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Social media as an alternative platform for social mobilization in the US

Abstract

This study aims to review the effectiveness of social media as a platform for social mobilization and to show how social media influence social movements in the US. It seeks to offer a literature-based comparison between the traditional and the new ones, answering the question why social media is a matter in American politics. It offers practical data about the role of social media in raising awareness, creating movements, influencing policy decisions, and changing Americans' minds. This paper builds on several meta-analysis studies. It reviews and discusses previous results found in literature. It also uses the Pew Research Center which offers critical data relating to the research topic. It finds that social media successfully encourage the Americans to engage in political discussions and increase their participation. Social media are an alternative space to social mobilization, which has positively influenced social movements.

Keywords: movements, mobilization, social media, American society.

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Introduction

Twitter's head of news, government, and elections, Adam Sharp states that 'it was less Twitter coming to politics, and more politics coming to Twitter and finding it as a platform to communicate and to organize effectively without a lot of the costs'.¹ The rise of social media has created a change in American politics as profound as the one which occurred when President Kennedy proved the effectiveness of television in a political campaign in 1960. According to the political scientist, President Kennedy significantly secured the presidency of 1961 due to his successful campaign use of mass media and his appeal to young Americans. Forty-eight years later President Obama followed the example of Kennedy and was the first to use social media, this time as a political platform in 2007.²

According to the 2019 Social Media Fact Sheet of Pew Research Center, about seven-in-ten Americans use social media to engage in the news or activities content, connect with their friends, entertain themselves, and share their opinions or information. The same center also found that 23% of social media users in the US changed their views on issues (including politics) because of something they knew from social media.³ In fact, this mainstream of social media in the US has changed the physics of information diffusion. The growing relevance of using social media implies a remarkable change in old political participation and public communication, which has always been exclusively initiated

¹ Buccoliero et al. (2018): 92.

² Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference".

³ Perrin (2020).

and controlled by specific actors, e.g. companies, journalists as well as politicians.⁴

This phenomenon has been observed by several disciplines, such as information communication studies, sociology, information systems, linguistics, and political science. Many scholars who examined the phenomenon of social media and political participation have developed their theories. Many of them argue that a society's reliance on social media can positively influence political engagement, increase citizens turnout at the polls and reduce information costs. Those researchers believe that social media help young people to engage in important national and international issues as they are more comfortable with the new technologies. A few examples include the Black Lives Matter movement, Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Iran's Green Movement, and Keystone XL pipeline movement.⁵

However, other scholars highlight also negative effects related to the rapid use of social media in politics. They argue that social media users spend much time communicating remotely with people rather than engage in a face-to-face discussion, a manner that would inhibit people's individual social skills. They also believe that on social media people express more negative views and sometimes attack others because of their sense of anonymity. Moreover, this group of writers indicates that social media encourage users to isolate themselves politically rather than encourage them to participate.⁶

⁴ Sharafat, "The Role of Social Media during Arab Protests 2010–2014".

⁵ Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference"; Hussain, Howard (2013); Ranney (2014); Moghanizadeh (2013); Hodges, Stocking (2016).

⁶ Zhang et al. (2010); Pandey, Gupta, Chattopadhyay (2020); Bennett, Segerberg (2012).

This study argues that regardless of social media controversial outcomes on individuals' behavior, it is an effective social mobilization tool. Social media are an alternative platform to political movements in the US. Social media present an exciting avenue of opportunity for American people and political activists to not only broadcast their messages but also engage in a dialogue with proponents of competing political ideas and ideologies. This article supposes that social media successfully encourage Americans to engage in political discussions and increase their participation. It seeks to offer a literature-based comparison between traditional media and social media, answering the question why social media is a matter in American politics. It offers practical data about the usage of social media in mobilizing American society.

This paper builds on several meta-analysis studies. It reviews and discussing previous literature results. It also uses the Pew Research Center which offers critical data regarding the research topic. This article is structured as follows. In the next section, it reviews the relevant literature regarding social media and political participation in the US. Then, it offers a comparison between the old and the new media. The following section addresses why social media is a matter in American politics. This paper then discusses the relationship between social movements and social media, along with presenting the available data regarding political motivations of social media users in the US. Finally, it ends with a concluding summary and an outline for future research.

