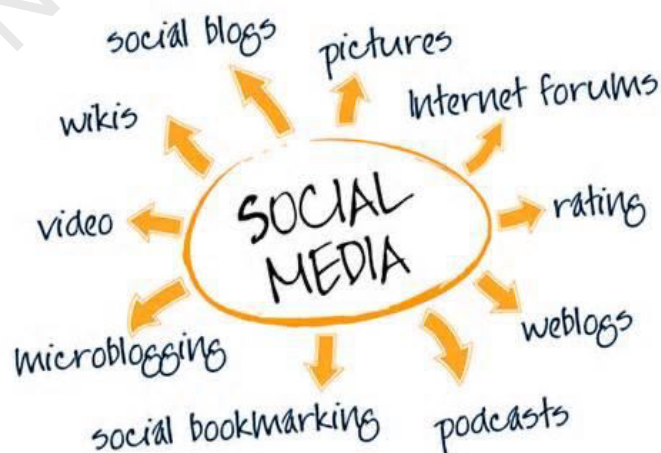


POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

As politicians and administrators search for innovative ways to meet the mandate of promoting best models in politics, the critical role that social media in accomplishing such goals is significant. It has been pointed out that social media offer easy ways to communicate, collaborate and share resources. Social networking on social media websites involves the use of the internet to connect users with their friends, family and followers. Social media websites are not necessarily about meeting new people online, although this does happen. Instead, they are primarily about connecting with friends, family and acquaintances one already have. The most well-known social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and LinkedIn. These websites allow people to share photos, videos and information, organise events, chat, and play online games.

Often, each “friends” (Facebook) or “followers” (Twitter) of the users will be connected to each other. Just like in real life, the connections between people are not just one-on-one, but a network of connections. This online social network is useful for spreading information, pictures and videos and generally staying in touch with people one would not normally get to interact with all the time. For example, one can easily set up a Facebook page with details and pictures of an event he might be planning, such as a public event. The page allows him to easily send out invitations to other users of the social media platform. Just like other technology, for example smartphones, social media is a very effective tool for connecting with people. However, there are a few privacy and security issues worth keeping in mind.

Buehner and Palenchar argue that Social media is at its core human communication, possessing characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness. They highlighted the fact that new media (the description applied to social media) is used in times of crisis to share and reshare information reaching millions of people without the intervening presence of journalists. The authors also point out that news from sources known as social media are tremendously influential and even perceived as more trustworthy than mainstream media in some instances. Technology allows private individuals to become sources of information online “sharing opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with others”.



More people have access to a mobile phone than a computer and it's worth remembering that many service users are comfortable using social media tools on their phones. Some local

authorities already use text messaging to remind young people of upcoming appointments. Twitter is widely accessible from virtually anywhere and is used to share news, events and discussions.

A fascinating experiment was undertaken by Sedgemoor Citizens Advice Bureau where they tweeted every enquiry they processed over seven days showing the scale and the scope of the advice they provided. Another social media innovation that looks highly promising for those in children's services is being developed by the Safeguarding 2.0 project -- which is developing new ways for child protection practitioners to communicate using Facebook-style modern, human and intuitive technology, centred around a family. The tools allow information to be distributed quickly across networks and will act as an early warning system to enable earlier intervention. The tool will be subject to rigorous security and confidentiality requirements from each of the partner agencies before it goes live. Christ and Potter talk about the ways that media are penetrating the cultures of the world and they make the argument that media literacy is critical for navigating the pathway.

Observers of the global political landscape have noted swift, drastic changes starting in the second decade of this century. In European democracies, significant numbers of voters have shifted to supporting populist politicians, some of whom have authoritarian tendencies. Academic literature studying these trends has identified a number of factors explaining the rise of populism driven by such phenomena as automation, globalization, austerity, refugee crises, and climate change. At the same time, a number of autocratic regimes around the globe have seen waves of protest movements and revolutions. (E.g.: The Arab Spring spreading across North Africa and the Middle East)

Many commentators suggest that the Internet in general, and social media in particular, plays a key role in amplifying economic, political, and cultural grievances across the globe. Also, they have their own independent effects on politics in both established democracies and autocratic regimes. The apparent role of social media in coordinating protests and giving a voice to the opposition in autocratic regimes created high hopes for the Internet and social media as a “liberation technology”. However, it is also noted that the autocratic regimes use the Internet and social media for surveillance and propaganda and to distract voters from politics. More recently, observers have started to blame social media in democracies for the rise of populism, the spread of xenophobic ideas, and the proliferation of fake news

There is plentiful evidence that traditional media (newspapers, radio, and TV) have had an important impact on political outcomes by providing political news and entertainment, both in their infancy and after they have become widespread. To the extent that online media resemble traditional media, one should expect their persuasion effects to mirror those of traditional media. However, certain features of the new media—of social media, in particular—distinguish them from traditional media.

What is special about social media, compared to traditional off-line media? We begin by summarizing the main hypotheses about how social media may affect politics. The two most important distinguishing features of the new social media are low barriers to entry and reliance on user-generated content. Low entry barriers make the gatekeeping of the spread of political information much less effective, allowing new entrants previously side-lined by the political establishment. By providing an outlet to the opposition and to whistle-blowers, social media make it harder for political and business actors to hide potentially harmful information. The

existing theoretical literature suggests that this could potentially make political regimes more vulnerable and more accountable. Low entry barriers can also have social costs. Social media give a platform to all previously marginalized groups, not only to the legitimate opposition in autocratic regimes. For example, social media can be used to spread extremist ideas, increasing their reach and potentially their influence. Furthermore, low barriers to entry coupled with the ability of online media users to repost, reshare, and copy content generated by others could undermine the reputation mechanisms that serve to guard the quality of information of traditional media outlets. As fact-checking standards online are lax, low entry barriers together with the unprecedented speed with which users can share content on social media could lead to a spread of misinformation and fake news, ultimately increasing political misperceptions. As immediate reactions are often based on emotions rather than reason, fake news, which evokes fear or anger, may spread faster than real news, which is often less emotionally charged. The ease with which emotional content gets shared online may also contribute to the ineffectiveness of fact-checking (based on reason) in countervailing false news (based on emotions). Low barriers to entry also vastly increase the choice of news sources and, arguably, allow users to tailor their news sources to their pre-existing preferences more finely than traditional media allow; this could potentially give rise to echo chambers and lead to increased political polarization.

By allowing horizontal flows of information through two-way communication between users, social media facilitate coordination between people, thus potentially making it easier to organize collective actions, such as street protests. At the same time, online protest activity in social media could crowd out off-line actions necessary for real political change in autocracies. User-generated content and two-way communication in social media could also change the way politicians and citizens interact: Social media allow politicians to receive immediate feedback on policy actions, to discuss policy proposals, and to measure political discontent. Such feedback could be used for policy improvements; it could also be used for oppression and political surveillance. In addition, the low cost of creating automated accounts and the ability to post content using anonymous or impersonated accounts enable the manipulation of online content seen by real users, potentially leading to political persuasion. Also, the data that online platforms collect about their users could be (and have been) used to target specific groups to make such manipulations more effective.