HSS 313: Digital Media and Democracy

Week 1

Thu, Aug 31, 2023

Today's agendas

- Overview of substantive themes

- Introducing digital media consumption analysis (ungraded)

Substantive themes

We will focus on nine key topics (see the syllabus)

1. Protest and collective action
2. Censorship and surveillance
3. Supply and demand of misinformation
4. Correcting misinformation
5. Echo chambers and political polarization
6. Incivility, hate speech, and violence
7. Various modes of digital communication
8. Digital literacy
9. Artificial intelligence and democracy

Theme 1: Protest and collective action

Do tools of digital media facilitate collective action in politics, and how?

- Collective action is action taken together by a group of people whose goal is to enhance their condition and achieve a common objective
- E.g., anti-government protests under dictatorships

Social media (or social networking sites), online forums, and messaging apps can be powerful tools for mobilizing and organizing collective action

Theme 1: Protest and collective action

Collective actions play a key role in democracy beyond institutionalized channels of participation (e.g. voting)

Theme 1: Protest and collective action

However, it is not easy to organize and maintain

- Lack of information spread
- Vulnerability to the "free rider" problem
- Would it succeed without me? What would I gain?

Can digital media help overcome these problems, and how?

What are the downsides/limitations?

- Just clicking "like"?
- Protests can get violent due to "online moral outrage"
- Dictators do not just sit around

Theme 2: Censorship and surveillance

Optimistic views on the democratic potential of digital media

- Peaked in the early 2010s as social media platforms facilitated the ouster of four of the world's longest-ruling dictators, in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen (the Arab Spring)
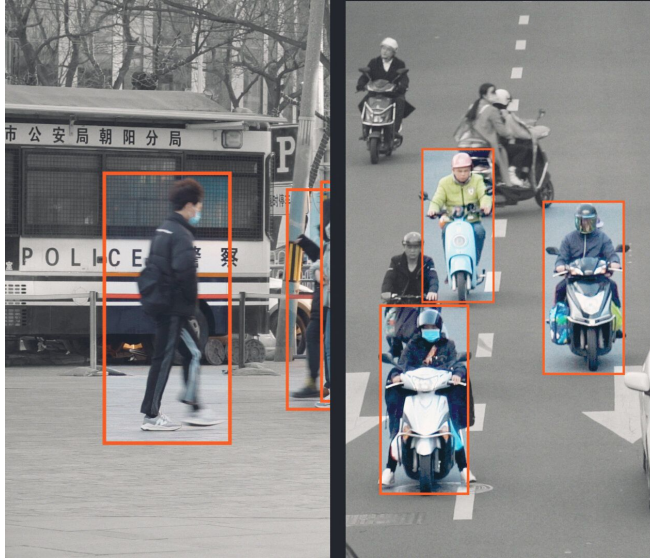
Many dictators, who monopolize power, can control where and when modern communication technology is introduced, who gets access, and what information is circulated

Theme 2: Censorship and surveillance
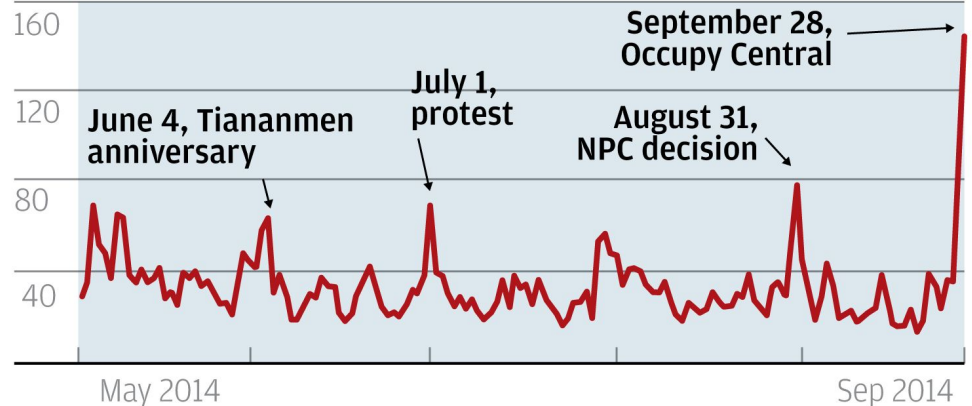
They can

