



THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ON DIFFERENT REGIME TYPES

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American social media platforms can affect the political systems of different states in varying ways. The effect varies both between and within democratic and authoritarian states and depends mainly on three political actors: domestic opposition, external forces, and the governing regime. Depending on how these three actors use social media, as well as on a state capacity and political regime type, there are four different effects that social media can have: It can have a weakening effect on strong democratic regimes, an intensifying effect on strong authoritarian regimes, a radicalizing effect on weak democratic regimes, and a destabilizing effect on weak authoritarian regimes. There are a number of possible approaches U.S. policymakers can take to decrease the effects of social media platforms and to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic, and objectively sourced information.

Today, for the first time since 2001, there are more autocracies than democracies in the world. The number of electoral and liberal democracies dropped from 55 percent of all countries at its peak in 2010 to only 48 percent in 2019.¹ This decline in the number of liberal democracies is crippling the U.S.-led liberal world order, weakening America's post-Cold War hegemony, and shifting power to authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, leading Fareed Zakaria to claim that "American hegemony died."² It seems that illiberal democracies and authoritarian regimes are on the rise all across the globe. Even in the United States, President Donald Trump

favored a new kind of hegemony — an illiberal one.³

This phenomenon can be explained by many factors, such as the rise of xenophobic populist movements in reaction to immigration, cultural change, the decline in job and economic security after the 2008 financial crisis, the opposition to globalization, and the loss of sovereignty.⁴ For authoritarian regimes, the growth of national populist movements in Europe and America is proof that "the liberal idea has outlived its purpose," as the public has turned against immigration, open borders, and multiculturalism.⁵ Recent elections worldwide reflect a deep groundswell of anti-establishment sentiment that can easily be mobilized by extremist

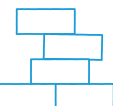
1 Anna Lührmann, et al., *Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020*, Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf.

2 Fareed Zakaria, "The Self-Destruction of American Power: Washington Squandered the Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 4 (July/August 2019): 10–16, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-11/self-destruction-american-power>.

3 Barry R. Posen, "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 20–27. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-13/rise-illiberal-hegemony>; and Richard Haass, "How a World Order Ends: And What Comes in Its Wake," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January/February 2019): 22–30. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-12-11/how-world-order-ends>.

4 Ronald Inglehart, "The Age of Insecurity: Can Democracy Save Itself?" *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (May/June 2018): 20–28, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-04-16/age-insecurity>.

5 Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete,'" *Financial Times*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.





political parties and candidates.⁶

In this essay, we highlight the role of U.S. social media platforms in the decline of liberal democracies and the rise of illiberal democracies and autocratic regimes across the world. Previous studies have examined different aspects of the impact of social media platforms on states and regimes but have usually done this in a siloed way — for example, narrowly focusing on the correlation between social media and the rise of populism, or on the influence of social media in Latin America and in the U.S. 2016 elections.⁷ Sarah Kreps posed a broader research question regarding the different effects of social media platforms in democracies and non-democracies.⁸ This essay contributes to this body of research by taking an even wider view. We describe the multifaceted impact of American social media platforms in different countries and seek to generalize and categorize this impact by offering an innovative explanation for it. These generalizations and categorizations help to explain why different countries experience the impact of social media in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity. They can also help policymakers to predict what may occur in similar countries where the impact is not yet clear and help them to take preliminary steps to avoid the same phenomenon.

We begin by reviewing social media platforms, their knowledge power (the power they gained by accumulating vast amounts of data about people and turning it into knowledge), and their potential as a liberating mechanism, before examining what went wrong in the last decade. This is followed by a discussion of the variable impacts of social media on the political systems in different states. We explore why the effect varies between different democratic states — for example, in Brazil compared to the United States — as well as between different authoritarian states — i.e., why it

has bolstered Russia's regime while fueling a revolution in Egypt. We suggest that social media's impact depends mainly on three political actors: domestic opposition, external forces, and the governing regime. By examining how these three actors use social media while considering variations in state capacity and political regime type, a causal model emerges in which there are four different effects of social media: weakening, intensifying, radicalizing, and destabilizing.

We further examine these disparate effects by examining four case studies, each representing a different combination of state capacity (weak vs. strong) and regime type (democratic vs. authoritarian). We argue that, contrary to the optimistic promise of social media platforms at the beginning of the millennium, it seems that they are having a weakening effect on strong democratic regimes, an intensifying effect on strong authoritarian regimes, a radicalizing effect on weak democratic regimes, and a destabilizing effect on weak authoritarian ones. We conclude by presenting the implications of our analysis for the future of the international system.

The Promise of Social Media

Of the seven most popular social media platforms, Facebook owns four: Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Together with YouTube, which is owned by Google, these are the five leading social media platforms not based in China. The most successful social media platform in “grabbing, holding, and processing human attention” is WeChat,⁹ a China-based application that “encompasses almost every aspect of human life.”¹⁰ It is a “one-stop-shop” model that led Facebook to try to consolidate its sub-companies

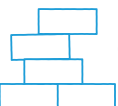
6 Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, “The End of the Democratic Century: Autocracy's Global Ascendance,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (May/June 2018): 29–38, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-04-16/end-democratic-century>.