Literature review

A social movement can be defined as an activity initiated by a group of people who unite together to protest against

injustice and challenge the status quo.⁷ It can be local, regional, national or even international, and may address different social issues. The traditional method of social movements is characterized by street demonstrations and massive mobilization.⁸ Inequalities, grievances and injustice are the key driving forces behind most of social movements, which always target the power holders⁹ and defined opponents.¹⁰ Social movement studies initially conceptualized injustice, grievance, panic, harm and other emotional states of human beings as the main reasons of collective behaviour.¹¹ But as the new forms of social movements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, collective behaviour theories became unsuitable to clarify how they can be managed in the absence of a central leader like Gandhi or Mao. Researchers then suggested that scholars should focus on labour, finance and other resources and recognize people's participation in movements as a rational choice.¹² Although the theory of resource mobilization has been criticized many times for significantly overemphasizing economic aspects,¹³ this theory along with the grievance-centered collective behaviour theories¹⁴ are a good approach to understand the mobilization cycle and the protest process of social movements. Although multiple scholars have examined the issue of the protest process,¹⁵ "four stages of social movements" seems to be the most important study on

⁷ Ranney (2014).

⁸ Giugni (1998).

⁹ Barnartt (2014); Tilly (1999).

¹⁰ Porta, Diani (2006).

¹¹ Blumer (1939); Smelser (2011).

¹² McCarthy, Zald (1997).

¹³ Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan (2012).

¹⁴ Smelser (2011).

¹⁵ Christiansen (2016): 2.

this topic as it takes all previous research into consideration. According to Christiansen, these four stages include: “emergence,” “coalescence,” “bureaucratization,” and “decline.” During the emergence stages, a movement’s main players act as agitators and undertake action to raise awareness. During the second period, coalescence, main players become organized, large numbers of participants join the initiative, leadership emerges, and protests or big demonstrations of strength occur. In the third step, bureaucratization, social movements start to achieve their goals by reaching out to political elites. In the fourth stage, social movements decline either because of failure or success.

Oppositional and alternative discourses to the formal mainstream have always existed, but the world triumph of social media has fundamentally opened the door to the public sphere. This situation is remarkably characterized by lesser governmental control over news flows, paralleled by increased observability and distrust in representative organizations.¹⁶ Consequently, alternative events and news channels are growing, and the ecosystem of alternative media prospers. Therefore, social media are positioned as the correction of the traditional media in a given historical and sociocultural context. Social media stage their alternativeness on several levels: by citing voices not heard in the traditional media, by building alternative information networks, by using diverging epistemologies and by posting alternative issues.¹⁷ Social media shape public opinion according to an agenda that is perceived as “being underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Bennett, Livingston (2018).

¹⁷ Holt, Figenschou, Frischlich (2019).

¹⁸ Boberg et al. (2020): 2.

Social media are considered as a microblogging space where people can spread real time messages all over the world. It has become well-known as an information platform that accelerates news,¹⁹ especially during special events and crises such as elections and demonstrations.²⁰ Social media have a wide range of communication tools to create a networked public sphere.²¹ Notably, media organizations, politicians, and journalists have adopted social media as a news source and to be used for outreach.²² Social media allow non-elites to reach and interact with elites and make their demands heard,²³ which opens up the political discussion to a greater number of participants.²⁴

The effects of social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter depend on how they are used. This conclusion has been well established in several meta-analysis investigations²⁵ as well as individual studies.²⁶ The meta-analysis research usually differentiates news or information uses, relationship-building or network uses, and online types of political expression. The scope of news or information draws upon the long-standing previous research which studies political knowledge, participation and media use in political and civic life.²⁷ The premise is that new media sources expose people to information and knowledge about current events and

¹⁹ Kwak et al. (2010).

²⁰ Zheng, Shahin (2020).

²¹ Ellison, Boyd, Dutton (2013).

²² Lasorsa, Lewis, Holton (2012).

²³ Penney (2016).

²⁴ Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, Holton (2014).

²⁵ Boulianne (2015); Boulianne (2019).

²⁶ Chan (2016); Wells, Thorson (2017).

²⁷ McLeod, Scheufele, Moy (1999); McCarthy, Zald (1977); Tilly (1999).

political issues, which raises their knowledge and awareness of engaging in political and civic life.²⁸ The scope of relationship-building or networking drawn in literature suggests that a major factor of political participation are informal and formal social ties that increase the chance of agreeing to participate.²⁹ Social media are effective platforms for starting social ties that can encourage participation in political and civic life.³⁰ Finally, the scope of online political expression is dealt with in new studies concerning the comfort of online types of participation.³¹ The theory is that new media offer an easy and comfortable method of discussing political matters, which enhances political participation.³²

Many studies have focused on social media and how they are used by Americans,³³ examines the extent in which social media, particularly Facebook, are used by Congressional candidates during their campaigns. MacWilliams concludes his study with an observation that the number of social media supporters can be counted as a real indicator of electoral success. While Kushin and Kitchener³⁴ investigate the use of social media for a political discussion by citizens. They find that social media are a legitimate platform for a political discussion, and that they have succeeded in overcoming the polarization of discussion in the past. Baumgartner

²⁸ Boulianne (2019); Boulianne (2015); Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, Samuel-Azran (2016); Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference"; Holt, Figenschou, Frischlich (2019).

