

Jasmin Habib: Okay, the third group, “You won't believe what social media is doing to your democracy”. This too was an exhibit in the room next door, and we have Robyn Peers, Samir Reynolds, Logan Miller, Don Tu, and Savannah Voll. Come on up.

Don: Good evening, everybody. Thank you very much for coming out to our presentation. I wanted to start things off with a quote. So for democracy to work, people need to have access to those public spaces that guarantee the rights of free speech, dissent, and critical dialogue. Now this is a quote from the scholar Dr. Henry Giroux. Some of you may or may not be familiar with him. Some of you in the room may be more familiar with him than others. Originally, this was joke that I thought would be very funny because I thought Dr. Giroux would be with us but anyways, I digress.

When democracy was born in ancient Athens, during the 5th century B.C., these public spaces were physical. They allowed for leaders and citizens to convene in one place to decide how to move their society forward. Now, we fast forward 2500 years, and of course these spaces, these physical spaces still exist. After all we have parliaments, we have town halls, we have courts. However, we have something that the ancient Athenians could've never dreamed of. We have the internet.

Now, you may remember this gentleman. He was, among other things, the first black president of the Harvard Law Review, and he did some other things as well. What is important though is that he is connected to the internet. So the internet has increasingly become that public space that guarantees the rights of free speech, dissent, and critical dialogue. And where a lot of that speech and dialogue is happening on social media.

But what is the nature of these new virtual spaces? Who is finding their voices on social media, and who has the power to silence those voices? Who has social media empowered, and how has it changed the fabric of our democracy? These are the questions that our team has explored through our project and our exhibit, and that we're gonna be exploring tonight through four major social media platforms. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit.

Once again, good evening everybody. I splashed this on you a little bit too early. My name is Don. This is Savannah, Robyn, Samir, and Logan, and so we want to lay out that investigation for you tonight. And to do that, we start off with a dive into Facebook with Savannah.

Savannah: In my section of our museum exhibit, I focused on the way that Facebook can be used as a medium both to undermine the principles of democracy, and to spread populist ideas. Political propaganda has always had this capacity, but the introduction of Facebook has really given strategists an unprecedented reach and sway. In the slide up here, just in case you're unfamiliar, I have a photo of a Facebook newsfeed with the trending news topics highlighted in red on the right.

In my research, I found that Facebook has been used for five significant tools that are somewhat nefarious to gain political support. So I'll be going through these five tools.

The first is the use of the “I Voted” sticker. This was first introduced to a group of Americans by Facebook during the 2012 presidential election. And it allowed

users to tell everyone on their Facebook feed that they had voted, and to encourage other people to vote as well. And the results of this experiment were that the group that they showed the sticker to, and gave them the opportunity to use, significantly had a higher turnout at the voting polls. So, with this functionality and the power that Facebook has, given its connection to the information that [inaudible 00:04:19], it has the ability to sway an election, just by offering the supporters of their preferred candidate the use of the sticker.

The second tool is the ability to inflate viewers and followership numbers by using fake accounts. And this is used normally to give the impression of a majority vote. By doing this, you're able to use conformity principles to embolden timid followers but also to sway undecided voters.

That moves us on to the third tool, which is the timeline algorithm. Facebook displays content that is most likely to please the viewer. Based on their past online behavior, and this is calculated through an algorithm, and oftentimes users are exposed only to content that already aligns with things that they agree with, things that they believe in, with little chance for exposure to new ideas. So this creates an echo chamber, which reinforces an artificial and incredibly limited world view. It also polarizes populations and can calcify confirmation biases.

That brings us to our fourth tool, which is the choice of what to display in the news stories. In the last slide, I just had that highlighted on the right. So that's the trending topics area. While a news agency would have a rigorous editorial process and channel of approval before posting to reduce bias, Facebook is fundamentally a social network, and it does not have these rigorous regulations in place. And actually in 2016, there was an ex-employee of Facebook who accused them of censoring conservative news stories in favor of posting liberal ones. While we don't know if this is true or not, this functionality in conjunction with its worldwide viewership gives Facebook the opportunity to really influence the democratic values and beliefs as well as the outcomes of different elections.

