophisticated mechanisms for controlling and censoring the Internet, allowing it to examine the content of individual online communications on a massive scale.[[177]](#endnote-176) In 2009, mass surveillance operations significantly aided the authorities’ ability to identify, track, arrest and imprison peaceful protesters.[[178]](#endnote-177) During the unrest that swept through Iran on the eve of 2018, the authorities implemented major disruptions to Internet access through slowdowns, blocked social media platforms (such as Instagram and Telegram) heavily used by the protesters to mobilize the street protests, and briefly cut off Iranians’ access to the global Internet. The development of Iran’s state-controlled National Internet Network (NIN) significantly enhanced the government’s ability to restrict, block and monitor Internet use in Iran.[[179]](#endnote-178) A number of other weak authoritarian governments have learned to control the networked public sphere through “surveillance and repression, using fear, blocking of information, mobilizing armies of supporters or paid employees who muddy the online waters with misinformation, doubt, confusion and distraction.” This makes it hard for ordinary people to navigate the networked public sphere and sort facts from fiction.[[180]](#endnote-179) Instead of denying access to dissidents, which is difficult to do, the authorities prefer to deny attention, focus and credibility.[[181]](#endnote-180)

Clarke and Koçak claim that social media platforms were, and still are, relevant, but that dissidents in authoritarian environments have switched to different tools.[[182]](#endnote-181) The new generation of dissidents uses messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. For example, activists used these apps instead of Twitter in the 2018 revolt in Armenia,[[183]](#endnote-182) and have used “Facebook live” for real-time coverage of anti-governmental protest activities in Nicaragua.[[184]](#endnote-183)

In summary, it can be said that social media affect political and social movements in weak authoritarian regimes, but that the presence of Facebook or Twitter does not make protests possible, more likely or more widespread. Social media makes it easier to alert many people who have declared a shared interest in information and plans; it lowers the transaction cost of the early organization and convinces the protesters that they are not alone. Massive protest movements in authoritarian regimes are possible only when enough people are convinced that enough people will join.[[185]](#endnote-184) Here, Facebook’s filter bubbles may help to convince people that there is more support for their positions than there really is, thus generating a self-fulfilling prophecy that drives people to the streets. Howard and Hussain suggest that social media may not be the only reason for a revolution, but that they play a significant role in it. Countries with the lowest levels of technology proliferation are among those with the weakest democratization movements.[[186]](#endnote-185)

The Radicalizing Effect in Weak Liberal-Democratic Regimes

There are several examples of weak liberal-democratic regimes around the world (usually new democracies in Eastern Europe, East Asia and Latin America). The freedom score (as calculated by Freedom House) has declined in some of these countries over the last several years: Brazil’s score dropped six points from 81 in 2016 to 75 in 2020, the Philippines fell six points from 65 to 59 (becoming an illiberal state) and Mexico lost three points, from 65 to 62. The decrease in freedom scores may be explained by the rise of populist leaders in these countries and the erosion of democratic pillars such as free and unbiased elections, which may lead to a drift towards authoritarianism and the retreat of democracy.[[187]](#endnote-186),[[188]](#endnote-187) Kendall-Taylor and Frantz explain how populism can easily pave the way to autocracy by capitalizing on citizen grievances. The populist leader “comes to power through democratic elections and subsequently harnesses widespread discontent to gradually undermine institutional constraints on their rule, marginalize the opposition and erode civil society.”[[189]](#endnote-188)

According to the *Democracy Report 2020*, Latin America has regressed to a level of democracy last recorded around 1992.[[190]](#endnote-189) The U.S.-style [model](http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/kpsexton/pdfs/MadisonianModel.pdf) of democracy implemented across Latin America after the end of dictatorships in the 1980s was characterized by general elections, separation of powers, built-in checks and balances, and civil control of the armed forces.[[191]](#endnote-190) This model did not match most Latin American nations’ cultural identities. In order to overcome the disconnection with their people, Latin American presidents started using social media to exercise leadership and engage directly with the electorate.[[192]](#endnote-191) Social media is perceived as the voice of the people and more authentic than the one dominated by mainstream media, “which responds to the agenda of their super-rich owners and their political allies, rather than to the real needs and interests of the public.”[[193]](#endnote-192)