²⁹ Musick, Wilson (2007).

³⁰ Zúñiga, Copeland, Bimber (2014); Chan (2016); Skoric, Zhu (2015).

³¹ Lu, Heatherly, Lee (2016).

³² Skoric, Zhu (2015); Boulianne (2019).

³³ MacWilliams (2015).

³⁴ Kushin, Kitchener (2009).

and Morris³⁵ explore how social media are used by young Americans in the context of presidential elections. The results of their studies indicate that social media are considered by young Americans as a source of political information and news. Robertson, Vatrappu, and Medina³⁶ conclude that nowadays social media offer a socio-technical environment that enables public discourse for people who tend to enter online “parlors” of political discussion, while Gainous and Wagner³⁷ show that in the US the nature of politics is changing around us. Although it is not a real revolution, but it is very hard to miss for anyone. Online connections have changed the rules of engagement between power leaders and the people. Zheng and Shahin³⁸ argue that social media differ from traditional media in their interactive potential, which becomes a crucial pillar in any consideration about political communication. The televised or published debates do not set the agenda of online debates. Instead, social media set agendas that are much in advance of the traditional media debates.³⁹

Therefore, on one hand, social media have the potential to reinvigorate public debate, which further contributes to political deliberation. Studies along these lines have focused on the relationship between social media news seeking, political discussion, expression, and offline political activities. Despite the fact that measurements and predictors vary from study to study, generally the support offered by social media has increased citizens’ exposure to political confrontation, which in turn cultivates engagement of the public in political

³⁵ Baumgartner, Morris (2010).

³⁶ Robertson, Vatrappu, Medina (2010).

³⁷ Gainous, Wagner (2014).

³⁸ Buccoliero et al. (2018).

³⁹ Zheng, Shahin (2020).

matters.⁴⁰ On the other hand, studies have also found that social media function as an echo chamber where political motivation gets reinforced.⁴¹ During elections, voters simultaneously use several media platforms, such as radio, TV, and social media, to understand political issues and candidates' positions.⁴² The traditional media focus more on politicians' private life rather than on national issues.⁴³ In order to get more knowledge about the advantages and disadvantages of the old and new media and the differences between the traditional media and social media, the next section compares social media with the traditional ones.

Traditional media vs social media

There is no doubt that the new media represent a remarkable departure from the old media that dominated and existed in the political environment of the United States.⁴⁴ Each of the previous advances from the small press to radio stations to television channels was an improvement in distribution and efficiency. However, the model of one-way communication and distribution controlled by small identifiable groups of people was unchanged. Social media have created a unique news platform alongside, and in many ways replacing, the old model.⁴⁵ They operate in two directions, al-

⁴⁰ Zúñiga, Copeland, Bimber (2014); Zheng, Shahin (2020).

⁴¹ Stroud (2010); Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, Samuel-Azran (2016); Ranney (2014).

⁴² Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, McGregor (2015); Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference"; Buccoliero et al. (2018).

⁴³ Marshall, Redmond (2015).

⁴⁴ Sharafat, "The Role of Social Media during Arab Protests 2010–2014"; Boberg et al. (2020).

⁴⁵ Holt, Figenschou, Frischlich (2019).

lowing people and policymakers to disseminate information and listen to each other rather than the policymakers speak and citizens listen. Furthermore, the conversation on social media works in a significantly open environment that allows news and activities that are perceived as most appealing to be published nationwide.⁴⁶ Users of social media sites decide not only what to reach and communicate but also what materials are worth redistributing to the widest audiences.⁴⁷

Many believe that broadcasts and newspapers were tools for those with means to send information and ideas to the mass public. That means the debate had one party arguing and another party listening. Governments, political parties, or other corporations controlled the content conveyed with rules or sometimes by owning all or part of the organization of distribution.⁴⁸ The power of the information provider was largely considered to be influential for both radio and television. On the other side, social media websites are user driven. That does not mean users of social media have replaced the operators of the traditional media as the producer of content. Rather, users of social media have greater control of their content in a universe where users have far more options than exist for television, newspapers, or radio. Moreover, as active contributors to the information network, users of social media are more engaged and attentive because it is they who select content that is available to them to read, listen, watch and share. This level of engagement and attention increases the awareness span of the users. People who select their materials, such as posting a link on their social media profiles, are going to spend enough time digesting and

⁴⁶ Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, Holton (2014).

⁴⁷ Gainous, Wagner (2014).

⁴⁸ Skoric, Zhu (2015).

reading the materials.⁴⁹ Overall, social media are more effective in transferring information and attracting their audiences.