- Simply shut down the entire internet

- Block connections to specific website and services

- Operate denial-of-service attacks

- Remove (and promote) certain content

- Use digital infrastructure to surveil their population (dissidents)

Theme 2: Censorship and surveillance

Censorship on China's social media

— Inaccessible Weibo posts per 10,000

June 4, Tiananmen anniversary

July 1, protest

August 31, NPC decision

September 28, Occupy Central

160

120

80

40

May 2014   Sep 2014

Sources: Weiboscope, Journalism and Media Studies Centre, HKU

SCMP

Theme 2: Censorship and surveillance

Theme 2: Censorship and surveillance

How do authoritarian governments control digital media?

Does digital repression substitute traditional repressive tactics?

How do people react to digital repression?

Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

The gatekeeping role of journalists

- Refers to their function as intermediaries between the information sources and the public
- Journalists decide what news stories are worthy of coverage and spend effort to make sure that what they cover is accurate

This role has evolved (or decreased) significantly with the advent of the digital media age, impacting the quality of information in several ways

Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

Concerns about unreliable information on the Internet

- Misinformation

- Disinformation

- Fake news

- Propaganda

Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

How is misinformation consumed?

Science

Current Issue   First release papers   Archive   About ⌄   Submit manuscript

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election

NIR GRINBERG, KENNETH JOSEPH, LISA FRIEDLAND, BRIONY SWIRE-THOMPSON, AND DAVID LAZER   Authors Info & Affiliations

SCIENCE • 25 Jan 2019 • Vol 363, Issue 6425 • pp. 374-378 • DOI: 10.1126/science.aau2706

↓ 14,332   ▯▯ 565

Finding facts about fake news

There was a proliferation of fake news during the 2016 election cycle. Grinberg *et al.* analyzed Twitter data by matching Twitter accounts to specific voters to determine who was exposed to fake news, who spread fake news, and how fake news interacted with factual news (see the Perspective by Ruths). Fake news accounted for nearly 6% of all news consumption, but it was heavily concentrated—only 1% of users were exposed to 80% of fake news, and 0.1% of users were responsible for sharing 80% of fake news. Interestingly, fake news was most concentrated among conservative voters.

Science, this issue p. 374; see also p. 348

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Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

How is misinformation consumed? (cont'd)

Cognition
Volume 188, July 2019, Pages 39-50

Original Articles

Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning

Gordon Pennycook [a], David G. Rand [a b c]

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Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

Who are the producers of misinformation? (e.g,, the Russian IRA)

Infamous Russian Troll Farm Appears to Be Source of Anti-Ukraine Propaganda

Theme 3: Supply and demand of misinformation

How is misinformation spread?

Lies spread faster than the truth

There is worldwide concern over false news and the possibility that it can influence political, economic, and social well-being. To understand how false news spreads, Vosoughi *et al.* used a data set of rumor cascades on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. About 126,000 rumors were spread by ~3 million people. False news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people. Falsehood also diffused faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences observed.

Science, this issue p. 1146

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Theme 4: Correcting misinformation

What interventions work (and do not work) to correct misinformation?

Would providing (more) correct information will work?

- Continued influence effect
- Worldview backfire effect

When do these unexpected effects take place?

How can we avoid these effects?

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

What do we mean by "political polarization"

- Simply speaking, it refers to the division of a society into distinct and often opposing political or partisan groups