Emarketer shows people in Latin America to be the most avid social media users in the world.[[194]](#endnote-193) By 2014, the region had the world’s highest use of social media by politicians.[[195]](#endnote-194) The vast majority of people get their news straight from social media services and place less trust in traditional media**.** WhatsApp, for example, has 120 million users in Brazil, a country with a population of 200 million. Thirty-five percent of these users regularly rely on the messaging platform for their news consumption, which makes WhatsApp networks “‘fertile for planting false information’ that can spread quickly from group to group until it is ‘out of control.’”[[196]](#endnote-195) These countries are more susceptible to efforts to promote divisive and anti-liberal narratives via online platforms, especially around elections, as polarization is a significant characteristic of Latin American politics. The use of fake news communicated via social media platforms has proved to be more effective within polarized societies.[[197]](#endnote-196),[[198]](#endnote-197),[[199]](#endnote-198),[[200]](#endnote-199) This, in turn, may give rise to a populist candidate who is inclined to promote an illiberal regime, and can further foster radicalization and change toward a national-populist, illiberal and even autocratic regime, especially since the checks and balances in states with only a short democratic history are less effective than in strong liberal states. [Müller](https://www.socialeurope.eu/author/jan-werner-mueller) calls the effort of populist leaders to transform entire political systems to their advantage “undemocratic” instead of “illiberal.”[[201]](#endnote-200)

Populism is an ideology that views society as divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite, “us” versus “them.”[[202]](#endnote-201) Populists portray themselves as anti-elitist,[[203]](#endnote-202) anti-pluralist,[[204]](#endnote-203) supporters of moralism, and the exclusive legitimate representative of the pure people in defiance of the corrupt elite (and especially the unresponsive political elites). The rhetoric used by populist leaders generally focuses on the perception of a state in a crisis that needs to be resolved. Bos et al. note that populists use a dramatized and discursive repertoire that creates tension between antagonistic blocks, between “friend” and “enemy,” between the people and the elites or outsiders.”[[205]](#endnote-204) Gerbaudo claims that the populist right (such as Bolsonaro in Brazil) “tends to take highly exclusionary and xenophobic forms, whereby the people are constructed in opposition to the Other, and in particular migrants and ethnic and religious minorities.” In contrast, left-wing populism (such as López Obrador in Mexico) opposes “immoral privilege, as embodied by greedy bankers, rogue entrepreneurs, and corrupt politicians accused of exploiting the people.”[[206]](#endnote-205) Postill describes centrist populists as opportunistic technocrats who borrow some of the populist rhetoric and blend it with a pro-market language of job flexibility, entrepreneurship and economic growth.[[207]](#endnote-206) These centrist populists (such as Macron in France and Rivera in Spain) adopt an effective “anti-populist populism,” which Postill calls “soft populism.”

Gerbaudo, who studies the relationship between populism and social media, explains that social media provides platforms for populists to invoke the support of ordinary people against the liberal establishment that is supposedly victimizing them.[[208]](#endnote-207) This connection between social media and populism can be assessed at two levels: opinion-building (the role acquired by social media as the people’s voice) and movement-building (the capability to rally the people). Social media platforms are perceived as a means of aggregating and unifying otherwise dispersed and divided people to promote a shared cause. Populists exploit the aggregation functionalities embedded in their architecture, as well as the platforms’ “economy of attention” and filter bubble effect. These characteristics help populists develop online crowds of like-minded individuals that constitute an important element of support for the rise of populist movements.[[209]](#endnote-208) Social media also has a “mobocratic” (rule by the mob) tendency, favoring “sensational content that more eyeballs will turn toward.”[[210]](#endnote-209) This tendency, which gives certain content disproportionate visibility, helps populist memes become a sort of focal point around which the crowd can gather and recognize their shared interests and desires. DiResta claims that the social networks’ algorithms focus on the popular and trendy over the accurate and important and, together with the recommendation engines, construct “siloed communities that experience their own reality and operate with their own facts.”[[211]](#endnote-210)