Moreover, information and news as such are not finite in scope, place, content and time. Physical copies of a newspaper have a limited amount of time and space, and the content cannot be changed after it has been printed. The content of newspapers is finite to what was released at the time and place of printing, and limited by the available pages. Even TV channels, which are not limited in time, are frozen by the model of the medium to broadcast only a single event or idea at a time. If a TV channel is not covering a topic interesting to the viewers, they are unable to alter the scope of the program. Therefore, social media websites are by far a most comprehensive, democratic, interactive and versatile form of communication.⁵⁰ They differ from the old media in not just scope and speed of publishing but largely by the nature of interaction between information and its consumer. In fact, what makes this a revolution in the universe of the media is that the character of the interaction widens as new applications and protocols are expanded and added. Social media websites become ever more accessible and interactive with every day passing. Social media offer a multi-directional conversation. One can respond to a video with a video. One can investigate an issue, explore that issue and respond to it, respond to the responses or even communicate about it. In addition, the content of social media is diverse and can be organized over multiple platforms, engaged in and understood using several applications, restricted only by the knowledge and access of the user.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gainous, Wagner (2014).

⁵⁰ Arceneaux, Johnson (2013).

⁵¹ Gulati, Williams (2011).

Some studies argue that citizens have a tendency to avoid news or information that challenges their predispositions because people do not like to be confronted with opinions that are in conflict with what they believe in. This conclusion arises from theories focused on cognitive dissonance⁵² and extends to many studies addressing people's inclination to find out congenial news.⁵³ That means the traditional media can create ambivalence in the information consumer through offering multisided information and news flows that may generate conflicting considerations.⁵⁴

Wang et al.⁵⁵ argue that social media users and followers, unlike television, radios, and newspaper consumers, are less involved in long news stories, which need extra motivation and cognitive efforts. Social media users are interested in and become engaged with clear and short messages or stories. Long news messages may not be attractive to social media followers and, as a result, may not shape or change opinions on social media. When other frame-setting elements (e.g. strength of argument, frame repetition, tone of frame) are the same, short messages are considered as a strong influencer changing social media public opinion, whereas long stories and articles in the traditional media are considered as a source of weak responses.

The new media bind people together and connect them with no concern for geography, traditional, political cleavages or distance. Unlike the traditional media, communication and information distribution can be immediate on social media.

⁵² Chen, Risen (2010); Elliot, Devine (1994); Festinger (1957).

⁵³ Arceneaux, Johnson (2013); Agranoff, Tabin (2011); Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, McGregor (2015); Ranney (2014).

⁵⁴ Alvarez, Brehm (1995); Gainous, Wagner (2001).

⁵⁵ Wang et al. (2017).

The discovery of information, news, feedback and updates can be done at speeds that have never been experienced before.⁵⁶ For example, in Egypt, a young blogger, Khaled Said, was killed by the Egyptian police on 6 June 2010. In reaction to his murder, his friend created a Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said” and posted photos of Said’s corpse. The page rapidly became a space for the discussion of grievances under President Mubarak’s administration and police brutality against civilians. That page and other related pages attracted millions of Egyptians, it was the spark that led to the removal of the Egyptian political system on 11 February 2011.⁵⁷ As the use of social media is growing worldwide, changes of the methods of political participation will accelerate with each day passing. This means that the method of how the society contacts with itself and with the governments is changing around us. Thus, the new media capture all of the advantages and elements of the old media. The new media can publish anything that magazines, television, newspapers and radio do, with an easily accessible, interactive interface on demand, and in an appropriate manner.⁵⁸

Why social media is a matter in the American society

The growth in the use of social media is significant among the Americans. In the political aspect, the importance of this growth in the use of social media is based on the understanding

⁵⁶ Pandey, Gupta, Chattopadhyay (2020); Moghanizadeh (2013); Chan (2016).

⁵⁷ Sharafat, “The Role of Social Media during Arab Protests 2010–2014”.

⁵⁸ Gainous, Wagner (2014).

of US political thought.⁵⁹ The basic notion of American democracy is the idea that citizens exercise sovereignty through the republican form of governance.⁶⁰ Online communication is vital to that sphere, as it structures what the Americans know and how they understand it. New media websites alter the political calculus in the US by shifting who controls news and information, how that information is distributed and who consumes information. Social media change two important elements of the mobilization process. First, by giving consumers the opportunity to pick their own platform of communication; social media allow the Americans to self-select their materials in a way that avoids any interpretation or disagreeable ideas. Second, social media websites themselves exist outside the traditional media machine, allowing young Americans, political actors, parties and candidates to dictate and shape their content. The intensification and expansion of the use of social media for political gain is remarkable even by Internet growth standards.⁶¹ In just a few years, the American political system is awash in social media from interest groups, candidates, parties, politicians and even the voters themselves. Members of Congress and the White House use social media to send short statements to Americans and to their followers almost at all times.⁶² During the current COVID-19 pandemic with its lockdown consequences, social media increasingly affect political information and communication during the pandemic, it has become a source of news concerning indications, vaccines and restrictions. Many countries, including the US, have prohibited large gatherings and

⁵⁹ Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference".