Then we have the last tool, which I'm sure most of you are most familiar with, given the last few days of news stories with Cambridge Analytica. So this is the opportunity to harness user data to create profiles that will then be used to work into political dark ads. So these are ads that are highly specialized and micro-targeted to be effective on a specific group of people, based on user data that was illegitimately harnessed by different corporate actors, one which was Cambridge Analytica. And these ads are created to persuade voters to vote a certain way. So this has already been linked to the 2016 EU referendum with Brexit, as well as the 2016 presidential election in the United States.

To sum up, Facebook is and has been already used as a way to lessen the fairness of an already flawed democratic system. There is good news though. We can take steps to diminish the effects of these tools, and I would propose three. The first one is to be aware of this. It's important to know that followership numbers can be misrepresented, and political ads on Facebook that you're seeing are likely targeted specifically towards you. The second is to knowingly broaden your scope of understanding. Look into conflicting ideas and make friends with people who are different from you. And third, perhaps most

important, is to go beyond Facebook for your politics and your news stories. That's what I would suggest.

I'll now pass it on to Robyn, who will talk about Twitter.

Robyn:

For my exhibit, I really looked at how Twitter has functioned as a transformative medium in a democratic context. Twitter as a medium has really grown in prominence following the unprecedented usage of it during the 2016 American election, by everyone's favorite, Donald Trump. And Twitter is not the same as Facebook in that it doesn't have the same restricted in-network access, which gives many the impression that it is being used to facilitate democratic engagement. This is aided by the fact that users can retweet, reply to, or like the tweets of their favorite politicians or celebrities, giving the impression that it's a reciprocal conversation.

In addition to this, there's also the functionality of hashtags, which are very positive for many activist movements, as they help them to gain momentum. Hashtags function rhetorically in many ways like a rallying cry. They can link individual tweets to larger conversations, helping these movements gain international prominence. Given the fact that Twitter has over 500 million tweets now per day, by their over 330 million active monthly users, this certainly gives many the impression that it is facilitating democracy on an international scale between and within societies.

However, this becomes much more complicated when we start to look at the fact that users can block other users on Twitter. Again, Donald Trump has been notorious for this, blocking a variety of dissenting individuals and groups, including those advocating for the rights of veterans, LGBTQ plus activists, as well as trolls who mock him online. And blocking allows individuals to not only prevent others from interacting with them, but also to block them from seeing any of the content they post. When we think of democratic politicians tweeting online, this becomes much more problematic.

In July of 2017, a group of activists actually attempted to take Trump to court over this issue, as they viewed it as a violation of their first amendment rights. However, the Justice Department argued that the Twitter accounts of politicians should not be considered public forums under first amendment purposes, meaning that he had the ability to block users as he wished.

We can also see this in a Canadian context more recently, as the Toronto mayor, John Tory was called out on Twitter for blocking anti-gay activist Anthony Oliveira, which actually violates established council policy in the city of Toronto.

In addition to issues of blocking, we also have to think of issues of access. As many of the most disenfranchised people in society lack access to technology, or lack comfort with using technology, which means that they often cannot access the same information about the actions and opinions of their politicians that are shared online. Given the quote that was shared by Dr. Giroux from earlier, we can see the ways in which we have to be more critical of the ways in which Twitter and other social media platforms are changing the way public forums function in democracies, as well as how we have to think about the ways that they might be actually subverting our existing democratic processes.

And I'm gonna turn it over now to Samir, to tell you a bit more about YouTube.

Samir: Hello, so YouTube is a huge site. It's the most popular video viewing site in the world. Over a billion hours of video watched every day. It also has global reach, it's in over 70 languages, can be accessed by about 90% of the world's population. And the videos, the site's unique because its format is videos. Videos are really easy to access. They're really easy to tell and see stories of really effective communication.

Also the ease of creating videos allows people who would typically be passive consumers of media to become active creators of media. Again, this allows people whose voices would typically not be heard to be heard. It allows you, anyone, to create a video and have a reach possibly around the world.

