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CSC 271

## A Threat to American Democracy

Social media can be described as the new media technology of today's day and age. There is a concrete possibility for social media technology to make a difference in political opinion and outcome. Fake news that gets circulated throughout various social media platforms also has a bearing on political opinion and outcome. In the most recent Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton presidential election of 2016, social media coverage had a surprising effect on the outcome of the election. Social media's impact has been beneficial to the overall climate of technology.

Previous campaigns, at least those before the 2008 election of Barack Obama, focused on less internet use and social media exposure (mostly due to the fact there was not much development in the internet department), and more on television, print, and direct exposure.<sup>1</sup> While "fake news," as it is referred to today, was still in play through print media, the time it took for factchecking the claims was significantly longer.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, the amount of coverage of candidates has increased significant through the entry of social media and the internet into the populations' tools.<sup>3</sup> This increase in coverage of candidates can be seen as a positive effect of social media as a technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Cain Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics," The New York Times, November 07, 2008, Accessed March 22, 2018, <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Caulfield, "28 National Newspapers of Record," Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers, January 8, 2017, Accessed March 22, 2018, <https://webliteracy.pressbooks.com/chapter/national-newspapers-of-record/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Digital News Developments in U.S. Presidential Campaigns, 200-2016," Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, July 18, 2016, Accessed March 22, 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/18/digital-news-developments-in-u-s-presidential-campaigns-2000-2016/>.

Greater accuracy of information put out by candidates can be illustrated through social media.<sup>4</sup> Use of fact-checking on statements and claims can keep the candidates more honest, and less likely to make unwarranted claims. One negative aspect of social media that can be identified is the magnitude of fake news distribution through social media.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, fact-checking and education of the fake news issue is assisting in the misinforming claims being distrusted.<sup>6</sup> Fake news distribution can be a negative aspect of social media, but will be dealt with through fact-checking and technological education; thus social media can be identified as an overall positive technology.

In the 2016 election, fake news stories were found for both pro-Trump and pro-Clinton.<sup>7</sup> A total of 38 million shares of fake stories translates to 760 million user-clicks of the story, which is more than double the population in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Social media facilitates the distribution of fake news, as shown in the study by Allcott stating 41.8% of fake news sites visitors are from social media links.<sup>9</sup> This negative social media finding can be countered by the fact checking and education on the issue in upcoming years. Social media benefits outweigh the negatives of fake news distribution.

Social media has a plethora of uses, ranging from communication, to opinion sharing, to outreach.<sup>10</sup> Negative aspects, such as fake news distribution, are outweighed by the benefits that

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<sup>4</sup> Petter Bae Brandtzaeg et al, "How Journalists and Social Media Users Perceive Online Fact-Checking and Verification Services," Taylor & Francis Online, August 29, 2017, Accessed March 22, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2017.1363657>.

<sup>5</sup> Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, October 19, 2017, Accessed March 22, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/>.

<sup>6</sup> Janna Anderson, "The Future of Truth," Accessed March 22, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (2017): 211-36, Accessed March 22, 2018, doi:10.3386/w23089. Page 212.

<sup>8</sup> Hunt Allcott, "Social Media," Accessed March 22, 2018, page 212.

<sup>9</sup> Hunt Allcott, "Social Media," Accessed March 22, 2018, page 222.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, London: Sage Publications, 2017.

accrue. Even during the presidential elections, social media has both positive and negative effects. The positives of greater communication and further development and outreach beat out the negatives of fake news and misinformation. Overall, social media's impact has had a beneficial effect on the technological climate.

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