7 For social media and the rise of populism, see John Postill, “Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective,” *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (July 2018): 754–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772186>; Paolo Gerbaudo, “Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?” *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (July 2018): 745–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772192>; and Sven Engesser, et al., “Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology,” *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 8 (August 2017): 1109–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1207697>. For social media in Latin America, see Miguel Angel Latouche, “Latin American Presidents Love Twitter – and That's Not a Good Sign,” *The Conversation*, March 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/latin-american-presidents-love-twitter-and-thats-not-a-good-sign-74913>. For social media and America's 2016 elections, see Kevin Poulsen, Ben Collins, and Spencer Ackerman, “Exclusive: Russia Used Facebook Events to Organize Anti-Immigrant Rallies on U.S. Soil,” *Daily Beast*, Sept. 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-russia-used-facebook-events-to-organize-anti-immigrant-rallies-on-us-soil>; and Kevin Poulsen, et al., “Exclusive: Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities,” *Daily Beast*, Sept. 20, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russians-appear-to-use-facebook-to-push-pro-trump-flash-mobs-in-florida>.

8 Sarah Kreps, *Social Media and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 32–43.

9 Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2019): 102–03.

10 Connie Chan, “When One App Rules Them All: The Case of WeChat and Mobile in China,” *Andreessen Horowitz*, Aug. 6, 2015, <https://a16z.com/2015/08/06/wechat-china-mobile-first/>.



(Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram) into one giant application.¹¹

Optimists have seen social media platforms as an expression of the liberalizing ethos of the internet: tools for empowering citizens, enabling economic opportunities, increasing freedom of

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expression, spreading liberal ideas, and providing an alternative communication platform for dissidents.¹² This positive view was espoused by some of the founders of U.S. social media platforms and can be traced back to John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,”¹³ which was popular at the time when these companies were established in Silicon Valley. Although these corporations started out politically neutral, some have moved in recent years toward publicly challenging governments.¹⁴ For example, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has talked about replacing the “old” social infrastructure of the state, “which opposes the flow of knowledge, trade and immigration,”¹⁵ with a new global community.¹⁶ Zuckerberg also stated: “In many ways, Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company.”¹⁷ Google’s Jared Cohen and Eric Schmidt wrote about the game-changing

implications of the internet for politics. They predicted that governments “will be caught off-guard when large numbers of their citizens, armed with virtually nothing but cell phones, take part in mini-rebellions that challenge their authority.”¹⁸

Social media platforms have the power to strengthen democracies by echoing public opinion. Clay Shirky argues that social media can help to increase freedom and change people’s political views by exposing them to other opinions echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues.¹⁹ At the beginning of the millennium, social media platforms were credited with shifting power from authoritarian regimes to ordinary people seeking freedom and social justice.²⁰ Peter Singer and Emerson Brooking wrote in 2018 that social media platforms “illuminated the shadowy crimes through which dictators had long clung to power and offered up a powerful new means of grassroots mobilization.”²¹ Manuel Castells describes social media as “a mobilizing force” that can “topple an entrenched regime if everybody would come together.”²² These platforms can compensate for the disadvantages of undisciplined groups by reducing coordination costs while increasing shared awareness.²³ Indeed, social media platforms played a role in the 2009 civil revolt in Moldova, dubbed “the first Facebook revolution”; the 2009 unrest in Iran, called “the first Twitter revolution”; the 2011 Russian “almost-revolution”; and the first wave of Arab social unrest in 2011, when “the Facebook-armed youth of Tunisia

11 Nick Statt and Shannon Liao, “Facebook Wants to Be WeChat,” *The Verge*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/8/18256226/facebook-wechat-messaging-zuckerberg-strategy>.

12 Larry Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (July 2010): 69–83, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Diamond-21-3.pdf>.

13 John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, Feb. 8, 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

14 Lucie Greene, *Silicon States: The Power and Politics of Big Tech and What It Means for Our Future* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2019), 36–95.

15 Mark Zuckerberg, “Mark Zuckerberg’s Commencement Address at Harvard,” *Harvard Gazette*, May 25, 2017, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/05/mark-zuckerbergs-speech-as-written-for-harvards-class-of-2017/>.

16 Mark Zuckerberg, “Building Global Community,” Facebook, Feb. 16, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>.

17 Franklin Foer, “Facebook’s War on Free Will,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/19/facebook-war-on-free-will>.

18 Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, “The Digital Disruption: Connectivity and the Diffusion of Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (November/December 2010): 75–85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20788718>.

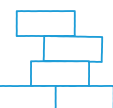
19 Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 28–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800379>.

20 Ahmed Shehabat, *Arab 2.0 Revolutions: Investigating Social Media Networks During Waves of the Egyptian Political Uprisings that Occur Between 2011, 2012 and 2013*, University of Western Sydney, M.A. Diss., 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322382260_Arab_20_revolutions_investigating_social_media_networks_during_waves_of_the_Egyptian_political_uprisings_that_occur_between_2011_2012_and_2013.

21 P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 86.

22 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 81.

