

The Weaponization of Social Media

After a military coup toppled Myanmar's democracy, the public formed an opposition force that engaged in coordinated riots and labor strikes to protest the change in leadership and fight for their liberties (Goldman, 2021).

Almost simultaneously, extremists and conspiracists were flocking the United States' Capitol in an effort to interrupt democratic processes and overturn the results of the presidential election (Lonsdorf, 2022).

Mobilizing thousands of people under a joint agenda without an outlined organizational hierarchy is no easy feat. However, the rise of certain social media platforms has enabled a new level of logistical coordination that was not feasible in the past. This is not without its consequences. The contrast between the events in Myanmar and those at the U.S. Capitol—both of which were organized via Twitter—highlights both social media's potential as a tool for advocacy, free speech, and amplifying voices, as well as its ability to promote misinformation and delude the public.

The primary problem with social media algorithms is that they promote more extreme viewpoints through confirmation bias. According to an article published by Sprout Social, a social media management and analytics tool, "social networks prioritize which content a user sees in their feed first by the likelihood that they'll actually want to see it" (Barnhart, 2021). In other words, if a user repeatedly engages with a certain type of post—for example, liking/commenting on posts with the hashtag #democrat—the algorithm will show them more of this content. This creates an echo chamber of sorts, where people are constantly seeing content that reaffirms their beliefs. Research done by the CU Boulder discovered that people

underestimated how much this feedback loop would corrode their opinions over time (Kuta, 2016).

Influencers have the power to correct this. Particularly, student journalists have a responsibility to ensure responsible use of their platforms. There are two ways they can accomplish this:

1. Primarily, they can do so by reporting factually and in an unbiased manner that explores all sides of an issue. The line between news and entertainment is often blurred, and it can become tempting to attract more attention to one's writing by twisting facts to make a story more poetic, controversial, or fluid. However, this is not ethical.
2. And second, they can do so by being responsive to their audience. Social media thrives on brevity: Tweets have a maximum of 280 characters, while the average TikTok is roughly 16 seconds. Getting news in such a short time frame means omitting certain details, which in turn, can result in inaccurate assumptions. However, there is opportunity to elaborate and clarify the content being posted if the journalist is responsive to questions asked from their audience.

If used correctly, influencers can use the power of social media as a tool to promote free speech, human rights, and democracy, as is being done in Myanmar. However, if left unchecked in the hands of unethical users, conspiracy theories can flourish and polarization can run rampant. Student journalists, as the next generation of the media, have the ability to shift the scale in either direction.

References

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