⁶⁰ Buccoliero et al. (2018).

⁶¹ Gainous, Wagner (2014); Gainous, Wagner (2011).

⁶² MacWilliams (2015).

occasionally even smaller meetings. So, social media have become an alternative tool to communicate and discuss various topics.⁶³

Therefore, the change in the American political machine is an obvious result of increased social media use. As the penetration of this communication model increases, successful activists will harness it, and the late riders will fall behind. Social interaction generally has always been about learning the rules of the system properly, and then using these rules to the society's advantage rather than considering it as a detriment.⁶⁴ Political consultants and experienced politicians always prefer the methods and modes that have worked in the past.⁶⁵ Looking backwards for an idealized society sphere for governing and participation is not only a poor position, but also basically incorrect. As everything is constantly changing and adapting, governing and mobilization have become a process of learning and adjustment where nothing is permanent, and nothing is fixed.⁶⁶

Social media change how information is distributed, and who operates the levers. It has no obvious gatekeeper. Anyone can join and contribute given good resources and knowledge. Search tools catalog resources efficiently so that any user with Internet access can find materials on virtually any subject.⁶⁷ New media are a brilliant aggregator of sortable news and information that is always free for everyone. People in the US and all over the world choose whether to redistribute, read or even add information on social media. Yet, while

⁶³ Boberg et al. (2020).

⁶⁴ Tewksbury (2005); Riker (1968).

⁶⁵ Appleton, Ward (1997).

⁶⁶ Ranney (2014).

⁶⁷ Skoric, Zhu (2015).

they decide what news and information to distribute or read, this is not a random process, nor are the Americans equal in the distribution. Some of them have a big number of followers that regularly follow their posts. Others lack a large network, or have no followers at all. For example, only on Twitter President Obama is followed by more than 125 million people.⁶⁸

Political scientists have found that the use of social media websites has altered the traditional political participation tactics to avoid the old media machine as it mostly interprets and filters political messages. The Americans nowadays use social media to bypass the traditional media and control their own information and news distribution.⁶⁹ Using social media widely in politics has become apparent, and a new form of political participation has started to instruct and aid Americans as to how to maximize their political influence in social media.⁷⁰

Social movements and social media in the US

One of the biggest promises of social media is the possibility for individuals, grassroots organizations and all citizens to overcome government censorship and old media gatekeepers and engage directly with potential specific groups, activists, and the public.⁷¹ The case of the Zapatista National Liberation Army circumventing the Mexican government's censorship to contact directly with foreign journalists and

⁶⁸ Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference."

⁶⁹ Gainous, Wagner (2011); Gainous, Wagner (2014).

⁷⁰ Agranoff, Tabin (2011).

⁷¹ Sharafat, "The Role of Social Media during Arab Protests 2010–2014."

the use of mailing lists and websites in anti-globalization movements in the 1990s are two well-known early cases of the use of Internet in social movements.⁷²

In the US, social media have been a very effective tool in mobilizing many social movements. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is one of these movement that grew out of a social media post.⁷³ Social media, especially Twitter, have allowed the stories of African Americans and the demands of the movement to be disseminated across the US without relying on the traditional media.⁷⁴ Social media have been critical in publicising the cases of the American police violence against African Americans and the cases of the American police reactions to the BLM activists. Social media have also been the main source of news and information about the BLM movement for most of the public and the behavior, language and emotions associated with the movement in social media applications can be a predictor of participation in street protests.⁷⁵

Therefore, a variety of groups, people and individuals interact, communicate and contribute to the conversation about BLM on social media websites, including people who oppose the movement, deploying and appropriating the BLM movement phraseology for their own purposes.⁷⁶ For instance, the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter have been distributed by people who have criticized or opposed the BLM movement, used to deny violence against African Americans and argued that there has been lack of attention

⁷² Ranney (2014).

⁷³ Ince, Rojas, Davis (2017).

⁷⁴ Freelon, McIlwain, Clark (2016).

⁷⁵ Cox (2017).