23 Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” 28–41.





and Egypt” demonstrated “the liberating power of social media.”²⁴ However, according to Singer and Brooking, these internet-enabled democratic movements “represented a high-water mark” that was followed by “a countering wave of authoritarianism using social media itself, woven into a pushback of repression, censorship and even violence.”²⁵

The use of social media has no single preordained outcome. These platforms cannot “bring the world closer together,” as Facebook’s mission states,²⁶ and help connect only democracy-loving people. As Zeynep Tufekci notes, they are also “connecting white supremacists, who can now assemble far more effectively or radical Buddhist monks in Myanmar, who now have much more potent tools for spreading incitement to ethnic cleansing.”²⁷ Social media can be used to support incumbent politicians within a country or to help external authoritarian powers to disseminate propaganda and disrupt the democratic transfer of power through elections in other countries.²⁸ It is also used by populists who pose a fundamental challenge to neoliberal ideology, spreading untruth and stirring outrage that affects voters’ judgment and fuels partisanship.²⁹ The different actors using social media platforms, whether for good purposes or bad, are exploiting the unprecedented concentration of knowledge power that these platforms have amassed over the past few years.

The Knowledge Power of Social Media

In recent years, social media platforms have gained “knowledge power” derived from the vast amounts of data that they have collected and marshaled.³⁰ According to Susan Strange, such power includes “what is believed or known and the channels by which these beliefs, ideas and knowledge are communicated, or confined.” This kind of power lies as much in the capacity to deny knowledge as in the power to convey it.³¹

The knowledge power of social media platforms may take many forms. Facebook, for example, knows more about a person than the government does.³² In 2002, Google discovered it could use the collateral data that it collects to profile users based on their characteristics and interests and then match advertisements to individual users.³³ Over the years, Google and Facebook have sold more ads by reducing user privacy and gaining more access to a person’s data.³⁴ In the competition for what Shoshana Zuboff called “surveillance capitalism” revenue,³⁵ the advantage goes to firms that can acquire vast and varied data streams. Therefore, social media platforms are expanding both the scope of surveillance (migrating from the virtual world into the real world of automobile dashboards and home appliances) and the depth of the surveillance (accumulating data on individuals’ personalities, moods, and emotions).

24 For the revolt in Moldova, see Ethan Zuckerman, “The First Twitter Revolution?” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 15, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/15/the-first-twitter-revolution-2/>. For the unrest in Iran, see Andrew Sullivan, “The Revolution Will Be Twittered,” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-twittered/200478/>. For the unrest in Russia, see Jessica Tobin, “We Are Not Afraid,” University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Undergraduate Diss., 2013, <https://globalstudies.unc.edu/files/2013/11/We-Are-Not-Afraid.pdf>; and Stephen White and Ian McAllister, “Did Russia (Nearly) Have a Facebook Revolution in 2011? Social Media’s Challenge to Authoritarianism,” *Politics* 34, no. 1 (February 2014): 72–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12037>. For the first wave of Arab social unrest, see Denis G. Campbell, *Egypt Unsh@ckled: Using Social Media to @#) the System* (Carmarthenshire, Wales: Cambria Books, 2011); and Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, “The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The Role of Digital Media,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 3 (July 2011): 35–48, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0041>. For the quote at the end of this sentence, see Roger Cohen, “Revolutionary Arab Geeks,” *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/opinion/28iht-edcohen28.html>.

25 Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 86.

26 Mark Zuckerberg, “Bringing the World Closer Together,” Facebook, June 22, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10154944663901634>.

27 Zeynep Tufekci, “It’s the (Democracy-Poisoning) Golden Age of Free Speech,” *Wired*, Jan. 16, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-issue-tech-turmoil-new-censorship/>.

28 Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, “The Crisis of Social Media,” Freedom House, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2019/crisis-social-media>.

29 “Do Social Media Threaten Democracy?” *The Economist*, Nov. 4, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/11/04/do-social-media-threaten-democracy>.

30 See Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 1–8; and Scott Galloway, *The Four: The Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google* (London: Bantam Press, 2017), 1–12.

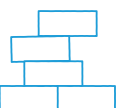
31 Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (London: Pinter, 1988), 115.

32 Matt Simon, “What This CIA Veteran Learned Helping Facebook with Elections,” *Wired*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-knows-more-about-you-than-cia/>.

33 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 3–17.

34 Bruce Schneier, *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 15–72.

35 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 6.



In addition to using knowledge power to profile and micro-target their users to sell more ads, Facebook also uses its algorithms to anticipate human behavior and create “prediction products” that make people easier to manipulate.³⁶ This power was allegedly harnessed to reshape popular perceptions of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the United Kingdom’s referendum on membership of the European Union.³⁷

Another aspect of social media’s knowledge power is reflected in its significant role in today’s media industry. The perceived trustworthiness of the news media in democratic states has given these states advantages over non-democratic ones. Lucie Greene calls Facebook, Twitter, and Google “the Fifth Estate” because they have replaced the traditional news outlets as the main places where people go to get their news.³⁸ They now have the power to shape public life, including what content is produced, where audiences go, and what news and information citizens see.³⁹

In 2012, Facebook declared that its mission is to expand and strengthen relationships between people and to help expose people to a greater number of diverse perspectives.⁴⁰ Instead, only a few years later, the opposite has happened. Facebook has become one of the sources for divisions among people.⁴¹ This can be attributed to two main factors: the “filter bubble phenomenon” and the rise of fake news.