- E.g., Ideological polarization
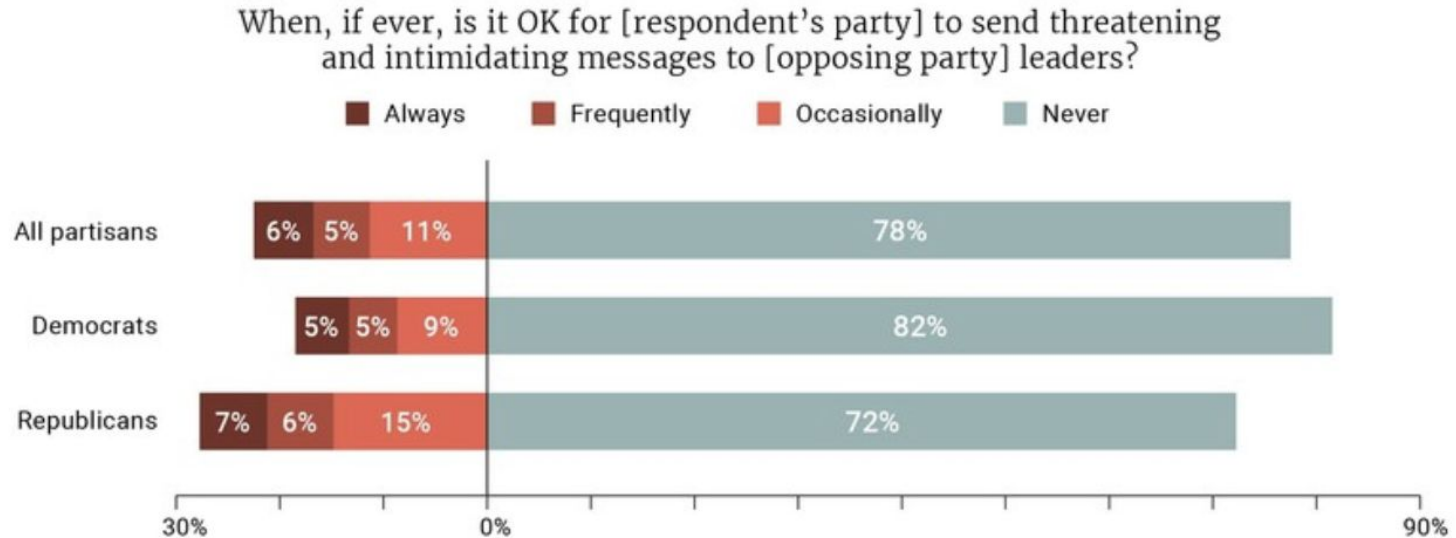
- E.g, Affective polarization

By the way, is political polarization bad?

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

When, if ever, is it OK for [respondent's party] to send threatening and intimidating messages to [opposing party] leaders?

■ Always   ■ Frequently   ■ Occasionally   ■ Never

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

When, if ever, is it OK for [respondent's party] to send threatening and intimidating messages to [opposing party] leaders?

Legend: Always · Frequently · Occasionally · Never

Group	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Never
All partisans	6%	5%	11%	78%
Democrats	5%	5%	9%	82%
Republicans	7%	6%	15%	72%

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

Does digital media, especially social media, contribute to political polarization?

The echo chamber thesis (quote from Barack Obama)

"If you are getting all your information off algorithms being sent through your phone and it's just reinforcing whatever biases you have, which is the pattern that develops, at a certain point, you just live in a bubble, and that's part of why our politics is so polarized right now. I think it's a solvable problem, but I think it's one we have to spend a lot of time thinking about"

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

However, do social media platforms create echo chambers in the first place?

Also, do recommendation/ranking algorithms actually reinforce echo

chambers?

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

Then, exposure to opposing views lead to less polarization?

Theme 5: Echo chambers and polarization

Then, exposure to opposing views lead to less polarization?

RESEARCH ARTICLE | SOCIAL SCIENCES

Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization

Christopher A. Bail, Lisa P. Argyle, Taylor W. Brown, +6, and Alexander Volfovsky Authors Info & Affiliations

Theme 6: Online hate speech

Hate speech ("혐오 발언" in Korean) ?

Bias-motivated, hostile, and malicious language targeted at a person or group because of their innate characteristics"

- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Religious groups
- LGBTQ+
- Women
- Immigrants
- Disabled Individuals

Theme 6: Online hate speech

Consequences

- Reduces the target's use of social media
- Causes psychological unrest and anxiety
- Pushes the target to withdraw from public debate both on- and offline, harming free speech and civic engagement

Questions

- How can we detect online hate speech? How prevalent is it?
- Who are the perpetrators? What are the targets?
- How can we reduce online hate speech?

