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During the 2016 election, Pope Francis endorsed GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump—at least, according to WTOE 5, a fake news Facebook page that has since been deleted. This is only one example of the multitudes of fake news stories that circulated during the 2016 election, and they are indicative of a larger problem that comes with the connectivity offered by social media: votes that are based on false information and extremist viewpoints.

Social media, conceptually, seems to be an ideal political tool. A political researcher in Minnesota can connect with people in Hong Kong within seconds. People can remind their friends to register to vote with Facebook. Shocking photos from the Middle East can become viral all around the world in just a day. As a result, groups have increased ability to communicate to those with similar and differing political views, bringing the political discussion to a visible, accessible forefront.

Despite these benefits, this accessibility comes with a cost. The Internet has granted us a protective barrier in the form of an electronic screen. This ability to remain anonymous, even on major social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, has created a new psychological phenomenon. Called the online disinhibition effect, it causes people to behave in a manner that is contrary to the behavior they demonstrate in real life (Suler 2001). This can result in people posting extremist viewpoints or outright misinformation. Additionally, these sites generally do not have any type of fact-checking systems. Because of this, incorrect information can spread quickly, become a central part of a person's political beliefs, and then be disproven all in the scope of a week.

We see this exemplified in the 2016 election where multiple "news stories" were circulated by both left- and right-wing organizations (Silverman et al. 2016). These stories

ranged from the aforementioned Pope story to an article claiming that Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS. While one can argue that social media heightens political understanding, it also introduces false beliefs to susceptible populations. This spread of false information, known as computational propaganda according to the University of Oxford, has effects that can be felt worldwide (Woolley and Howard, 2017). Not only is the United States affected, but citizens of other countries see this fake news and believe it as well, damaging current and future US relations. Unfortunately, most Americans do not read through these fake news stories and find out just how ludicrous these claims are. In our digital age, most information is gathered through headlines. With only 59% of shared URLs actually being clicked, clickbait headlines such as "Racist Photo of Hillary Clinton!" are taken at face value having never been read (Gabielkov et al. 2016).

As far as polarization, social media creates a digital echo chamber. These echo chambers allow others to spread highly polarizing ideas and receive only affirmation back. While social media allows individuals and groups to spread information, users can still block others who disagree with them and follow only those who adhere to their political ideologies. Consequently, political polarization has already risen. Twitter is primary evidence of that. With a highly polarized retweet network where users only retweet those with shared views and an equally polarized user base where 75% hold unambiguous political views, the effect that these echo chambers have within political discussion is both visible and detrimental (Gabielkov et al. 2016).

As individuals choose to only consume stories that follow their political beliefs, this polarization becomes intermingled with the onslaught of fake news. Recent evidence found that Trump supporters and conservatives were 40% more likely to have visited a pro-Trump fake

news website than non-Trump supporters. A similar trend was found amongst Clinton supporters. 15% were likely to have visited a pro-Clinton fake news website (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018).

Despite the negative impacts of social media, there are also positives to it. These sites offer a platform to disenfranchised voices. This has led to movements and protests such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and even the Arab Spring. Adapting to our evolving political atmosphere is one of the major ways to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls; for example, both Facebook and Twitter have drafted new policies regarding detecting fake news. Overall, social media, while a powerful political tool, can be used to further harm a system that relies on a well-informed public. If that public is informed solely by clickbaity headlines and hyper-partisan social media users, the votes cast will be nothing more than a "like" for one's favorite make-believe politician.

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