Facebook’s algorithms tend to reinforce a “filter bubble” that shields people from dissenting information and only delivers content that confirms their views.⁴² Social media platforms are part of

the digital “attention economy,” which focuses on the interplay between money and attention. The more people are engaged with the content on social media and are exposed to commercial ads, the more it generates income for these platforms. In order to keep people engaged, Facebook tends to expose them to the most popular posts and to confrontational and inflammatory news items that tend to make people more extreme in their views.⁴³ Facebook encourages society to self-segregate into like-minded communities, which increases the distance between groups with opposing views, causing more polarization.⁴⁴ YouTube’s recommendation algorithm typically recommends videos that echo the political bias of its viewers and what they choose to view, and feeds them videos containing viewpoints that are more extreme than the ones they currently hold.⁴⁵

Fake news has gained prevalence in recent years due to the rising role of social media platforms as news outlets, where content can be produced and relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.”⁴⁶ This type of news is widespread because it is cheaper to produce than precise reporting and because consumers enjoy partisan news. A fake story shared by millions becomes “real” because people believe that if it’s going viral, it must be true. The most inflammatory materials will travel the farthest and fastest. False stories on Twitter, for example, spread significantly faster and more broadly than true ones, and

36 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8.

37 Karen Kornbluh, “The Internet’s Lost Promise: And How America Can Restore It,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018): 33–38, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-13/internets-lost-promise>; and Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus, “The Data that Turned the World Upside Down,” *Vice*, Jan. 28, 2017, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mg9vvn/how-our-likes-helped-trump-win.

38 See Greene, *Silicon States*, 73–96; and Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016,” Pew Research Center, May 26, 2016, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>.

39 Matthew Hindman, *The Internet Trap: How the Digital Economy Builds Monopolies and Undermines Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1–14.

40 “Mark Zuckerberg’s Letter to Investors: ‘the Hacker Way,’” *CNN*, Feb. 1, 2012, https://money.cnn.com/2012/02/01/technology/zuckerberg_ipo_letter/index.htm.

41 Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media*.

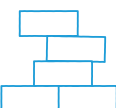
42 A “filter bubble” is a state of intellectual isolation that results from a website algorithm that selectively guesses what information a user would like to see based on information about the user, such as location, past click-behavior, and search history. See Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Books, 2012). See also Carly Okyle, “Are You Living in a Digital Bubble? This Flowchart Will Tell You,” *Entrepreneur*, June 11, 2016, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/277351>.

43 Galloway, *The Four*, 119.

44 Ashesh Mukherjee, *The Internet Trap: Five Costs of Living Online* (Toronto: University of Toronto press, 2018), 42; and Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 71–76.

45 Zeynep Tufekci, “YouTube, the Great Radicalizer,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>; and Jack Nicas, “How YouTube Drives People to the Internet’s Darkest Corners,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 7, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478>.

46 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>.





wider distribution of false stories also makes them more profitable for social media platforms.⁴⁷

Fake news finds fertile ground in a divided electorate that has clear in-groups and out-groups, where people are ready to accept any statement as long it is consistent with what they already believe.⁴⁸ Extreme examples of fake news spread by social media platforms can be found in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where the dissemination of hate speech contributed to the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims and anti-Muslim riots, respectively.⁴⁹

In the last several years, political actors have begun to use the knowledge power of social media to their advantage. A 2016 Rand study discusses the “firehose of falsehood” — a high-intensity stream of lies, partial truths, and complete fictions that impacted several democratic elections, including in Ukraine, Italy, France, Germany, and the United States.⁵⁰ The “firehosing” that took place in America, for example, included attempts to influence public opinion and promote political protests.⁵¹ According to some scholars, authoritarian and illiberal states started using social media platforms to spread fake information to exercise their “sharp power.”⁵² This sharp power can stifle productive discussion in democracies, deepen domestic polarization, exacerbate ethnic tensions, rekindle nationalism, weaken public confidence in

both journalism and elections, and diminish the overall influence of the Western-led international system.⁵³ Authoritarian and illiberal regimes also use social media knowledge power, together with artificial intelligence, as a monitoring tool, allowing them to collect and analyze vast amounts of data on entire populations. Such regimes also undercut the credibility of valid information sources by using “bot-fueled campaigns of trolling and distraction, or piecemeal leaks of hacked materials, meant to swamp the attention of traditional media.”⁵⁴ Once citizens learn to assume that the regime’s fake information is true, they alter their behavior without the regime having to resort to physical repression.⁵⁵

But it is not only authoritarian and illiberal states that use fake news to deepen domestic polarization, radicalize people’s politics, and rekindle nationalism. This also occurs in democracies. Some democratic countries are experiencing a rise in populist leaders, fueling a drift toward national-populism, illiberalism, and even autocracy. According to Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, populists and far-right extremists exploit social media platforms to “build large audiences around similar interests, lace their political messaging with false or inflammatory content, and coordinate its dissemination across multiple platforms.”⁵⁶ Paolo Gerbaudo argues that social

47 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online,” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 2018): 1146–51. <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

48 Mukherjee, *The Internet Trap*, 44.

49 Libby Hogan and Michael Safi, “Revealed: Facebook Hate Speech Exploded in Myanmar During Rohingya Crisis,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/03/revealed-facebook-hate-speech-exploded-in-myanmar-during-rohingya-crisis>; and Michael Safi, “Sri Lanka Accuses Facebook Over Hate Speech After Deadly Riots,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/14/facebook-accused-by-sri-lanka-of-failing-to-control-hate-speech>.

