

Social Media: Educate, Engage, Expose

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There is a widely held belief in the democratic world that citizens should participate politically, however many people struggle to become involved in political discussion and debate. James Fishkin, a political theorist, argues that the best way to increase political participation is through deliberative democracy, a form of participation where citizens have the chance to learn, take time to think, and debate with other citizens before making decisions on political activities.¹ This form of democracy offers citizens the opportunity to become informed and have meaningful debates with people of different backgrounds and ideologies.² While Fishkin is referring to sending citizens to deliberative multi-day conferences, deliberative democracy can also be achieved through social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and other chat forums, in a more immediate and cost effective manner. This essay will argue that social media enhances democracy as it increases exposure to issues, allows people to engage with politicians, and increases exposure to people with opposing views, thus facilitating deliberative democracy.

The first way that social media can create deliberative democracy is through increasing the exposure of individuals to political issues. In Canada 67% of people have a social media account.³ However, only about 50% of Canadians read the news frequently.⁴ This difference demonstrates that social media in Canada penetrates more deeply than traditional media sources. News and current events are often found on social media feeds and as such Canadians can use social media as a news, and informative feed. For example, the purpose of Twitter is not to create interpersonal connections, but rather to share information.⁵ While Twitter is constrained by the

¹ James S. Fishkin, Robert C. Luskin and Roger Jowell, "Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation," *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 4 (2000): 659, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.4.657>.

² Ibid, 660.

³ "Social networking in Canada - statistics & facts." Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2729/social-networking-in-canada/#:~:text=After%20years%20of%20constant%20growth,the%20world's%20most%20connected%20populations>.

⁴ Susan Delacourt, *Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them*, (Madeira Park, British Columbia: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), 202.

⁵ Anatoliy Gruz, and Jeffrey Roy. "Investigating Political Polarization on Twitter: A Canadian Perspective," *Policy and Internet* 6, no. 1 (2014): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1002/1944-2866.POI354>.

character limit, many people get around this by posting links to more information.⁶ While Twitter in itself may not provide enough information for Canadians to become educated on issues in the news, the linked sources allow Canadians to access a larger variety of information. As social media content is created by a variety of individuals, each reading from different sources, social media feeds can include a larger variety of news sources and stories. As such, Canadians through social media are exposed to a variety of sources that they would not view otherwise.

The second way that social media can create deliberative democracy is through providing an easily accessible space for people to engage with political officials. Most people see typical political participation, such as participating in town halls or volunteering for a political party, as boring, pointless, and painful, and they do not participate in these.⁷ However, there is a desire in the population for political participation, with 83% of people surveyed interested in participating in a form of deliberative democracy.⁸ Social media is a good way to involve citizens in this deliberative process as it allows people to engage in small doses and in locations where they are already active. Social media also allows citizens to directly interact with their government. One example of this is from Australia's HeadsUp Forum which allowed school-aged students to discuss current issues and politics that affected them.⁹ After students had time to debate, MPs stepped in and read the comments and consensus that the students had come to.¹⁰ In the report produced after by the MP's they frequently cited the debate held on this forum and the opinions of young Australians.¹¹ This allowed MP's to go beyond the typical media sources and in-person discussions, and go to a platform that students understood. The White House's social media

⁶ Ibid, 39.

⁷ Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 13.

⁸ Ibid, 15.

⁹ Brian Loader, *Young Citizens in the Digital Age Political Engagement, Young People and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2007), 159.

¹⁰ Ibid, 160.

¹¹ Ibid, 160.

accounts have found similar outcomes. Through being on an already established platform they can engage with many citizens without the filters or limitations of traditional media.¹² Social media allows deliberation to be less time consuming and provide access to the debate on platforms currently in use.