In Brazil’s 2018 elections, Bolsonaro, a far-right candidate, was elected president, putting an end to the social-democratic pact established after the generals left power. In these elections, the far-right movement “Brazil over Everything, God above Everyone” overtly used the spread of misinformation and fake news through social media to advance its discourse. This included attacks against the Workers’ Party (PT), the main competitor, associating the PT with child abuse, female nudity and more.[[212]](#endnote-211) Bolsonaro’s campaign also used social media platforms to attack minority groups, including the LGBT community, blacks, indigenous people and feminists. Up until the 2018 elections, TV political advertising was the primary means to reach out to Brazil’s electorate. Bolsonaro’s low-budget campaign, however, relied heavily on political micro-targeting via social media to directly engage with his electoral base and benefitted from decentralized network communication, without any mediation from organic agents in journalism.[[213]](#endnote-212) His early supporters distrust mainstream media and assume that social media is more genuine “because it’s filled with friends and family.”[[214]](#endnote-213) The campaign focused especially on professionalizing a fake news industry by using WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Bolsonaro’s entire campaign was built upon exploiting a sense of fear that ends up creating space for accepting the authoritarian feelings latent in society.[[215]](#endnote-214) Angered by violence, scandals and a deep recession, voters were ready for Bolsonaro’s messages on crime, corruption and family values. He derived his power from the high levels of cognitive dissonance troubling some voters – between the image of the country they hold and the real world they see. An authoritarian discourse offers security and comfort, providing the illusion of immediate economic rewards, thus reducing anxiety.

In summary, social media platforms are a very convenient communication tool that populists can exploit in weak liberal democratic states to circumvent the traditional media and reach directly to their filter bubble supporters. It is a playground for spreading fake news and narratives that are polarizing, divisive and anti-liberal – without the fact-checking filter of the regular media. These platforms allow populists to position themselves as worthy alternatives to the existing governments, while smearing their rivals. Democratic principles further erode when candidates such as Bolsonaro, who use social media manipulation as part of their campaign strategy, continue with these tactics after assuming power.[[216]](#endnote-215),[[217]](#endnote-216) This can potentially turn liberal democratic regimes into illiberal and even autocratic regimes. Such regimes will look different from the military regimes, personalized despotism or *caudillismo* (strongman rule) that characterized the region at various times in the past.

The Intensifying Effect in Strong Authoritarian Regimes

Between 2000 and 2017, 60 percent of all dictatorships faced at least one anti-government protest of fifty participants or more; ten authoritarian regimes fell during this period and 19 were replaced through elections, many of which came in the wake of mass protest campaigns.[[218]](#endnote-217) The *Democracy Report 2020* shows that pro-democracy protests reached an all-time high in 2019. People took to the streets to protest the erosion of democracies and to challenge dictators.[[219]](#endnote-218) The leaderless nature of the protest movement in the 2019 Hong Kong protests against China was made possible by social media. Protesters took their cues from more than 100 groups on the instant messaging app Telegram, dozens of Instagram sites and online forums like LIHKG. The groups were used to post everything from news on upcoming protests to tips on dousing tear gas canisters fired by the police, the identities of suspected undercover police and access codes to buildings in Hong Kong where protesters could hide.[[220]](#endnote-219) Overseas Chinese dissidents and activists played a crucial role in protesting the totalitarian regime, assisting and even guiding activists inside China. The Chinese expatriates connected with those inside China via social media to get their news out to the world, to journalists, NGO workers, diplomats, academia and activists in other countries.[[221]](#endnote-220)

In order to avoid regime change, strong authoritarian regimes have embraced technology to become “digital autocracies.” That is, they restrict their citizens’ use of the Internet and social media, while harnessing a new arsenal of digital tools to face the human force of mass anti-government protests.[[222]](#endnote-221) Digital repression not only decreases the likelihood of protest, but also reduces the chance that a government will be confronted by a large mobilization effort. In the last twenty years, the more durable authoritarian regimes were those that implemented digital repression. [[223]](#endnote-222)