50 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” RAND Corporation, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>. For more about Russian intervention in elections see also David Alandete and Daniel Verdú, “How Russian Networks Worked to Boost the Far Right in Italy,” *El Pais*, March 1, 2018, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/01/inenglish/1519922107_909331.html.

51 See Mike Isaac and Scott Shane, “Facebook’s Russia-Linked Ads Came in Many Disguises,” *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/technology/facebook-russia-ads.html>; Poulsen, Collins, and Ackerman, “Russia Used Facebook Events to Organize Anti-Immigrant Rallies”; and Poulsen, et al., “Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies.”

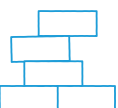
52 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig coined the term “sharp power” in order to describe the way in which authoritarian countries pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in targeted countries. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to “win hearts and minds,” the common frame of reference for soft-power efforts. They are instead seeking to manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>. See also Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190826_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf.

53 Dominic Spohr, “Fake News and Ideological Polarization: Filter Bubbles and Selective Exposure on Social Media,” *Business Information Review* 34, no. 3 (September 2017): 150–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382117722446>; Philip H. Howard, “Our Data, Ourselves,” *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/16/our-data-ourselves-democracy-technology-algorithms/>; Art Swift, “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low,” Gallup, Sept. 14, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-%20mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>; Brian Fonseca, “Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America,” *Global Americans*, Aug. 7, 2018, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2018/08/russian-deceptive-propaganda-growing-fast-in-latin-america/>; and Charles Edel, “Democracy Is Fighting for Its Life,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 10, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/10/democracy-is-fighting-for-its-life/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=14845&utm_term=Flashpoints%20OC.

54 Tufekci, “It’s the (Democracy-Poisoning) Golden Age of Free Speech.”

55 Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, “The Digital Dictators: How Technology Strengthens Autocracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 103–15, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-02-06/digital-dictators>.

56 Shahbaz and Funk, “The Crisis of Social Media.”



media is attractive to populists because it provides an outlet for countering the perceived pro-establishment bias of mainstream news media. The filter bubble helps individuals who are politically disgruntled to congregate online and mobilize militant support for anti-establishment candidates.⁵⁷ The unregulated social media platforms are thus converted into instruments for political distortion and societal control.⁵⁸

In conclusion, social media can play a positive or a negative role: It can be a liberalizing tool, used to spread information and knowledge, but it can also be a tool of suppression, used to disseminate distorted information and fake news. Grassroots movements and freedom fighters can make use of social media platforms, but so can authoritarian regimes.

The Variable Impact of Social Media Platforms

Although social media platforms are used throughout the world, they seem to have a different impact on the political system in democratic regimes as opposed to authoritarian regimes. What accounts for this difference? Why do they spark revolutions in some states while supporting the rise of populist candidates in others? Why do they disrupt democratic elections in one country, but support the regime's anti-democratic measures in another? In order to understand the varying effects of social media, it's important to distinguish clearly between liberal and illiberal regimes. In addition, it is necessary to consider whether those regimes are strong or weak.

Regime Types and Capacity

We used the "freedom score" calculated by Freedom House and the Regimes of the World typology based on V-Dem data to distinguish between democratic and illiberal or authoritarian states.⁵⁹ Countries are classified as democratic if they *de facto* hold free and fair multiparty elections and also guarantee freedom of speech and expression.⁶⁰ A liberal democracy is also

characterized by having effective legislative and judicial oversight of the executive and protecting individual and minority liberties and the rule of law.⁶¹ In contrast, an authoritarian regime is characterized by a government that permits people only a limited degree of political freedom. In such regimes, the government controls the political process and determines individual freedoms without any constitutional accountability.⁶²

The "freedom score" is based on two main parameters — political rights and civil liberties — and it can show trends in a state's score over the last several years. Democratic states ("free" in Freedom House's terminology) are those with a freedom score of at least 70, while authoritarian states ("not free") are those with scores of 35 or less. Since there are some anomalies around the transition points (70 and 35) for the case studies in this article, we chose democratic states with scores over 74 — Brazil (75), the United States (86), and the United Kingdom (94) — and authoritarian states with scores under 25 — Russia (20), China (10), Egypt (21), and Iran (17). The only exception is Mexico, whose freedom score of 62 represents a deteriorating democratic state. The Regimes of the World typology confirms the above classification of the United States and the United Kingdom as liberal democracies; Brazil and Mexico as electoral democracies; Russia, Iran, and Egypt as electoral autocracies; and China as a closed autocracy.

While the distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes can help to explain the variable impact of social media on the political system, a more powerful explanation emerges when we add state capacity to the equation. State capacity refers to the institutions and resources available to states for governing the polity. In this article, we distinguish between strong or capable states and weak or malfunctioning ones. In contrast to weak states, strong states possess well-functioning institutions and sufficient resources to carry out policies and major functions. Especially important is a state's justice system and its monopoly over the means of violence (i.e., its coercive capacity). Thus, a strong state can supply security in its sovereign territory.

57 Gerbaudo, "Social Media and Populism," 745–53.

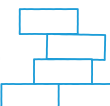
58 Shahbaz and Funk, "The Crisis of Social Media."