⁷⁶ Ince, Rojas, Davis (2017).

to the American police safety by BLM movement supporters.⁷⁷ During the early stage of the movement in 2014, researchers found that the debate on social media which used the slogans of BLM fell into five groups: discussion of actions and tactics of the movement; affirmations of the goals of the BLM and expressions of solidarity; documentation, reactions, and reports of the American police violence; counter protest expressions blocking the tactics, ideology and goals of the BLM movement; and calls for protests in Missouri following the killing of Michael Brown.⁷⁸

In fact, riots and protests that started following the killing of Brown in 2014 shocked the country. The photos of military-grade weapons being used on civilians, tear gas, shooting of wooden pellets, and arrests of journalists legally reporting those actions sparked discussions about militarization of the American police force and the excessive use of force by the police not just against African Americans but also against people protesting in these actions.⁷⁹ These tactics and demands were repeated in the 2020 riots following the death of George Floyd. However, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic posed a new complication to this issue. If protests continue in American streets, its conditions, the use of tear gas, crowd control and containment tactics employed by the American police would definitely facilitate the spread of the coronavirus.⁸⁰ Activists, supporters and allies of the BLM movement faced an unprecedented situation of balancing the threat of the pandemic against the threat of systemic racism in the US, further complicated by the in-

⁷⁷ Freelon, McIlwain, Clark (2016).

⁷⁸ Ince, Rojas, Davis (2017).

⁷⁹ Cox (2017).

⁸⁰ Bolsover (2020).

tersectionality of these dangers that has left, ethnic groups disproportionately highly affected by the pandemic as well as the national control restrictions that target those regions in which the virus is quickly spreading. Even so, protesters all over the US have intensified their efforts in social media along with their activities on the ground. During only 13 days, from 26 May to 7 June 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used in more than 47.8 million posts or conversations on Twitter – an average of 3.7 million per day.⁸¹

Hence, social media platforms influence political, cultural, economic and social activists in the American society. The majority of Americans believe that these sites are a useful tool for raising awareness, creating sustained movements, make elected officials pay attention to issues, influence policy decisions, and change people's minds about political and social issues (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows how people in the US think about social media and their effectiveness in building social movements, as well as their beliefs whether social media help raise awareness, make elected officials pay attention to issues, influence policy decisions, and change people's minds about political and social issues. As the figure illustrates, the Americans tend to have a very positive opinion about the role social media platforms play in the society.

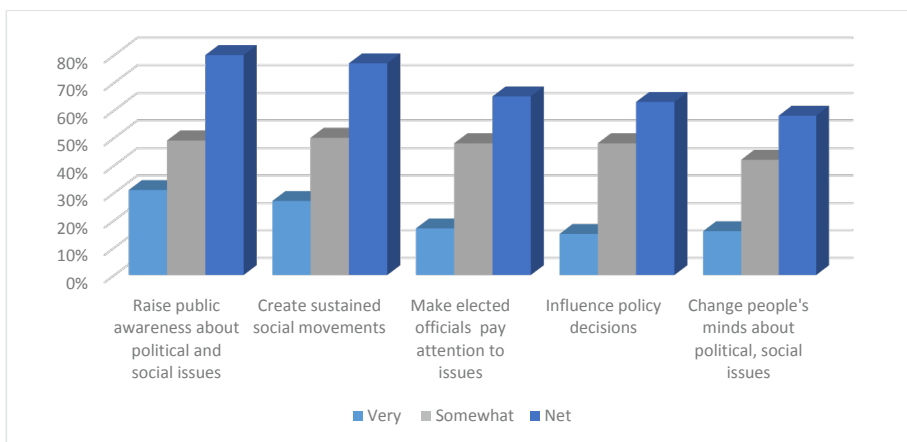
Figure 1 indicates that about eight-in-ten Americans consider social media websites to be an effective tool for raising public awareness about political or social issues. Also, about 77% of them think that social media are an important space for creating sustained social movements. 65% of Americans indicate that social media platforms are an effective tool

⁸¹ Anderson, Barthel, Perrin, Vogels (2020).

in making elected officials pay attention to issues. Furthermore, 63 % of them say that they influence policy decisions. A smaller share (58%) think that social media help in changing people's minds about political or social issues.

Figure 1:

Percentages of Americans who believe that social media are an effective tool with respect to selected social indicators.



Data source: Pew Research Center⁸²

Hence, social media have remarkably shaped the characteristics of social movements in the US by making them more virtual and informal.⁸³ This informal environment has offered a chance for non-elite actors to play a significant role in the process of mobilization anywhere and anytime.⁸⁴ These new media have been most beneficial for the main players who need to coordinate and communicate with each other

⁸² Auxier, McClain (2020).

⁸³ Boulianne (2015).

