A s s i g n m e n t   1

Title:
Conference Paper SP1 2021

Name: Jordan Edmondson
Student Number: 20465236
Unit Name: Social Media, Communities and Networks
Email Address: 20465236@student.curtin.edu.au
Date Submitted: 04/04/21
Word Count: 1947
URL (if applicable):

I declare that I have retained a copy of this assignment. I have read and understood Curtin University policies on Plagiarism and Copyright and declare that this assignment complies with these policies. I declare that this assignment is my own work and has not been submitted previously in any form for assessment.

_____Jordan Edmondson 04/04/2020_____

(Date/Signature)
(Typing your name in the space provided is sufficient when submitting online via FLECS-Blackboard.)

The dangers of online social networks enhancing political ideology and participation

Stream: Online Networks and Social Change

Abstract

This paper shows the links between online social networks and influence on political ideology. It explores this influence under the scope of shifting community types and thought leaders. Further to this, we explore the nature and legitimacy of political information shared through online social networks and finally how this interaction can lead to a rise in political participation. In essence we are able to see a shift of political influence from the political opinions found within traditional communities to a broader, online community. These opinions are formed through what's shared within these online communities, information which has been shown to be potentially falsified or politically biased. Impacts of this are then explored under the context of political activism and participation, something which has also shifted in its nature due to online social networks.

Introduction

There are many influencers in the day to day lives of a modern individual. From advertising to messages contained within media, we are continually being bombarded with influence to our ways of thinking and ideologies. The discussion ahead will focus on the various influences that Online Social Networks (OSNs) can have on the political ideology of the individual. It will delve into how such catalyst for influence has changed alongside the progression of society from traditional communities to online, networked based communities. The concept of influence spread by the few to the many will also be explored under a political context. There will also be discussion pertaining to the legitimacy of information and influence spread through these OSNs and the different avenues in which falsified and biased information can find itself being spread across vast networks of individuals. Surpassing the dangers that arise when discussing the notion of political influence through OSN interaction, we discuss the impacts such influence can have and how this culminates into political action.

Traditional Community Echo Chambers vs Online Social Network Echo Chambers and Political Homophily

The structure of community has changed alongside the technological evolution of modern society (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018). The idea of a traditional community, one that sits on porches and discusses the goings on within the relative confines of their area no longer really exists within the modernized world (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018). With the rise of OSNs, the modern social structure saw a shift from such traditional close-knit communities into broader, loosely-knit structures unbound by the physical constraints of geography (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018).

Ideologies and political beliefs of traditional communities were heavily influenced by an 'Echo Chamber' effect (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018). This is essentially a feedback loop

wherein the traditions and opinions of the majority in the community were echoed back to that community thus limiting the diversity of opinions found within that society. The political beliefs and opinions that were echoed throughout these chambers of society generally tended to be that of a conservative nature (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018).

With the shift from traditional community structure to the digitally networked community that came with the revolution of OSNs, the capacity to spread ideologies and opinions was greatly increased. No longer was the individual bound to the ideological influences found within their community but instead capable of consuming the opinions and ideologies of a much broader network (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018). This potential for consumption of opinions from a widespread and diverse audience is not always realised however.

The traditional community has been traded for the OSN and while some of the ideologies manifested within the echo chambers of traditional community could perhaps be considered to be outdated and have no place in the modern world (Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018), they were at least kept confined to their community. The concept of a political echo chamber has not diminished with this change in social structure, it has in fact been able to reshape itself to fit with the OSN and can now reach much more sizable audiences without the constraints of geography.

While the echo chambers of traditional communities grew naturally and were glued together by the isolative nature of that community, echo chambers existing on OSNs require a different catalyst to hold themselves together. This mainly comes in the form of political homophily (Boutyline & Willer, 2016), the tendency for those who share similar interests to bond together, or, as the saying goes "Birds of a feather flock together". Bringing those individuals who share common interests, in this case, political interests together into their own OSN community can lead to the creation of a digital echo chamber. This is mainly due to the nature of the social networking platforms these OSNs are built off of. They provide the ability for individuals to share one's own opinions along with the ability to spread the opinions of others that they identify with. This combined with the element of political homophily will naturally create OSN communities that are continually digesting and sharing like-minded political opinions, in other words, an echo chamber (Boutyline & Willer, 2016) (Williams et al., 2015).

Just like the echo chambers of traditional communities, this creates an environment wherein there is little capacity for diversity of opinion and thus those opinions shared within the echo chamber proliferate and drive a much more consistent influence on the opinions and ideologies of individuals consuming them (Boutyline & Willer, 2016) (Williams et al., 2015). This concept has been found to be particularly true in conservative circles (Boutyline & Willer, 2016).

Hyperactive Users and Opinion Influence

With such large networks of individuals connected through OSNs, one would expect the majority of content spread across these platforms to be constructed from the many, but this is not generally the case (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020). There are those who are considered to be 'Hyperactive Users' (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020), users who's OSN activity (Posting, sharing, etc.) well surpasses that of an average user. These hyperactive users control so much of the OSN space with posts rooted within their own ideologies and opinions that they become 'Opinion Leaders' (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020).

As the name suggests, these opinion leaders have the capacity to shape the perspectives and ideologies of those who are connected to them within their OSN (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020). This raises concerns considering the potential outreach of these opinion leaders as it generates a potential for a large sphere of influence to be created based off of the political ideologies of the individual, ideologies that, as we will discuss, can be wrought from misinformation and political bias. Furthermore, these ideologies may not necessarily apply to those that this individual is influencing as they may come from completely different contexts.