China has long maintained [strict regulations](https://www.businessinsider.com/china-great-firewall-censorship-under-xi-jinping-2018-3) that determine which websites and social media platforms are accessible in the country[[224]](#endnote-223) and which are blocked behind [China’s “Great Firewall”](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/the-great-firewall-of-china/2018/11/05/5dc0f85a-e16d-11e8-ba30-a7ded04d8fac_story.html?utm_term=.9afa8f4f9c01) of Internet censorship and “cyber sovereignty” model. Spar claimed in 2003 that “if people in China want to get information from sites in Silicon Valley, even the most omnipotent of governments will be hard-pressed to stop them.”[[225]](#endnote-224) But recent years have proven her wrong. YouTube was blocked in March 2008, the same month that a major wave of protests-turned-riots swept Tibet. Facebook and Twitter were blocked the next year, soon after an outbreak of ethnic unrest rocked Xinjiang in July 2009.[[226]](#endnote-225)

China employs advanced technology to censor its citizens on social media (and access their private information). This technology, combined with laws, regulations and increased enforcement, is increasingly being used to “repress dissident voices and shape online conversation.”[[227]](#endnote-226),[[228]](#endnote-227) Many of the state’s censorship tactics operate with a light touch, so that Chinese Internet users do not necessarily detect the behind-the-scenes filtering and deletion of material. Along with the new laws and regulations, “there are seven ‘bottom lines’ that social-media content shouldn’t contravene: China’s rules and laws, the socialist system, the country’s national interests, the legitimate interests of citizens, public order, morality and authentic information.”[[229]](#endnote-228) Chinese social media companies (such as WeChat and Sina Weibo[[230]](#endnote-229),[[231]](#endnote-230)) have no choice but to actively participate in the monitoring and censorship of their users.[[232]](#endnote-231)

U.S.-based social media corporations cannot enter and operate in China without becoming active partners in the government’s efforts to silence dissent through censorship, mass surveillance and the use of criminal charges.[[233]](#endnote-232) In December 2017, an official from China’s Cyberspace Administration claimed: “If they [foreign social media] want to come back, we welcome [them]. The condition is that they have to abide by Chinese law and regulations. That is the bottom line. And also that they would not do any harm to Chinese national security and national consumers’ interests.”[[234]](#endnote-233) Collaboration with the Chinese government contradicts the liberal agenda of most of these corporations, which see themselves as champions of free expression, offering a platform where people anywhere in the world can talk, share information, protest, act as citizen journalists, demand accountability from their officials and engage in no-holds-barred conversations. Still, some of these companies, such as Google, are directly[[235]](#endnote-234),[[236]](#endnote-235) and indirectly[[237]](#endnote-236) helping China to enhance its Internet surveillance capabilities and censorship technology.

Russia, another strong authoritarian regime, lives in constant fear of U.S. efforts to interfere with the Russian regime. After witnessing the role of social media in the Arab Spring revolutions, Russia became increasingly concerned that the U.S. had “found a truly magic tool that could bring people to the streets without any organizing structure.”[[238]](#endnote-240) This fear was amplified by a number of statements by U.S. officials, including: “the Che Guevara of the twenty-first century is the network” and “dictatorships are now more vulnerable than they have ever been before … because of the devolution of power from the nation state to the individual.”[[239]](#endnote-241) This fear became a reality with the protests against irregularities in the 2011 Russian legislative elections – protests that were facilitated via Facebook and Twitter. [[240]](#endnote-242)

Smirnov, the director of the FSB, stated in 2012: “New technologies are being used by Western special services to create and maintain a level of continual tension in society with serious intentions extending even to regime change.” He emphasized that Russia needed to develop ways to respond to such technologies.[[241]](#endnote-243) In June 2012, legislation was introduced in the Duma, the lower house of parliament, to impose a nationwide filtering system on the Internet. The legislation was approved a month later. In 2013, a system for social media monitoring – *Mediaimpuls* – was introduced. Russian law grants the authorities a mandate to block online content, including social media websites whose activities are deemed “undesirable” or “extremist,” and to prevent users of social media and communications platforms from remaining anonymous.[[242]](#endnote-244) Under its 2019 Sovereign Internet Law, Russia is centralizing Internet traffic in the country and creating chokepoints (similar to those of China’s Great Firewall). The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (or Roskomnadzor) is exercising its authority inside Russia and across the borders, in an effort to silence protesters and anti-Russian voices.[[243]](#endnote-245),[[244]](#endnote-246)