YouTube also has comment sections, which allow people to interact with videos and each other, to leave comments on videos, and users of the site firmly believe that this really helps facilitate discussion and discourse. If you ever scroll through YouTube comments though, you may find this is not really the case, especially now with the practice known as flaming, which is often comment that are deliberately offensive and quite often very vulgar and profane. I spent a lot of time doing research, and whoa.. this practice essentially lowers the level of discourse, which is not a good thing.

But this practice of flaming actually it's been shown, it actually lowers the level of discourse on YouTube. Which isn't necessarily a good thing.

Last thing we'll talk about here is YouTube's privately owned. It's owned by Google, which is a private company, and this means they have the ability to decide what you can put on their site. Although they rarely ever do remove videos in their entirety. They really only do this for copyright complaints, or really obscene videos like for example the beheading of James Foley by ISIS was on YouTube, that was taken off because you know, obvious reasons. But the practice known as demonetization, where they remove, they stop allowing videos to earn money is common. It's for videos that violate their terms, and really allows people, it can really stop, effectively censor people, it really stops these videos from earning money, and the creators of the video if they can blacklist entire channels, people use as a real source of income.

Another issue with that is the algorithm that demonetizes videos has been known to be flawed and demonetize videos that shouldn't have been demonetized. But taking a step back again, YouTube, although they don't censor videos actively, only they choose to not, they still can. Which means that we're essentially relying on the benevolence of a big corporation to facilitate free speech. If they wanted to, they could start censoring political viewpoints, or stop taking things off the internet, which really raises some serious issues if they do decide to exercise that power.

The next slide, this is a typical YouTube video, what it looks like. So you can see the video up there, the main video, one of Henry Giroux. And then on the right, there's suggestions, which kind of again issues with algorithms and echo chambers do still apply. It also kind of shows you who made the video, how many views, can see a thumbs up and thumbs down, and below this if you were to scroll down you could see the comments and really interact with the comments on the video.

Now I'm passing off to Logan to talk about Reddit.

Logan: Reddit may be the least well known of the four social media sites that we analyzed. It is by no means small. Last year it was the fourth most visited website within North America. For those who don't know, the way Reddit is set up, it has a very unique structure. It's divided into things called sub-Reddits or subs. These things range every single topic you can possibly imagine, from sports fan pages, meme boards, increasingly political discussion.

Once you get into these subs, people post videos, links, pictures, and then comments. These are up-voted and down-voted. Things that are up-voted float to the top, and things that are down-voted float to the bottom. Say if I'm on the Toronto Blue Jays sub-Reddit, a completely random example, this is great, because I always have relative news, stats, my favorite players. But if I'm on a political discussion, this can be very dangerous, it can be very prone to becoming an echo chamber.

Increasingly, this has become very popular for a political forum. World news for example has 60 million subscribers, and Our Donald, the Donald Trump sub-Reddit has only 600,000. And once you get on there, it seems great, because all these opinions match your own. But is a lot like an echo chamber. In my exhibit, I analyzed one headline which was when Delta Airlines stopped its NRA travel discounts, and on the Our Donald, this had a very different reaction than on Our Resist, which was an anti-Donald Trump sub-Reddit.

And while Reddit may be particularly prone to this process, it is by no means unique on the internet. And a lot of the internet can look like this. Because people go to websites that tend to confirm that their own viewpoints. So I encourage you all to think about whether or not you are in an echo chamber.

Now I'll pass it over to Don to close us out.

Don: Sure thing. Thank you very much. So, as the Spiderman saying goes, "With great power comes great responsibility." And so, in our context, we're talking about how social media has revolutionized politics. It's given people the means to interact directly, both with democratic institutions as well as one another, with unprecedented speed and reach. However, while individuals can speak and be heard like never before, social media is also giving companies an unprecedented insight into how we think, and allowing governments and corporations an incredible amount of power to influence us and control how we act.

Ultimately, it's up to us, users of social media, to be aware of the impact of our social media usage. And we need to use it to uphold those ideals of free speech, dissent, and critical dialogue. Thank you very much for coming out and your time tonight. We hope you enjoyed the presentation and after one more presentation we would love to take your questions.