Theme 7: Various modes of digital communication

The mode of digital media varies widely: text/image/video, interaction, pace, etc.
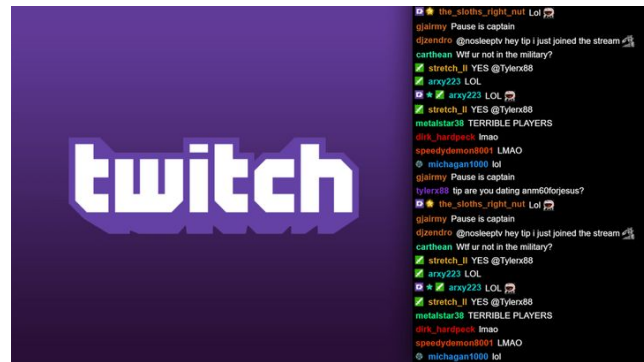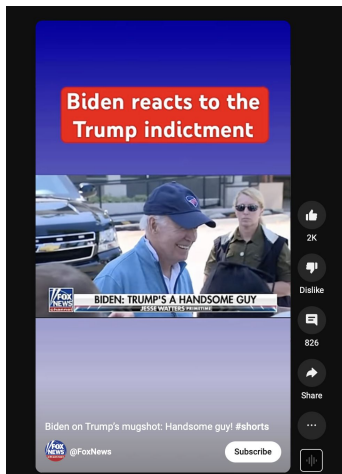
Theme 7: Various modes of digital communication

What effects does the mode of the content have on political phenomenon?

● E.g., video is stronger than text for persuasion and/or content diffusion?

Theme 7: Various modes of digital communication

Seeing Is Believing: Is Video Modality More Powerful in Spreading Fake News via Online Messaging Apps?

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Theme 8: Digital literacy

Theme 8: Digital literacy

Digital literacy means the capability to make sense of online information combined with the basic digital skills necessary to attain it

This can shape user online experience in various ways

For instance, let's think about the following (popular) arguments

- "People with low digital literacy are less likely to identify fake news"
- "People with low digital literacy are more likely to share fake news"

Theme 8: Digital literacy

SHARE

DOWNLOAD PDF

PEER REVIEWED

Digital literacy is associated with more discerning accuracy judgments but not sharing intentions

Theme 9: Artificial intelligence and democracy

We know little about how recent developments in AI shape our democracy

We will spend effort to examine/speculate the imminent and future consequences of various AI technologies, including (but not limited) generative AI

Theme 9: Artificial intelligence and democracy

For instance,

- Large Language Models

  - Can AI communication tools increase legislative responsiveness and trust in democratic institutions?

  - How will the traditional news ecosystem be affected by AI-generated news?

- Deep fakes

  - Are political deepfakes as credible as real media?

Media consumption analysis (informal, ungraded)

Instruction

1. For a week from now

   - Go over the list of questions and make sure you understand them

   - Second, reflect on your own experience building on those questions

2. Come to class and discuss your experience/thoughts (next Thu, 9/7)

Media consumption analysis (informal, ungraded)

1. Personal Digital Media Habits:

- How (frequently) do you consume digital information, both for news and for entertainment? What platforms or sources do you use and trust the most, and why?
- How do you think the algorithms that curate your feed impact the content you see? Do you think this affects your perspective on political/social issues?

2. Disinformation and Fake News:

- Have you ever encountered misinformation online (e.g., fake news)?
- In what mode was the misinformation (e.g., text, image, video)?
- How did you identify it, and what impact do you think it has on your perception of reality and your behavior?
- Who do you think produces such content, and why do you think they do?

Media consumption analysis (informal, ungraded)

3. Polarization and Echo Chambers:

- Do you believe you are exposed to diverse viewpoints, or are you more likely to interact with people who share your beliefs? How might this affect your views?
- Do you think you self-select into content that is consistent with your viewpoints, or it is more of a result from algorithmic curation?
- When you are exposed to content that is inconsistent with your viewpoints, do you think you could be persuaded? Or would it rather simply reinforce your current viewpoints?

4. Online Activism and Protests:

- Have you ever participated in or witnessed online activism or protests, at least in the form of clicking "like"?
- (How) do you think digital media platforms facilitate or hinder these activities?

Media consumption analysis (informal, ungraded)

5. Censorship and Surveillance:

- Based on your own experiences, can you think of instances where social media platforms or governments have limited or controlled the flow of information online, particularly online related politics? How did this impact your access to information and your views and behavior?
- If you are aware of any, does this awareness affect your behavior?

6. Aggressive Speech and Online Harassment:

- Have you ever encountered rude, hateful speech or online harassment in the context political/social discussion? If so, where? How did it make you feel, and how do you think it affects your attitudes?
- Have you seen any measure taken by digital media platforms (or governments) to address aggressive/hate speech?