59 "Countries and Territories," Freedom House, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>; Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes," *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 1, (2018): 60–77, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>; and Lührmann et al., *Democracy Report 2020*.

60 Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 35–43.

61 Christian, W. Haerpfer, et al., eds., *Democratization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

62 Robert Longley, "Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism, and Fascism," *ThoughtCo*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/totalitarianism-authoritarianism-fascism-4147699>.





Such a sense of security sustained over time can facilitate business and commerce.⁶³ Weak states, on the other hand, lack the effective political institutions and resources to implement their policies, protect their populations from violent conflict, and deliver political goods.⁶⁴

No single index can distinguish strong states from weak ones. State strength or capacity can be measured, among other things, by a state's capacity to provide services to the whole population, the extent to which infrastructure and communication networks cover the state territory, and the level of the state's control over its sovereign territory. It can also be measured through gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, GDP growth, and trade indicators because states with higher economic development enjoy larger pools of resources from which to extract taxes.

For this paper, we used three different indicators to determine whether a state is weak or strong: the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index,⁶⁵ which takes into account political stability indicators such as the security apparatus, group grievances, uneven economic development, state legitimacy, and external interventions (which reflects the state's coercive capacity);⁶⁶ the World Bank data on Gross National Income, because, in an economically developed state, taxes constitute a significant portion of the annual income; and total military expenditures (as calculated by the International Institute for Strategic Studies), which indicate to what extent a given state is capable of mobilizing manpower for military service. Any one of these indices is not enough on its own to determine whether a state is strong or weak. China, for example, would not be considered a strong state according to the Fragile State Index or GDP per capita, but if one considers Gross National Income and total military expenditures, it is. Similarly, Brazil is not a typical weak state by the Fragile State Index, but when examining its military expenditure, which is much lower than that of strong states, it cannot be considered a strong state.

A Causal Explanation of Social Media's Impact

In our analysis of the variations in the effects of social media platforms on states, we consider only American social media platforms that wield knowledge power, usually acquired through data collection and processing. We do not consider other social media platforms, such as the Russian platform VK or China's WeChat, because they are more culture-dependent and less common outside their home countries. U.S. social media platforms are used in different ways by three main types of political actors: domestic opposition (dissidents or populist candidates), external forces (other countries or multinational corporations), and the governing regime. These actors use social media for political purposes in an effort to influence a state's political system. But the outcome is beyond their reach because it is determined by the combined effect of the state's capacity and the state's regime. This essay will analyze these actors, together with the differences in state capacity and regime, to deduce a causal model that indicates four potential effects of social media platforms on states: destabilization, radicalization, intensification, and weakening.

Destabilization takes place in weak authoritarian regimes when social media platforms facilitate the coordination and mobilization of dissidents and grassroots movements (which represent domestic opposition) in resisting the government's tyranny. The governing regime in these cases usually lacks the coercive capacity to maintain internal order and stop well-coordinated resistance. This destabilization effect can ultimately lead to regime change or, in extreme cases, a failed state scenario. A recent example of this destabilizing effect, which resulted in regime change, is the 2011 revolution in Egypt that culminated in President Hosni Mubarak's ouster.

The use of social media platforms as a disseminator of fake news and disinformation during an election process leads to a *radicalizing effect* when it occurs in weak democratic countries. Social media can be used by populist and anti-establishment candidates (domestic opposition) and may diminish democratic institutions and processes. Some

63 Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Washington, DC; Cambridge, MA: Brookings Institute Press/World Peace Foundation, 2003), 1–28; and Ashley J. Tellis, et al., *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2000), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1110.html.

64 Benjamin Miller, *International and Regional Security: The Causes of War and Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 109–10; and Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick, *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World*, Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2008, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/02_weak_states_index.pdf.

65 J.J. Messner de Latour, et al., "Fragile States Index 2020 — Annual Report," The Fund for Peace, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2020/05/08/fragile-states-index-2020-annual-report/>.

66 The Group Grievance Indicator focuses on divisions and schisms between different groups in society — particularly divisions based on social or political characteristics — and their inclusion in the political process. See "C3: Group Grievance," Fragile States Index, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/c3/>.

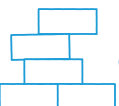


Table 1: The four types of political effects of social media platforms

| | Democratic Regime | Authoritarian Regime |
|--------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Strong State | Weakening effect | Intensifying effect |
| Weak State | Radicalizing effect | Destabilizing effect |

of these practices continue even after these candidates are elected to office. Social media platforms may also be malignly exploited by external forces — Russia, for example — to disturb elections in democratic countries. The use of social media platforms is considered an integral part of the democratic election process because the platforms are vehicles for exercising free speech. This limits the governing regime's capacity to restrict and counter the malign use of these social media platforms. This radicalization effect could steer a state that lacks sufficient checks and balances and a strong democratic tradition toward becoming an illiberal or authoritarian regime. Recent examples of this radicalizing effect are the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

