What can I do? How to use social media to improve democratic society

By:

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Abstract

Debate abounds about the implications of social media use for democratic societies, but often ignores the potential of individual citizens to shape their own social media habits. This essay outlines five concrete steps that individuals can take to make social media use more constructive for our communities. First, research and follow high-quality sources of information, including news organizations, experts on a topic, and news literacy groups. Second, prioritize their exposure to people with diverse views on a topic while bringing a civil orientation towards the content to encourage knowledge and tolerance of the other side. Third, engage with high quality posts, even when they disagree with our views, to amplify their reach and train the algorithms to show us similar content in the future. Fourth, correct misinformation when it appears in our social media feeds, providing links to accurate information from an expert. This is especially valuable when we correct information that matches our predispositions to limit the potential for biased processing to dismiss the corrections and to avoid furthering the divides between groups. Fifth, engage with a range of content on social media, as expressing ourselves – even through low-cost behaviors – can encourage greater political activity in other spaces. In taking these steps, we prioritize healthy conversation on social media that buttress social norms and practices that we value as a society.

Keywords: social media, democracy, misinformation, cross-cutting exposure, political participation

Debate abounds about the implications of social media use for democratic societies. Do social media help us connect with people we don't know or do they exacerbate existing divisions between individuals and groups? Are they a space for misinformation to spread easily and rapidly, or an opportunity for individuals and organizations to correct misperceptions before they become entrenched on the public consciousness? Do they simply lead to low-effort engagement, or can they train us to more effectively participate in other spaces?

This debate focuses on social media as they exist currently, but social media are constantly evolving and changing to meet our needs. There's much that we can do as citizens of a democratic society to make social media use more constructive for ourselves and others. This essay outlines a few concrete steps that we can take as individuals to boost the democratic potential of social media.

Populate your feed with good information

A variety of forces explain what we see on social media. Our own choices about which people and organizations to follow, *their* decisions about what to share, and opaque algorithms that dictate the content that ultimately appears on our feed – what Thorson and Wells (2015) term "curated flows of information."

Following Expert Organizations

But while the specific content we see may be outside our control – for example, whether or not my friend shares a particular news story – we maintain control over these inputs. We can maximize good information in our feed by making conscious decisions about who (and who not) to follow. News organizations, non-profits, and experts all have social media feeds, broadcasting quality information at minimal cost to the individual. Roughly 26% of social media users in America follow a science-related page (Pew, 2018a), while 68% of Americans get news from

social media (Pew, 2018b). Following expert organizations directly allows for the convenience of seeing news while mitigating frequently-expressed concerns about accuracy on social media (Pew, 2018b), provided that we first adequately research and follow credible organizations.

Similarly, joining a group or following a hashtag for a cause that you are interested in can not only provide you detailed information on that topic, but also broaden your exposure to diverse viewpoints on a range of issues. In fact, studies have found the potential for cross-cutting conversation was highest in online discussion groups not explicitly focused on politics (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; see also Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015).

Finally, following a news literacy organization may not only offer you unique content but also improve your engagement with the other content that you see on your feed. While many people are familiar with news literacy concepts regarding news production and biased consumption, they often fail to apply those lessons when faced with partisan news content (Tully, Vraga, & Smithson, 2018). Seeing a news literacy message immediately before consuming news has been shown to reduce hostile media effects (Vraga, Tully, & Rojas, 2009) and boost self-perceived literacy (Tully & Vraga, 2017). Therefore, exposure to news literacy messages may remind us of our role in critically consuming information as well as provide specific warnings of the types of misinformation that can populate social media feeds, producing an inoculation effect (e.g., Vraga & Bode, 2017b).

However, we must remain cautious so that these messages do not encourage skepticism of *all* media message, regardless of their value (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2017), lead to unrealistic levels of confidence in our abilities (boyd, 2017), or create further polarization in response to partisan message (Vraga & Tully, 2015). For these messages to be effective, individuals must navigate between two extreme responses: feeling cynical of all media

messages and failing to distinguish low versus high quality information versus feeling over-confident in their own abilities as compared to others' susceptibility to misinformation (boyd, 2017; Jang & Kim, 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Following Diverse Perspectives

Another way to boost the democratic value of social media is to ensure our feeds are populated with diverse viewpoints and ideas. Users should resist the temptation to silence these voices by blocking or unfriending for posting too much political content or political content they disagree with – something 27% of social media users report doing (Bode, 2016; Pew, 2016).