China and Russia have started to proliferate their models of digital authoritarianism across the globe. China is exporting its digital tools for domestic censorship and surveillance, while Russia is disseminating its model of tightened information control coupled with intimidation of Internet service providers (ISPs), telecom providers, private companies and civil society groups.[[245]](#endnote-247) Russia’s model may be an appealing, relatively low-tech and inexpensive alternative to the Chinese model because it does not require high-tech information filtration capabilities and can be implemented without a pre-existing government firewall.[[246]](#endnote-248)

Some of the tools that were initially developed for domestic use are now part of the “sharp power” campaign that China and Russia are waging against liberal democratic regimes. This includes the use of automated accounts (“bots”) on social media to manipulate and “amplify influence campaigns and produce a flurry of distracting or misleading posts,” sowing confusion and uncertainty through the spread of alternative narratives.[[247]](#endnote-249),[[248]](#endnote-250) Another tool, Internet trolls, involves people paid to disrupt online discussions by deliberately posting inflammatory or off-topic messages in order to provoke and intimidate. Russia conducted a massive troll attack against Ukraine and other countries after annexing Crimea.[[249]](#endnote-251) Both trolls and bots have been used in democratic elections across the world in the last five years.

To summarize, social media platforms intensify strong authoritarian regimes and do not help dissidents as they do in weak authoritarian regimes. Strong authoritarian regimes implement rules and legislation, together with digital tools for domestic censorship and surveillance, while limiting the entrance of U.S.-based social media platforms into their domestic market. This hinders the ability of dissidents to organize and mobilize using social media platforms, which are used in these countries as a surveillance tool. China and Russia also export their restrictive practices to other authoritarian states.

Social media platforms are also convenient tools used by strong authoritarian regimes to apply sharp power against liberal-democratic countries around the world – mainly the U.S., the UK and other NATO countries. Russia has used these platforms to spread fake news via bots and Internet trolls in several liberal-democratic elections, helping to elect populist nominees or promote their agenda, deepening domestic polarization, ethnic tension and anti-migrant and anti-minority sentiments, and eroding democratic institutions.

The Polarizing Effect in Strong Liberal-Democratic Regimes

The use of social media as a platform for political advertising and promotion is not new to the liberal-democratic regimes. U.S. President Obama used big data and individual marketing to drive people to the voting booths in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.[[250]](#endnote-252) The new phenomenon is the malign use of these platforms and their mobilization in efforts to change people’s perceptions. Indeed, researchers identify the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as a watershed event in terms of the impact of fake news that circulated on social media platforms.[[251]](#endnote-253),[[252]](#endnote-254) The dependence of democracies on free and open political discourse provides opportunities for their rivals to infiltrate their information ecosystems.[[253]](#endnote-255)

Facebook acknowledged that 146 million users may have viewed Russian misinformation on its platform during the election campaign, while YouTube acknowledged 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter acknowledged 36,746 Russian-linked accounts.[[254]](#endnote-256) A U.S. national intelligence report, backed by a Senate Intelligence Committee bipartisan report, claims that Russia’s “Internet Research Agency,” an army of social media trolls created in 2014, were part of Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 elections. This interference included propaganda campaigns in the media and a troll campaign on social media aimed at undermining public faith in the American democratic process.[[255]](#endnote-257) The Internet Research Agency spent more than $100,000 on Facebook political ads between June 2015 and May 2017, using 470 fake accounts.[[256]](#endnote-258),[[257]](#endnote-259) Facebook reported to the U.S. Senate that Russian trolls created Facebook events seen by more than 300,000 users between 2015 and 2017, and that around 62,500 people planned to attend the events.[[258]](#endnote-260) Russian accounts used Facebook to promote pro-Trump rallies such as “Florida Goes Trump” in August 2016, as well as protest events in May 2016 around the opening of an Islamic Center library.