The third way that social media can create deliberative democracy is through increasing exposure to people with opposing viewpoints. In-person, people interact with people of similar political views and life experiences.¹³ Social media relies on weak connections, and provides exposure to people with different life experiences.¹⁴ There are three main challenges to an in-person deliberation, practicality, as it is difficult to arrange these meetings, anxiety, as connections may be weak and conversations may be emotive, and generalization, as people may be stereotyped based on their physical appearance.¹⁵ Contact online, or over social media, may assuage these fears as it allows for flexible scheduling and requires no travel, individuals can take time to think and research about issues before responding, and the internet eliminates audio-visual clues that may lead to discrimination.¹⁶ People who are hesitant to join in-person conversations are more easily able to join online discussions and participate in a deliberation. Facebook relies on interactions between acquaintances, and allows for interaction with a larger number of people that they may not regularly associate with while Twitter relies on connections between people with similar interests, not necessarily connections that were ever in-person.¹⁷

¹² Gruzd, "Investigating Political Polarization on Twitter: A Canadian Perspective," 31.

¹³ Coleman, and Shane, *Connecting Democracy: Online Consultation and the Flow of Political Communication*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 140.

¹⁴ Ibid, 192.

¹⁵ Roger Austin, Angela Rickard, and Jacqueline Reilly, "Face-to-Face Contact in Blended Learning for Intercultural Education: The Role of Teachers," *Irish Educational Studies* 36, no. 3 (2017): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2017.1327364>.

¹⁶ Young Min Baek, Magdalena Wojcieszak, and Michael X Delli Carpini, "Online Versus Face-to-Face Deliberation: Who? Why? What? With What Effects?" *New Media & Society* 14, no. 3 (2012): 365, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811413191>.

¹⁷ Mustafa Oz, Pei Zheng, and Gina Masullo Chen, "Twitter Versus Facebook: Comparing Incivility, Impoliteness, and Deliberative Attributes," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 9 (2018): 3402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817749516>.

Social media facilitates interactions between people that would not interact in-person, and thus users gain exposure to a larger variety of viewpoints and life experiences. It allows people to socialize outside of their geographical area, social class or usual social circles. By increasing the variety of individuals interacted with, an issue can be better understood from different perspectives.

The two main criticisms of social media as a form of deliberative democracy are the ideas that social media is an echo chamber and that it has a lot of disinformation. The echo chamber criticism is centred around the idea that social media does not increase exposure to other ideas, but instead perpetuates pre-existing opinions and homophily, the grouping together of people in similar demographic groups.¹⁸ Despite this being a widely held belief, some studies, such as one from Pew Institute disprove this. This study found that most social media users follow accounts of other ideologies, and are likely to seek out websites that both confirm and deny their pre-existing opinions.¹⁹ A second study found that even when people avoid active debate with ideological opponents, they frequently read and learn from their comments.²⁰ These studies demonstrate that individuals on social media do not restrict themselves to their ideological bubble, but rather seek out and engage with individuals who do not share their opinions. The second criticism of social media is that widespread disinformation, in the form of untrue information, fake identities, or misleading information would impede the democratic process.²¹ Social media is authored by its users, and as such, it is vulnerable to political interference by other nations. Despite this threat, it has yet to be proven that disinformation has degraded the electoral or deliberative system in any way, as there are no great differences in opinions or voting

¹⁸ Gruzd, "Investigating Political Polarization on Twitter: A Canadian Perspective," 35.

¹⁹ Ibid, 31.

²⁰ Ibid, 38.

²¹ Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly*, (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>.

preferences after interference.²² While fears of social media being an echo chamber, or full of disinformation, are widespread, there is a lack of evidence that proves this to be the case. As such, the benefits of deliberative democracy through social media should outweigh the unfounded fears.

The deliberative conference suggested by Fishkin would be effective because it brings together people from different backgrounds, educates them and provides them with an opportunity for debate. However, it is impractical due to geographical barriers, time constraints, and visual prejudice causing people to be judged on their physical appearance and presentation rather than on their viewpoints. Social media can address the impracticalities of deliberative conferences and in-person discussions as suggested by Fishkin. It can increase exposure to ideas as it has more penetration into the market than traditional media, it can provide a space for citizens to engage with their politicians, and it can increase exposure to opposing viewpoints beyond the typical social circle. Deliberative democracy is effective, but it is inaccessible in its traditional form. Social media increases the accessibility of the deliberative process, and thus it should be seen as an effective method of deliberative democracy.

²² Ibid, 11.

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