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The Role of Social Media in Activism and Disaster Relief: A Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become an integral part of modern communication, and their impact on various aspects of our lives cannot be underestimated. In particular, social media has had a significant influence on political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts around the world. The widespread use of social media has facilitated the spread of information and ideas, leading to increased political participation, mobilization of activists, and aid distribution during times of crisis. However, social media has also brought challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation, online harassment, and the manipulation of public opinion. Therefore, understanding the role of social media in these contexts is crucial for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the most common ways that social media is used in political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts, and what are the benefits and drawbacks of these uses?
How has social media affected the way that people organize and participate in political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts, and what are the implications of these changes?
To what extent does social media facilitate or hinder effective communication and coordination among activists, disaster relief workers, and other stakeholders involved in political movements and disaster relief efforts?
How can social media be used to amplify marginalized voices and promote social justice in political movements and disaster relief efforts, and what are the challenges associated with these efforts?

How do different types of social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) affect the ways that political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts are organized and communicated, and how do these effects vary across different contexts?

What ethical considerations should be taken into account when using social media in political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts, and how can these considerations be addressed?

METHODS

Using the Twitter API and TAGS v6.1, we harvested tweets and retweets containing relevant hashtags related to political movements, activism, and disaster relief over a period of one week. The hashtags used were identified based on previous research and included #politicalmovement, #activism, #disasterrelief, #protest, #socialjustice, and #humanitarianaid.
Data Categorization:
> Each tweet was manually categorized using Microsoft Excel based on a predetermined list of themes, including but not limited to:
> Types of political movements or activism (e.g., environmental, social justice, human rights, etc.)
> Geographic location of the movement/activism/disaster relief efforts
> Role of social media in promoting or organizing the movement/activism/disaster relief efforts
> Criticisms of political response/policy related to the movement/activism/disaster relief efforts
> Positive or negative sentiment expressed in the tweet

Data Analysis:
Microsoft Excel was used to count the prevalence of each theme, and we used MonkeyLearn.com to run a sentiment analysis of the tweets. We also manually extracted common hashtags used in the tweets and used Wordclouds.co.uk to create a tag cloud of the hashtags.
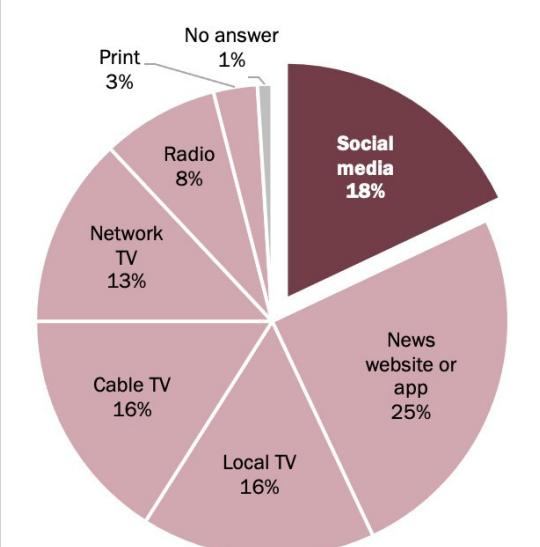**Ethical Considerations:**
To ensure privacy, only public Twitter content was used, and usernames were removed, with the exception of organizations and public figures. Data used was uploaded to a secure repository on GitLab for analysis and presentation.
Limitations:
The study is limited to Twitter data and may not represent the full range of social media usage related to political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts. Additionally, manual categorization may introduce some degree of subjectivity in the analysis.
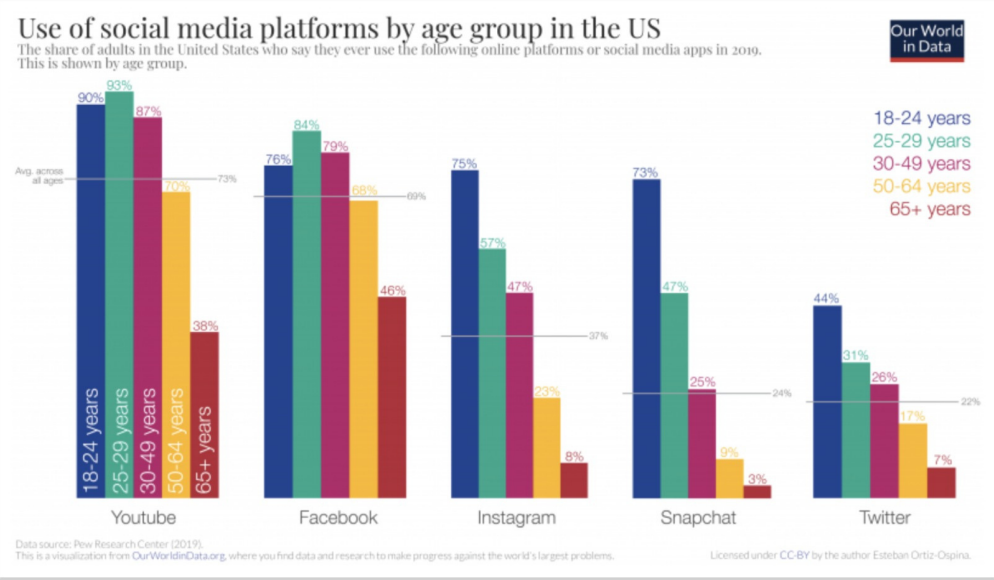
FINDING