Similarly, researchers discovered massive Russian Twitter meddling in the Brexit referendum.[[259]](#endnote-261),[[260]](#endnote-262) More than 150,000 Russian-language Twitter accounts posted tens of thousands of messages in English urging Britain to leave the European Union in the days prior to the referendum. Most of the messages sought to inflame fears about Muslims and immigrants and aimed to intensify the polarization of the electorate.[[261]](#endnote-263) The British prime minister even publically accused Moscow of seeking to “weaponize information” and “sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.” Russia’s cyber activities included “deploying its state-run media organizations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images.”[[262]](#endnote-264)

According to the U.S. Justice Department, the Internet Research Agency used Facebook’s own tools to ensure that their propaganda was as effective as possible. These tools allowed them to receive real-time results on which types of ad campaigns were reaching their target audience and which posts were generating the most engagement with viewers.[[263]](#endnote-265),[[264]](#endnote-266) Nance notes that Russia launches these covert operations with the aim of shaping public opinion in foreign countries on key political issues. These “active measures” of media manipulation and disinformation, using social media campaigns, fake news and troll armies, are designed to exploit political division and subvert the democratic process in the U.S. and Europe.[[265]](#endnote-267),[[266]](#endnote-268) The Russians incorporate social media in their strategic planning and information warfare to “undermine the political, economic and social system, and effect massive brainwashing of the population for destabilizing the society and the state.”[[267]](#endnote-269)

Russian “perception management” vis-à-vis liberal-democratic elections is based on the art of disinformation, or “using false or misleading information and injecting it or getting it credited by legitimate and credible sources. The false information must be logical, believable and acceptable to gain the confidence of the target population.”[[268]](#endnote-270)

Russia typically manipulates information not to persuade others or spread a view or ideology, but to sow confusion and disruption. The aim is to create the impression that truth does not exist, and thus undermine trust and authority in democracies. Russian manipulators on social media amplify extreme views, conspiracy theories and doubts about democratic institutions.[[269]](#endnote-271) Russian intervention found a receptive audience of people who believe that all truths are partial and that there are many legitimate ways to understand or represent an event.[[270]](#endnote-272) Truth is a cornerstone of democracies and distinguishes them from autocracies.[[271]](#endnote-273) Using disinformation and fake news in the public sphere may diminish the role of facts in public life and lead to what Kavanagh and Rich call “truth decay”[[272]](#endnote-274) and what Hannah Arendt described as a reality in which “the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false – no longer exist.”[[273]](#endnote-275) Senator Richard Burr said in a report on the Russian attempts to interfere with the U.S. election that “Russia is waging an information warfare campaign against the U.S. that didn’t start and didn’t end with the 2016 election. Their goal is broader: to sow societal discord and erode public confidence in the machinery of government. By flooding social media with false reports, conspiracy theories and trolls, and by exploiting existing divisions, Russia is trying to breed distrust of our democratic institutions and our fellow Americans.” [[274]](#endnote-276)

But not all scholars agree that Russian intervention actually affected the election process. Allcott and Gentzkow show in their research that the exposure to fake news was insufficient to be pivotal in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and that the change effected by fake news was smaller than Trump’s margin of victory in the pivotal states.[[275]](#endnote-277) Sides, Tesler and Vavreck also claim that the money reportedly spent by the Russians on advertisements was not targeted effectively on battlegrounds states and was dwarfed by the money spent by the two candidates. Although the Russians published thousands of ads, they constituted only a fraction of the overall posts and tweets that circulated in the media during the election campaign. Moreover, even if people engaged with Russian-sponsored content, there is still the question of whether and how it affected their voting behavior.[[276]](#endnote-278) Even if Russian influence was not the main reason for Trump’s victory in the 2016 election or for the success of Brexit supporters in the UK referendum, the spread of fake news via social media networks only deepened liberal societies’ distrust of political institutions, and distrust of the media in particular.[[277]](#endnote-279)

To summarize, social media platforms can weaken strong liberal-democratic regimes. Liberal democratic institutions need constant attention and reinforcement in order to be effective bulwarks. The solutions are mainly institutional: maintaining the independence of the judiciary, thwarting a would-be autocrat’s attempts to grab hold of the levers of justice, maintaining a legislative check on executive authority and enshrining political norms more clearly into constitutions.[[278]](#endnote-280) Democracy, especially liberal democracy, has always been dependent on the trust and beliefs of the self-governed.