Within a tightly-knit traditional community, an influencer of political opinion and ideology was the echo-chambers of opinion within that community. The shift to loosely-knit, broader online social networked communities has seen this replaced by the few opinion leaders whose outreach surpasses geographical confines and potentially the political contexts that these confines come with. The opinion leaders have the potential to sit at the head of the digital, political echo chambers discussed previously, a dangerous notion when considering the interplay between the two.

The Nature of Political Information and Opinion Wrought from OSNs

With the capacity to shape and influence political opinion through the sharing of information on OSN platforms (Meraz, 2011), one must consider the nature of this information and its origins. This is where another danger is brought to attention as that information might not necessarily be true or it may be presented in a way which renders it with heavy political bias.

An example of this can be seen in the 2016 election wherein 'Russian Bots' flooded social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, spreading misinformation and politically biased information that aligned with a conservative, pro-Trump agenda (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020). Once these posts were seeded within the platforms, they were taken up by conservatives and spread through their respective OSNs, thus creating an exponentially increasing distribution network (Papakyriakopoulos et al. 2020).

Aside from the specific example found within the 2016 election, it has been found that OSNs are becoming more and more of a driving factor in shaping political opinions as compared to that of traditional media outlets (Meraz, 2011). The dangers of this can be seen when compounded it with the fact that when compared against such traditional media outlets, OSNs have been regarded to be the least credible source of information (Johnson & Kaye, 2014).

OSNs and Political Action

When political agitation reaches its boiling point, the impacted communities rise up and protest. This has been true for as long as society has existed and is an innate property to the functioning of an organized community. Modern protest, however, have significantly changed with the introduction of OSNs (Jost et al., 2018). Protests can utilise such networks to assist in spreading information on the logistical level (E.g., transport, discussion of police presence, etc.), the ideological level and as a means of providing updates to the state of the ongoing protest (Jost et al., 2018). Protests can have the ability to shape the "future balance of power" (Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015) on various different levels, from social reform to overthrow of city state.

As mentioned, OSNs play an important part on the ideological level of a modern protest, in particular, they are commonly used to spread the information and ideologies which become the spark of ignition for citizens to take up such political action (Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015) (Jost et al., 2018).

If one were to take this information and put it under the scope of previous discussions, they would be immediately struck by the implications. This is where the core dangers discussed above culminate into an impact that surpasses just the notion of influence to an individual's political opinions, it breeds an impact that can potentially topple city states and manipulate social reform. Political movements that are flared to action based off of information that may not necessarily be true, spread through echo chambers wherein polarizing opinion that may contain truth are not able to be taken under heed, echo chambers that are potentially fueled by the contributions made by a few individuals whose contexts may not even be relevant to those who they influence. This is where the true dangers of political ideology enhancement through OSNs lay.

Conclusion

The main dangers arising from the political influence of OSNs are twofold and intertwined. The influence itself, wrought from misinformation or political bias and its ability to culminate into political action. The discussion above has provided evidence to both of these factors. It has sought to demonstrate how political influence on OSNs can originate from potential misinformation, political bias or information that has been fed through an echo chamber with no potential for polarization. Online social networks not only provide the capability to share political information, whether it be legitimate or not, they also provide a platform in which individuals can organize and participate offline protest based off of this political information. This incentive to participate can be generated from misinformation spread through untrusted sources. It could be spread through the voice of the few hyperactive users or it can be propagated through the echo chambers within an individual's online social network. This capacity for a mass ignition to political participation was not possible prior to the advent of these online social networks wherein the political ideologies were mostly confined to the echo chambers of a local community. It is for this reason that this paper sits under the conference stream of 'Online Networks and Social Change' as it clearly demonstrates the capacity for OSNs to enable social change.

References

A. Badawy, E. Ferrara and K. Lerman, "Analyzing the Digital Traces of Political Manipulation: The 2016 Russian Interference Twitter Campaign," *2018 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM)*, Barcelona, Spain, 2018, pp. 258-265, doi: 10.1109/ASONAM.2018.8508646.

Boutyline, A., & Willer, R. (2016). The Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers: Variation in Ideological Homophily in Online Networks. *Political Psychology*, *38*(3), 551–569. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12337

Hampton, K. N. & Wellman, B. (2018). Lost and Saved . . . Again: The Moral Panic about the Loss of Community Takes Hold of Social Media. *Contemporary Sociology*. 37(6), 643-651.

Johnson, T. J., & Kaye, B. K. (2014). Credibility of Social Network Sites for Political Information Among Politically Interested Internet Users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*(4), 957–974. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12084

Jost, J. T., Barberá, P., Bonneau, R., Langer, M., Metzger, M., Nagler, J., Sterling, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks. *Political Psychology*, *39*, 85–118. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12478

Meraz, S. (2011). The fight for 'how to think': Traditional media, social networks, and issue interpretation. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, *12*(1), 107–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884910385193

Papacharissi, Z. (2011). Conclusion: A Networked Self (Chapter 15). In Z. Papacharissi (ed) *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. Routledge.

Papakyriakopoulos, O., Serrano, J. C. M., & Hegelich, S. (2020). Political communication on social media: A tale of hyperactive users and bias in recommender systems. *Online Social Networks and Media*, 15, 100058. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.osnem.2019.100058

Steinert-Threlkeld, Z. C., Mocanu, D., Vespignani, A., & Fowler, J. (2015). Online social networks and offline protest. *EPJ Data Science*, *4*(1), 19. https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-015-0056-y

Williams, H. T., McMurray, J. R., Kurz, T., & Hugo Lambert, F. (2015). Network analysis reveals open forums and echo chambers in social media discussions of climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, *32*, 126–138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.03.006