The *intensifying effect* takes place in strong authoritarian countries when social media platforms become a surveillance tool of the governing regime, which uses them to intensify the government's coercive capacity, suppress civil rights, and counter the domestic opposition. These platforms also enhance the state's sharp power with regard to liberal-democratic states. Social media platforms do not usually have a substantial liberalizing effect in strong authoritarian countries because the regimes control the internet in their territory. Recent examples of the intensifying effect include laws in China and Russia that give the states the power to surveil their citizens' activities on social media, and Russia's intervention in democratic elections in several liberal-democratic states by using these platforms as disseminators of fake news and disinformation.⁶⁷

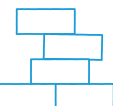
The use of social media platforms by domestic populist forces or external malign forces can weaken domestic authority in strong democratic regimes, support the rise of populism, and diminish democratic institutions and ideas, such as multilateralism and globalization. Democratic norms in strong liberal regimes constrain these states from countering the malign use of social media, despite having the capacity to do so. In this scenario, the domestic political system becomes polarized, but the state's established system of checks and

balances and strong democratic tradition preserve its liberal character. Recent examples include the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the U.K. Brexit referendum. Table 1 summarizes the four types of political effects that U.S. social media platforms have on states.

In the following sections, we present four primary case studies to illustrate this model and describe the effects that social media platforms have on different states. The case selection is based on variations in the type of regime and the state's capacity. The detailed case studies described in each classification are only the prominent ones in which the literature and the availability of empirical material regarding social media effects are more prevalent than others. The effect of social media on states is a relatively new research topic and the publications in this area are mainly concentrated on the limited case studies that we chose to present in this article. The case studies are the leading instances that represent the political effects of social media platforms on states: destabilizing, radicalizing, intensifying, and weakening.

For the destabilizing effect, we look at Egypt, a prominent country in the Arab world with a stable leader for three decades who was nevertheless quickly overthrown after less than three weeks of protests. To demonstrate the radicalizing effect, we chose Brazil, a leading economy in Latin America, a region that underwent a rapid democratization process in the last 20 years of the 20th century but that, in the last several years, has reverted to illiberalism and even to authoritarianism. For the intensifying effect, we considered the malign use of social media in the most powerful authoritarian states, Russia and China. For the weakening effect, we chose the external intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, which is considered to be a leading case of authoritarian intervention because of America's status as the most powerful liberal democracy in the world. In each of these sections, we discuss additional examples, but it should be noted that not all countries in the same classification are necessarily affected by social media to the same extent as the anchor case.

67 Polyakova and Meserole, "Exporting Digital Authoritarianism," 6.





The Destabilizing Effect in Weak Authoritarian Regimes

Social media platforms can help to create and mobilize domestic opposition to the governing regime by making it easier for opposition members to connect, organize, and circumvent the regime's restrictions. Organized resistance to the government's tyranny may lead to regime change in weak authoritarian regimes, but some governments put in place surveillance systems that monitor social media platforms, helping to counter dissidents early in their organization stage and reducing the risk of regime change.

In just over a year, a wave of unrest that first began in Tunisia in December 2010 swept through the Arab region, leading to the overthrow of four Arab heads of state.⁶⁸ Power seemed to be shifting from authoritarian regimes to citizens. Social media platforms were credited with helping to cause this shift. Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain explain that digital media (including social media platforms) helped to shape events and outcomes by spreading protest messages, connecting frustrated citizens, and helping them to realize that

rights.⁷⁰ Laura Stein outlines six different ways in which the internet and social media platforms may help social movements: by providing information, assisting people in mobilizing and taking an action, promoting interaction and dialogue, helping to connect different networks of people, serving as an outlet for creative expression, and promoting fundraising and resource generation.⁷¹

The use of social media platforms is part of each stage of any uprising in the internet era. In the preparation phase, activists use social media platforms to find each other, build solidarity around shared grievances, and identify collective political goals. In the ignition phase, which involves some inciting incident, social media helps to publicize that incident and enrage the public. Take, for example, the pictures of Khaled Mohamed Saeed, who was beaten to death by police in Egypt, or Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in Tunisia.⁷² In the street protests phase, the call for protests and the protest locations are coordinated online, while in the international buy-in phase, pictures, tweets, and videos from the uprising gain international interest and support. Usually, this pressures the rulers of the state to enter the climax phase,

in which the state either cracks down and protesters are forced to go home (as in the case of Iran), rulers concede and meet public demands (as in Egypt and Tunisia), or the groups reach a protracted stalemate (as in Syria). The denouement largely depends on the state's coercive power.⁷³

Egypt serves as a good case study for the destabilizing effect of social media platforms. Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt from 1981 until 2011, resigning only 18 days after the beginning of the Egyptian uprising, which started in January 2011.

Social media platforms can also be effective in bolstering authoritarian regimes, which may help explain why, in the years after the Arab Spring, there were fewer revolutions in weak authoritarian regimes.

they shared grievances and could act together to do something about their situation.⁶⁹ The protestors succeeded in building and mobilizing a spontaneous domestic opposition. Other researchers contend that the "Internet may be the only avenue left for citizens in authoritarian regimes to influence government, fight corruption, or defend their

Scholars are divided on the role that social media platforms played in the Egyptian revolution. Killian Clarke and Korhan Kocak argue that Facebook and Twitter contributed meaningfully to mobilizing the "first movers" (the demonstrators who participated in the protest on Jan. 25, 2011) to form an *ad hoc* domestic opposition. These platforms helped

68 Regina Salanova, *Social Media and Political Change: The Case of the 2011 Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt*, Institut Catala Internacional per la Pau, Working Papers, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/2072/205489>.