The spread of fake news, disinformation, misleading information and falsehoods through social media platforms, as part of malign perception management, may amplify extreme views, conspiracy theories and doubts about democratic institutions. This phenomenon reflects a repeated effort by malign forces. In 2017, for example, one year after the U.S. presidential elections, at least eighteen national elections were targeted by social media manipulation and disinformation tactics. These efforts, both domestic and foreign-based, adversely affected the citizens’ ability to choose their leaders based on factual news and authentic debate. “The use of paid commentators and political bots to spread government propaganda was pioneered by China and Russia but has now gone global.”[[279]](#endnote-281) Even when democratic regimes learn to deal with one kind of malign interference in their elections, there is still the possibility that the next malign interference will look completely different due to technological developments – for example, using machine learning to fabricate images and videos (“deep fake”) that are more difficult to distinguish from the real thing. [[280]](#endnote-282)

Conclusion

My essay employs four case studies to illustrate that social media platforms have upsides and downsides. In weak authoritarian states, they can help dissidents communicate and organize more easily (the destabilizing effect), but they can also be used as a suppressive tool by strong authoritarian states that exploit the knowledge aggregated on the platforms (the intensifying effect). Social media platforms can be an instrument for spreading information and knowledge, but also for disseminating distorted information and fake news in strong liberal democracies (the polarizing effect). They can facilitate the rise of populist leaders in weak liberal states (the radicalizing effect), making them more susceptible to turning into an illiberal or even authoritarian regime. The essay shows that the malign use of various inherent characteristics of social media platform – such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, a low entry bar, aggregate knowledge about people, the lack of fact-checking of the information flowing through them, information cascades and the automatic recommendation algorithm – may lead to the erosion of democratic principles and institutions in liberal democracies across the world. This malign use can be orchestrated from inside or outside the states.

Although the Russian intervention during the 2016 U.S. elections caught the attention of U.S. policymakers and the American public, it seems that the impact of social media platforms on other liberal democracies around the world is less discussed. The malign use of social media platforms is only one of the reasons for the disruption of the liberal order; other factors include the 2008 financial crisis, job losses related to changes in trade and technology, the increased flow of migrants and refugees, and more.[[281]](#endnote-283) But the abuse of social media platforms is one problem the U.S. can commit to fixing, without waiting for it to fix itself.[[282]](#endnote-284) In order to prevent liberal democracies from drifting into illiberal or autocratic regimes, and potentially into the sphere of influence of Russia or China, it is crucial that the U.S. and other democracies take action today. Maintaining the current liberal international order has many advantages for the U.S. and requires keeping the Internet an American and private-led model project. This means countering efforts by Russia and China to gain a greater voice in Internet governance and promote their agenda of cyber sovereignty, with government control and Internet regulations replacing a global and open Internet.[[283]](#endnote-285) A restricted Internet with government control may curtail free speech and help more countries surveil their citizens in a way that erodes their democratic norms and institutions, paving the way toward illiberalism or authoritarianism. Some of these countries may then become “digital autocracies.”[[284]](#endnote-286)

The U.S. cannot rely only on the efforts of social media corporations to fix themselves by implementing policies and technological means to decrease the flow of hate speech and fake news on their platforms.[[285]](#endnote-287),[[286]](#endnote-288) Regulating or decentralizing these corporations is not a “silver bullet” solution either.[[287]](#endnote-289) ,[[288]](#endnote-290)

The best way to counter the spread of authoritarianism is to defend and restore democracy: the rule of law, fair elections, free speech and freedom of the press.[[289]](#endnote-291) The U.S. can join other like-minded democratic governments in asserting principles to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic and objectively sourced information. This can be done by securing free, independent and reliable information, and by defending those who produce it.[[290]](#endnote-292) One such effort to impose democratic safeguards on digital information and communications platforms was made in September 2019 with the signing of the International Partnership on Information and Democracy. Restrictive legislation should be recognized as a potentially dangerous tool. The Network Enforcement Act in Germany has come under criticism for practically legitimizing a model of online censorship that was subsequently copy-pasted by 13 governments around the world – most of which do not share Germany’s commitment to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. [[291]](#endnote-293)

An extreme measure suggested by Clarke and Knake is for the U.S. and its allies to create a digital bloc (“Internet Freedom League”) within which data, services and products can flow freely. Countries that do not respect freedom of expression or engage in disruptive activity would be excluded from this Internet realm.[[292]](#endnote-294)

Whatever action U.S. policymakers decide to take, it is imperative to act quickly, as the future of disinformation and fake news can materialize in new ways that cannot be easily countered, such as the use of deep fake and artificial intelligence technologies.[[293]](#endnote-295)

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