The Dualisms of Social Media

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As international students (Caro from Mexico studying in Italy, and Saeed from Pakistan studying in the United States), we rely on social media to stay connected with our friends and family thousands of miles away. As college students we find ourselves enjoying social media, but there are also instances when we feel overwhelmed. After discussing these conflicting sentiments, we realize that the various effects of social media lead to a wider commentary on world affairs. Here we focus particularly on the global state of democracy.

At the Athens Democracy Forum, we were intrigued by the panel "The Double Threat to European Democracy," and found ourselves with questions such as the following; How is it possible for social media to have a dual effect on democracy? Why are there cases in which social media plays a positive role in building democratic values, yet in other cases it poses a threat to those very same principles?

Just in the last decade, the world has seen multiple instances in which social media has played a significant role in facilitating communication and interaction amongst people towards the fulfillment of democratic values such as the freedom of speech, protesting, and voting. For instance, the efficacy of Twitter during the Arab Spring (particularly in Egypt) is very well-documented. Protesters used the platform to effectively organize demonstrations, disseminate information about their activities, and most important, to raise local and global awareness of ongoing and on-the-ground events. The Ukrainian protests saw the use of Facebook, and the current Belarus protestors are using Telegram. In the United States, Instagram is coalescing popular support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Additionally, who can question the impact that #MeToo has had around the globe? If we take these examples, the benefits of social media and its positive impact on democracy are well recognized and established. Citizens in countries that have historically had limited democratic freedoms are using social media effectively to demand their rights.

Nevertheless, we are also witnessing cases where social media provides a platform for hate speech and disinformation, which ends up polarizing societies. For instance, also in the United States, Twitter and Facebook have brought to the forefront and accelerated the division between Republican and Democrat voters by becoming sites of ferocious political arguments, where respect and tolerance seem to have disappeared. Popular documentaries such as "The Social Dilemma" and "The Great Hack" actively warn the public of the dangers that social media poses. Why is it that in seemingly "stable" democracies (like the United States), social media seems to be a polarizing force? Earlier we wrote that in countries that are going through the democratization process, social media has shaped up to be a powerful tool to unite people. Shouldn't it have the same effect in mature democracies too?

As we continue to reflect, we recognize that in younger democracies social media has proven to be a platform where people can "have a taste" of what the right of freedom of speech feels like. In these countries, such as the examples we have shared from Egypt, Ukraine, and Belarus, societies have demonstrated a responsible and positive use of social media.

On the other hand, in seemingly democratic countries such as the United States where the right to the freedom of speech is recognized more widely, the use of social media has descended into scapegoating, hate speech and misinformation. We anxiously notice that in countries where social media rhetoric has descended to a blasé level of dishonesty, it is not only making the country misinformed, but also making it less democratic.

We posit to our readers, not to fear the rise and use of social media in our daily lives, but to accept it as a tool that can be used for the greater good. There are instances where social media platforms have given rise and credence to the struggle for democracy around the world. Of course, people must be wary of the media they digest, and make informed decisions. Our consumption of these different platforms requires our diligence.