⁸⁴ Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference."

more regularly and frequently.⁸⁵ They have enabled non-elite, core and elite actors to participate freely in movements without any government restrictions and regulations.⁸⁶ However, not all social movement activists become really prominent on the new media. Some activists become more influential than others as their contributions become more popular and shared. Another advantage of social media is that they play a mediating role by reaching out to both closely linked and less linked users. Moreover, they have made it much easier for the movements to reach out to other existing movements. For instance, on Facebook and Twitter, users can represent two different hashtags or slogans together in one post and make a connection between two different issues.⁸⁷ This is how online social mobilizations can lead to spillover effects by influencing actors of other social movements. Although the spillover effect is sometimes an unplanned consequence of any movement, it has the ability to strengthen and widen movements.⁸⁸

Twitter, for example, has become remarkably effective in social movements.⁸⁹ Apart from being a platform for collective ideas and actions, it builds “transparency, privacy, security, and interpersonal trust” among its users.⁹⁰ Although some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of Twitter for social movements,⁹¹ others have found that it is a very potent tool for the dissemination of news and information.⁹²

⁸⁵ Holt, Figenschou, Frischlich (2019).

⁸⁶ MacWilliams (2015); Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, Samuel-Azran (2016).

⁸⁷ Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, Holton (2014); Chan (2016).

⁸⁸ Gabore, Xiujun (2018).

⁸⁹ Gainous, Wagner (2014); Cox (2017).

⁹⁰ Bennett, Segerberg (2012): 753.

⁹¹ Bennett, Livingston (2018).

⁹² Gainous, Wagner (2014); Penney (2016).

Because Twitter is an open and free platform, news spread rapidly on the application allowing actors to take quick actions that driving prompt mobilization.⁹³

It is worth mentioning that “hashtags” is a key technique to share news, information and movements, which make the content searchable for other users and more visible. Another key technique is the “mention” option which is used by activists to make the content directly reach out to politicians and other elites.⁹⁴ When the elite actors such as bureaucrats, political leaders, human rights activists, writers and other distinguished citizens join the movement themselves by posting a content, sharing a photo, tweeting or retweeting, it sparks a widespread response as they have a large number of followers and friends on social media. Elites can initiate new networks and join the existing networks encouraging other users to join the movement. Therefore, the involvement of activists and elites draws attention of the authorities. Their engagement in the existing movements creates massive mobilization and consequently enhances the chances that the movements reach their goals.⁹⁵

The development of ideologies, sentiments, and beliefs of the Americans about any issue significantly depends on how the media describe it. This process of public opinion formation depends on the media sources because people’s understanding of social, economic, cultural, or political issues is mediated by the presentation and selection of content by the media.⁹⁶ The media contribute to how citizens understand and perceive national and international issues and

⁹³ Sharafat, “U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference”.

⁹⁴ Hodges, Stocking (2016).

⁹⁵ Boulianne (2019).

⁹⁶ Lecheler, De Vreese (2010).

shape public opinion by stressing a specific aspect of a broader subject matter. For example, the Americans' opinion about a Ku Klux Klan issue depends on whether the American media present the issue as a free-speech matter or disruption of public security.⁹⁷

Therefore, opinions are shaped under the influence of specific representations of materials in the national media: either by stressing the existing beliefs on an issue or by highlighting a new belief, which is initiated by the recipient accepting the new interpretation.⁹⁸ In other words, consideration by the media modifies or activates people's existing world-views or, if there is no belief about the issue, media news creates such schemata and public opinion can be formed.⁹⁹

Figure 2 presents the percentage of Americans who have changed their views or position about a national or international issue because of information or contents they read or watched on social media websites. Admittedly, one of the main issues which was distributed by social media was BLM, a large part of the Americans got their knowledge about it from social media. Consequently, many of them offered their support to the movement, or at least their sympathy. According to the above figure, the role of social media in changing Americans' minds about social or political issues increased from 15% of the Americans who said that the content of social media motivated them to change their attitude towards particular issues in 2018 to 23% in 2020.

The biggest leap as compared with 2018 was among Republicans, as Figure 2 shows. While in 2020, 21% of the Republican users of social media stated that social media helped

⁹⁷ Nelson, Oxley, Clawson (1997).

