

# POLITICS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

## HOW MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES CAN SUPPORT POLITICAL EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has taken the world by storm, with approximately 3.8 billion people utilizing some form of it.<sup>1</sup> These forms include social networking sites accessed through an internet browser and apps downloaded onto a mobile device. While used for many reasons, social media's portable, mobile, and immediate nature allows for an expansion of political participation.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is fundamentally different from traditional news sources like television, radio, and newspapers due to user generation of content designed to maintain social connections.<sup>3</sup> Its potential to provide learning opportunities about politics through incidental exposure to information,<sup>3</sup> and the chance to engage in continuous, live online discussion also set it apart. Teaching students how to conduct political discourse online and how to critically evaluate social media as a news source can contribute to the creation of an informed, democratic citizenry and redefine how social media is used in politics.



### CONTEXT

#### #THANKSOBAMA

The birth of social media in politics is often attributed to Barack Obama's use of it in his 2008 presidential campaign.<sup>4,5</sup> He used social media to create cohesive communities of supporters that contributed to the creation of grassroots movements, local meetings, canvassing projects, and outreach campaigns.<sup>4,5</sup> Not only was Obama the first Black president, he was also the first social media president and set the precedent for future candidates by redefining what a politician could "look" like on social media.<sup>5</sup> Gone was the image of a reserved and rigid politician. Now a politician could be charismatic, dynamic, and distinctly human—both online and in-person.<sup>5</sup> Obama's campaign strategies were mirrored by the 2016 candidates who utilized social media to interact with their supporters and encouraged their engagement in the form of posting photos, status updates, check-ins and invites to

campaign events.<sup>2</sup> These candidates included Donald Trump, whose subsequent nomination and presidency were defined by his use of Twitter. Trump's prolific use of Twitter during his presidency revealed that social media use in politics could be a dual-edge sword—creating just as much division as unity. Hannan<sup>5</sup> explains that Trump enabled "trolling" within politics at the highest level, taking the anti-authority memes and practices birthed within the anonymity of the website 4chan and normalising them to the point where anonymity is no longer necessary. More so, this behavior has extended beyond social media and into Congress, with satirical bills being proposed solely to mock colleagues across the aisle.<sup>5</sup> Trolling and other forms of uncivil discourse practices that began online at the civilian level are popping up at all levels and forms of politics, almost akin to "trickle-up" incivility.<sup>5,6</sup> The fleeting civility present in politics today has grave potential implications, epitomized by Trump's and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un's exchange of largely unveiled threats in 2017.<sup>5</sup> This raises the question: If this practice is not corrected in face-to-face political interactions by world leaders, will there be room for civil discourse in politics in the future?<sup>6</sup>



### CRITICISMS

There are many potential problems in using social media as a method of obtaining political information. Primary of these is a need for, and lack of, objective truth in social media and the dilemma of discerning what is "fake news."

Now popularity "competes with logic and evidence as an arbiter of truth...[and] often carries more persuasive power than the appeal to impersonal fact."<sup>5</sup> Social factors like popularity and "tribal-affinity" drive fake news.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is exacerbated by the brief nature of social media posts and the algorithms that control which posts appear at the top of a user's feed. Only so much information can fit in a 280-character Tweet and hold users' waning attention. If algorithms purposefully show users what is popular or similar to previously liked posts, the variety of opinions and news that users might be exposed to is limited.

Other issues include the dilemma of uncivil discourse and associated conflict avoidance limiting peoples' willingness to discuss politics on social media.<sup>2,6</sup> Many people may dislike about politics on social media because of the lack of respectful discourse, the threat of online harassment, and the potential workplace surveillance—even if they have, or are willing to have, face-to-face political discussions with the same people.<sup>6</sup> Finally, though social media is used by billions of people around the world, access to it is not equal. The cost of mobile devices, app subscriptions, and internet services remains prohibitive and thus limits the viability of social media as a means to gain political information.<sup>6</sup>



Hey, how's it going?

Jeremy is ranting about politics on Twitter again. 🙄

Eww 🤢 Why does he even bother talking about it online?





# CIVIC EDUCATION

John Dewey stated that one of education's primary roles is to create informed, democratic citizens. Alehegn and Mentor<sup>7</sup> explain that adults with university degrees are increasingly likely to participate dynamically in civic duties than those without degrees and emphasize that universities are thus vital to the advancement of student education and engagement in civics. However, they note that mobile apps and social media are not used regularly in education, even though their use would allow for constant, accessible, and engaging civic learning opportunities.<sup>7</sup> A student's civic education should not be limited by access to post-secondary educational opportunities. Being a democratic citizen doesn't start the minute one becomes of voting age; it begins as a child when learning how to share, communicate, and work with others. Yet, mobile content on social media is how many of today's youth are learning about politics, its role in society, current issues, and candidates.

## CONNECTION

I grew up with social media and was only 11 years old when Barack Obama's social media campaign succeeded in getting him elected president in 2008. I was first able

to vote in a presidential election in 2016. I have never known a world where social media and politics were not inextricably tied. So why was I not formally taught about politics until I was almost of voting age? Why did the education I receive not utilize, evaluate, or discuss the very mobile tools I used to politically educate myself? I have been told at all levels of my education, from high school to graduate school, about the importance of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a skill I use every day as an educational research assistant and Master of Educational Technology graduate student. It is also a skill I practice every day when I read or watch the news, in any form, whether it be traditional or social media. With traditional media, I must still consider the broadcast I watch or which newspaper I read, and determine what biases are present. However, I know that the writers of the content likely had to fact-check their sources to comply with journalistic principles and to avoid lawsuits, but the same cannot be said of news I read on social media. As is typical of social media, sources are rarely provided and little may be known about the user who posted the content. As a result, biases can only be guessed at, and online discussion rarely provides clarity on these matters. Therefore, critical thinking and the ability to maintain civil discourse in these interactions are of primary importance to the use of social media as a political news source.



## POTENTIAL

Educators already teach students to be critical thinkers when it comes to scientific concepts and research, or when evaluating historical sources. Many schools already have access to district-provided laptops or tablets that they use to support these critical thinking efforts in specific subject matter areas. Those same principles should be taught more generally so that students can apply them to the full breadth of topics that are relevant in students' lives.

Teaching students to evaluate the validity and reliability of social media posts on their phone as they would a primary historical document could promote a more informed, democratic citizenry. Critical evaluation of social media posts has the potential to address the social factors that drive fake news and foster mobile news that is fact-based. Supplementing classroom learning with social media application-based discussions would allow for student development and transference of in-person etiquette skills to online interactions. This could encourage an increased amount of civil discourse online and in-person at all levels. Increased discourse and interaction could also increase the levels of political knowledge, engagement, and self-perceived competence in students before they can vote and redefine how social media is currently used in politics. If the youth are the future of our civic society, educators must adapt their education to be relevant to the world around them and teach students to think critically of the information, sources, and methods they use to learn about it.

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