There are a number of tools designed to make such conscious cross-cutting engagement easier.[1] But it is not enough to expose ourselves to the other side. In fact, exposure to our opponents can *increase* polarization by encouraging people to develop arguments to rebut the ideas they wish to discredit (Bail et al., 2018; Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, polarization is not the inevitable outcome of exposure to cross-cutting views, and can boost our tolerance and understanding of opposing viewpoints, especially when we bring a "civil orientation" towards these views (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Mutz, 2006).

Training the Algorithms

Specific decisions about who to follow are one way to shape what appears on our feed. Although social media algorithms are often opaque, their goal is clear: to boost our interest and engagement with the site (Pariser, 2011; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018). Therefore, these same algorithms give us the opportunity to better manage what we see. Choosing to strategically engage with content from people we follow – such as liking or commenting on a post – can also

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[1] Examples include: "Escape your Bubble" (https://www.escapeyourbubble. com/), "Red Feed, Blue Feed" (http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/), "FlipFeed" (https://flipfeed.media.mit.edu/), or "PolitEcho" (http://politecho.org/).

be used to improve the democratic value of social media, and these benefits can accrue for both ourselves and for our connections online.

First, choosing to engage with a post amplifies its reach to a wider audience. Given the logic of curated flows, this means you may enable that post to reach people who have not taken deliberate steps to maximize the democratic potential of their feed. Engaging with a post you respect, even if you disagree with, should make it more likely to reach a diverse audience and potentially crowd out other lower quality information.

Second, engaging with a post makes it more likely that *other* people will engage with that post when it appears on their feed. Social endorsements can override partisan predispositions for social media content (Messing & Westwood, 2014), meaning a post with more likes should heighten engagement across party lines. Likewise, commenting on a post to explicitly note respect for the viewpoints even if we disagree with them may be even more powerful than a "like" button, producing fewer partisan responses (Stroud, Muddiman, & Scacco, 2017).

Third, this engagement signals to the algorithm to surface similar content for in your feed in the future. This process can be problematic if we only engage with like-minded content, potentially creating filter bubbles (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Pariser, 2011). But it also means that we can strategically optimize our own feeds by deliberately engaging with quality content offered from diverse sources and perspectives.

See something, say something

One of the largest concerns about the impact of social media on democratic society is the potential for misinformation or disinformation campaigns to skew public attitudes (Broniatowski et al., 2018; Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen, 2018; Garrett, 2017; Guess et al., 2018). Several features of social media – including the lack of established gatekeepers, the relatively

flat ecosystem that allows sources of different quality to occupy the same real estate, and the difficulty of identifying relevant source cues – may explain why misinformation tends to spread faster and receive more attention online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; see also del Vicario et al., 2016; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010).

However, social media also allow individuals to refute misinformation immediately, correcting the record for the entire community exposed to incorrect information. When an individual sees misinformation being shared on their feed – for example, an inaccurate link or meme – that person can effectively correct the misperceptions created among all those who are seeing the misinformation by providing a clear rebuttal, explicitly debunking the misinformation being shared and providing a link to an expert organization (Bode & Vraga, 2018a; Vraga & Bode, 2018). While this approach requires multiple users – a single user is not enough to correct misinformation on their own (Vraga & Bode, 2017) – it can reduce misperceptions successfully across a range of topics. Although you do not need to personally know the individual sharing the misinformation to effectively correct the misperceptions it can create (Bode & Vraga, 2018; Vraga & Bode, 2018), corrections of friends and family are likely to be even more effective (Margoin, Hannack, & Weber, 2018), as are corrections that that involve corrections from within the party, such as a Democrat correcting another Democrat (Benegal & Scruggs, 2018). In other words, *everyone* can and should offer corrections when they see misinformation, and the effects are not limited to the popular or influential.

Not only can user corrections effectively respond to misinformation on their own, they can also signal to expert organizations or to the platform itself that the misinformation exists, helping them respond. Expert organizations like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) do not require multiple responses to effectively correct misinformation (Vraga & Bode, 2017), making

them more efficient responders to misinformation if they can identify it. Second, users' corrective responses may also facilitate the platform's efforts to identify misinformation and slow its spread (Fowler, 2018), as well as produce algorithmic responses to correct the inaccurate story (Bode & Vraga, 2015).

However, if users only "correct" stories that they disagree with rather than carefully vetting all material, it can reinforce existing divides. There are reasons for concern; studies have found that social media users are more likely to share fact-checking stories that advantage their own political party and can prompt hostile responses from "the other side" – especially among Republicans (Amazeen, Vargo, & Hopp, 2018; Shin & Thorson, 2017).