About two-in-ten U.S. adults got most of their political news on social media
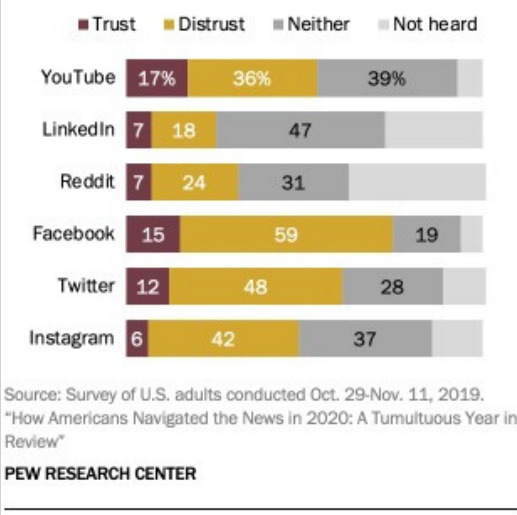% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...
No answer 1%
Print 3%
Radio 8%
Social media 18%
Network TV 13%
News website or app 25%
Cable TV 16%
Local TV 16%
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review"
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Use of social media platforms by age group in the US
18-24 years, 25-29 years, 30-49 years, 50-64 years, 65+ years

Few U.S. adults trusted social media as place to get political and election news
% of U.S. adults who ___ each source as a place to get political and election news
Trust / Distrust / Neither / Not heard
YouTube: 17% / 36% / 39%
LinkedIn: 7 / 18 / 47
Reddit: 7 / 24 / 31
Facebook: 15 / 59 / 19
Twitter: 12 / 48 / 28
Instagram: 8 / 42 / 37
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review"
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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RELATED RESEARCH

Social media has played a significant role in recent political movements and protests, allowing activists to communicate and coordinate more easily and reach a wider audience than traditional forms of media (e.g. TV, newspapers). For example, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 were largely organized and spread through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Social media has also been used to support disaster relief efforts by providing real-time information about the situation on the ground, connecting volunteers with those in need, and facilitating fundraising and donation efforts.

Beyond the differences in perceptions between partisans – and within parties based on people's news sources – those who turn to social media as the most common way they get their political news stand out in some ways from those who get news from other pathways (news websites and apps; local, cable, and network TV; radio; and print).
Throughout 2020, the Center's American News Pathways project found that those who primarily got political news on social media tended to follow news – about both the 2020 election and the COVID-19 pandemic – less closely than others. Perhaps related to that fact, this group also was less likely to correctly answer a range of fact-based questions about politics and current events.

The 18% of U.S. adults who said in late 2019 that social media was the most common way they got political news also differ from other Americans demographically. Most notably, they are the youngest group by a considerable margin – nearly half of the adults who turned mostly to social media are under 30 (48%), compared with 21% of those who turned to news websites or apps, and even fewer of those who said they mostly turned to other platforms like cable television or print. Compared with all other news consumers, U.S. adults who most commonly used social media for news also are less likely to be White (56% are).

While many Americans get news on social media, the public as a whole largely distrusts these platforms as a source for political news. In November of 2019, both Democrats and Republicans were more likely to express distrust rather than trust in social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as sources of political news. For example, among U.S. adults overall, 59% said they distrusted Facebook as a place for political news, compared with just 15% who said they trusted the social networking site.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media has revolutionized the way people engage in political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts. Social media provides a platform for individuals to connect, organize and mobilize around shared interests and causes. The ability to spread information and connect with others has made social media a powerful tool for promoting change and affecting social movements. However, social media also has its limitations, and it is not a panacea for all social and political problems. It is essential to recognize the potential negative effects that social media can have, including the spread of misinformation and disinformation, echo chamber effects, and polarization.

Recommendations:
To fully realize the potential of social media for political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts, the following recommendations are suggested:
> Develop strategies for combating misinformation and disinformation on social media. This can include increasing media literacy, creating fact-checking initiatives, and promoting responsible online behavior.
> Encourage diverse perspectives and promote critical thinking by exposing people to a wide range of information sources.
> Foster an inclusive and respectful online environment that encourages civil discourse and discourages hate speech and cyberbullying.
> Utilize social media analytics tools to better understand the dynamics of social media and how it is used to promote political movements, activism, and disaster relief efforts.
> Invest in research that examines the role of social media in shaping social and political movements and developing best practices for leveraging social media for social change.