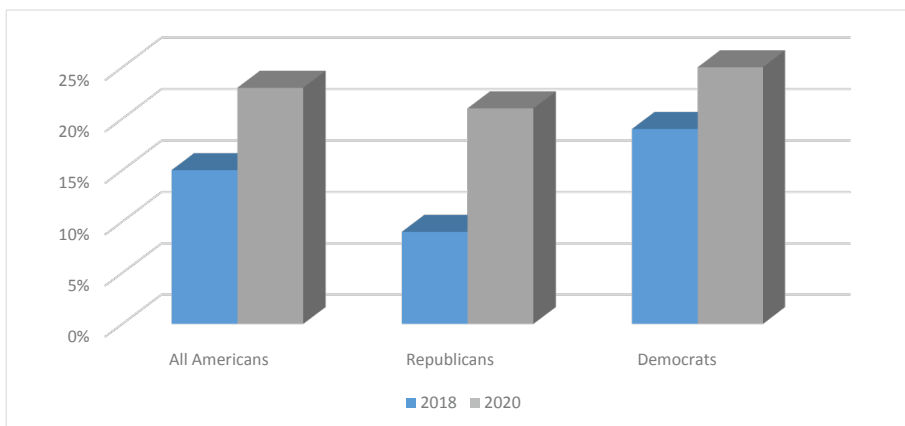
⁹⁸ Gabore, Xiujun (2018).

⁹⁹ Scheufele, Scheufele (2009).

them to change their minds on an issue (including BLM), in 2018 only 9% indicated that social media did so. However, social media still continue to be more active and potent among Democrats than among Republicans. Roughly a quarter of Democrats have changed their views on an issue because of something they saw on social media in 2020; this percentage amounted to 19% in 2018.

Figure 2:

Percentages of social media users in the US (Republicans and Democrats) who said they have changed their attitude toward a political or social issue because of something they saw on social media in 2018 and 2020.



Data source: Pew Research Center¹⁰⁰

The presentation and selection of information and news by journalists and editors in a certain way for the coverage of events significantly influence their followers' ideas about those events. This formation, defined as frame-setting

¹⁰⁰ Perrin (2020).

by Scheufele and Scheufele,¹⁰¹ put forward some aspects of an issue to center stage or hide them out of audiences' view and influence people's views and public opinion.¹⁰²

However, changing opinions in social media is influenced by the type of content users receive and the people they interact with. How the users of social media engage in and consume information influences people's opinions.¹⁰³ Public opinion on social media is shaped by how users construe and crystallize the meaning. In the public opinion formation process, social media content influences the formal evaluative direction of interpretations which change people's judgment about issues.¹⁰⁴

Information is not distributed and consumed on social media without effect on people's opinions.¹⁰⁵ Lu, Heatherly, and Lee¹⁰⁶ argue that news coverage of events that is shared and consumed by social media members influences their opinions and how they evaluate the events. Social media become a suitable platform for the Americans to express opinions and ideas formed or influenced by online dissemination of information¹⁰⁷

Overall, the dissemination of news, information, and events on social media exerts a remarkable influence on American public opinion through frame, tone, composition, and repetition.¹⁰⁸ People who use social media in the US reflect those views that are repeatedly ignored by organized media

¹⁰¹ Scheufele, Scheufele (2009).

¹⁰² Gabore, Xiujun (2018).

¹⁰³ Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, Holton (2014).

¹⁰⁴ Cox (2017).

¹⁰⁵ Ranney (2014).

¹⁰⁶ Lu, Heatherly, and Lee (2016).

¹⁰⁷ Sharafat, "U.S. Politics and the Media International Conference".

¹⁰⁸ Gabore, Xiujun (2018).

stations; in most cases, the tone of the view is echoed by engagement of other users of social media.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

As research studies have shown, in the last decades, social media have become a noteworthy political communication channel not only in the US but all over the world. They enable individuals, activists, policymakers, and elites to directly interact with each other. Therefore, political and social activities have gained greater mobilization and transparency, and the Americans might become more involved in public issues.

Broadcasts and newspapers were tools for those with means to send information and ideas to the mass public. This means the debate has one party arguing and another party listening. Governments, political parties, or other corporations controlled the content conveyed with rules or sometimes by owning all or part of the organization of distribution. While social media sites are user driven. That does not mean users of social media have replaced the operators of the traditional media as the producer of content. Rather, users of social media have greater control of their content in a universe where users have many options.

The majority of the Americans believe these websites are a useful tool for raising awareness, creating sustained movements, make elected officials pay attention to issues, influence policy decisions, and change people's minds about political and social issues. In the public opinion formation process, social media content influences the formal evaluative direction of interpretations, which changes people's judgment about

¹⁰⁹ Boulianne (2015).

issues. The BLM movement is an evidence of how Americans have changed their attitude toward an issue because of social media content. Another case of the role of social media in social mobilization is the COVID-19 pandemic, where social media have become an alternative tool to communicate and discuss various topics.

Future research on social media users' behavior is encouraged. The unique data structure of social media allows investigators to document the behavior of social media users and these results could be combined with questionnaires and surveys. For instance, if social media influence the voting behavior or adoption of attitudes in the American society, does it contribute to increasing negativity in democratic politics or not?

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