One way to lessen this partisan predisposition to fact-check only the "other side" might be asking for a public commitment to share higher quality information and respond to incorrect information. The Pro-Truth Pledge asks people to commit to verifying information before sharing, as well as responding to correct misinformation when others post it (Tsipursky, Votta, & Roose, 2018b) – in other words, engaging in these corrective efforts that we know can be effective. Preliminary research suggests that those who signed up for the "Pro-Truth Pledge" posted more accurate news stories on Facebook and reported higher quality interactions with other people's posts after signing the Pledge (Tsipursky et al., 2017a; 2017b). The public commitment required as part of the pledge should make it more likely individuals will follow through with their efforts, rather than risk the dissonance that can result (Aronson, Fried, & Stone, 1991; Festinger, 1957). Publicly committing yourself – either via the Pledge or through a public post on your own feed – can provide additional incentive to continue with efforts to improve information quality.

Get Engaged

While correcting misinformation may be an especially important way to get involved on social media, it is by no means the only way. First and foremost, sharing high-quality news on social media has the potential to produce benefits for the entire social media community by making incidental exposure to such news more likely. Of course, this is only beneficial if the sources we share are high quality. Sharing low-quality sources or being motivated by entertainment purposes to share information can increase the risks of sharing misinformation (Chadwick, Baccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018), suggesting care must be taken when sharing stories.

Sharing and expressing ourselves on social media not only benefits those seeing our posts, but also can directly benefit ourselves. The act of expressing oneself on social media can influence the way that we engage with news and information in the future (Pingree, 2007), and can boost our confidence and willingness to engage in action in other spaces. In contrast to original concerns that online social behaviors would create slacktivists unwilling to engage further elsewhere (Gladwell, 2010), those who engage in more political activities and expression on their social media feeds tend to also be more willing to participate in offline spaces in a range of civic and political behaviors (Bouilanne, 2015; gil de Zuniga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Valenzuela, 2013). Even "low-cost" behaviors, such as liking or commenting on political content on social media as noted above, can produce greater political activity offline, especially among those less interested in politics in general (Bode, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015). Likewise, sharing and commenting on news content, as well as content related to specific issues, is related to stronger political efficacy and opinion leadership (Vraga, Anderson, Kotcher, & Maibach, 2015b; Weeks, Ardevol-Abreu, & gil de Zuniga, 2017).

Extra care must be taken when these sharing and engagement activities become overtly political. When asked about political content on social media, many people express immediate

disgust, citing the prominence of rants and drama that political content can create (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015a; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). A Pew study from 2016 found that 49% of social media users say online political discussions are less civil than other places, and 59% find social media interactions with those with opposing views are stressful and frustrating (Pew, 2016).

But incivility is not a requirement of political content. Just as incivility can be contagious - especially coming from like-minded partisans (Edgerly, Vraga, Dalrymple, Macafee, & Fung, 2013; Gervais, 2014) – so too should be civility. Avoiding an uncivil response reduces the likelihood the conversation will devolve into a rancorous debate that so many associate with political talk on social media.

Likewise, not all political activity needs to be divisive. Encouraging people to vote, for example, is generally seen as a valuable activity on social media (Vraga et al., 2015a), and can produce contagion effects in boosting participation throughout your network (Bond et al. 2012). Similarly, engaging in campaigns on social issues – for example, the red equal sign campaign for social equality or the KONY 2012 campaign – may not be immediately categorized as "political" (Penney, 2014; Thorson, 2012; Vromen et al., 2015) and thus offer opportunities to share information and mobilize people on that issue. Therefore, there is considerable latitude for individuals to engage in both overtly political activity on social media, as well as adjacent activities driven by social issues that can still improve the quality of discourse online.

Conclusion

Despite the consternation around the potential for social media to undermine democratic values, many opportunities exist for individuals to make social media a more healthy and valuable space for democratic interaction to occur. Many of these steps are relatively small –

such as following more diverse accounts or liking content we disagree with – whereas others require deeper commitment, such as policing and responding to misinformation. While this essay broadly focused on efforts that apply across social media platforms, care must also be taken to respect and respond to the specific norms and affordances of each space for more effective action (Bode & Vraga, 2018b; Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018). Ultimately, social media offer us another opportunity to engage in democratic behavior, working together to prioritize a healthy conversation that buttresses social norms and practices.

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