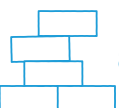
69 Philip N. Howard, and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 24.

70 Bruce Etling, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, "Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing," *SAIS Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2010): 37-49, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4609956>.

71 Laura Stein, "Social Movement Web Use in Theory and Practice: A Content Analysis of US Movement Websites," *New Media and Society* 11, no. 5 (July 2009): 749-71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809105350>.

72 Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave*, 21.

73 Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave*, 26.



to produce this outcome by recruiting people, planning and coordinating a leaderless protest, and providing live updates. The success across these three dimensions helped to convince many other Egyptians to join in subsequent protests, thus setting in motion a revolutionary cascade that resulted in Mubarak's ouster.⁷⁴ Juby John Eipe also underlines the significant role that Twitter played in initiating, organizing, and executing a powerful political movement in Egypt, including mobilizing people with no political background.⁷⁵ Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain note that YouTube and other video archiving platforms allowed citizen journalists, using mobile phone cameras and consumer electronics, to broadcast stories that the mainstream media could not or did not want to cover.⁷⁶

Others are not so fast to give all the praise to social media. Tarak Barkawi is critical of the credit given to "Western technology" rather than to the "ordinary Egyptians, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, who toppled the regime."⁷⁷ He argues that the West imagines itself as the real agent in the uprisings and he denounces "fantastically Eurocentric" narratives. "To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak," Barkawi writes. Mason agrees that social networks allow people to assemble and protest but insists that the revolutions in the Arab world "have been social, political and real — not virtual."⁷⁸ According to Mohamed Ben Moussa, social media platforms were only effective because they operated in synergy with a huge array of "other more conventional

media and offline societal networks."⁷⁹ Regina Salanova agrees that, in the end, *Al-Jazeera* and other international media "amplified the message, attracted the majority of the population to join the revolts and put pressure on the authoritarian states by engaging international audiences."⁸⁰ Ian Black notes that state surveillance of social media platforms compelled activists to use alternative media and communication tools.⁸¹

The Egyptian uprising is not the only example of social media playing a prominent role in political upheaval. Mark Pfeifle, a former U.S. national security adviser in the George W. Bush administration, wrote regarding the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran that "[w]ithout Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy."⁸² He also called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In the uprising in Tunisia, the blogosphere provided a forum for open political dialogue on regime corruption and the potential for political change.⁸³ In Sudan's 2019 uprising, social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook) gave people an alternative source of information and an opportunity to organize and rebel against their government.⁸⁴ This enabled dissent to spread from regional cities, such as Atbara, to Khartoum and elsewhere much faster.⁸⁵ Social media platforms also helped diaspora communities to stay updated about events in Sudan and play an invaluable role in the uprisings by sharing updates and fostering solidarity.⁸⁶

Again, some scholars have downplayed the impact of social media on these events. Golnaz Esfandiari wrote regarding the Green Movement after

74 Killian Clarke and Korhan Kocak, "Launching Revolution: Social Media and the Egyptian Uprising's First Movers," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (July 2020): 1025–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000194>.

75 Juby John Eipe, "Egypt Revolution 2.0: Tweets and Trends from Egypt," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 19, no.1 (February 2014): 22–27, <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-191112227>.

76 Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave*, 66.

77 Tarak Barkawi, "The Globalisation of Revolution," *Al-Jazeera*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/03/2011320131934568573.html>.

78 Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London: Verso, 2012), 5–24.

79 Mohamed Ben Moussa, "From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2013): 47–68, <http://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.166>.

80 Salanova, *Social Media and Political Change*.

81 Ian Black, "Egypt Protest Leaflets Distributed in Cairo Give Blueprint for Mass Action," *The Guardian*, Jan. 27, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/27/egypt-protest-leaflets-mass-action>.

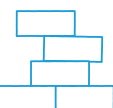
82 Mark Pfeifle, "A Nobel Peace Prize for Twitter?" *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0706/p09s02-coop.html>.

83 Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave*, 66.

84 Oluwatosin Adeshokan, "How Social Media Propels Protests in Sudan," *TRT World*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/how-social-media-propels-protests-in-sudan-26185>.

85 W.J. Berridge, "Briefing: The Uprising in Sudan," *African Affairs* 119, no. 474 (January 2020): 164–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz015>.

86 Alexander Durie, "The Sudan Uprising and the Critical Role of Social Media," *The New Arab*, Sept. 17, 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/9/17/sudans-uprising-and-the-critical-role-of-social-media>.





the 2009 elections in Iran: “Simply put: There was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran.”⁸⁷ Bruce Etling and his coauthors agree that Twitter did not necessarily play a role in organizing the Iranian protests.⁸⁸ Others attribute less importance to social media’s role in rallying local audiences and focus instead on the “bridging function” of social media platforms, which allows them to inform international audiences and mainstream media.⁸⁹

Social media platforms can also be effective in bolstering authoritarian regimes,⁹⁰ which may help explain why, in the years after the Arab Spring, there were fewer revolutions in weak authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes, even those that lack financial resources, can now use social media surveillance tools that weren’t available to Egypt during its revolution to monitor and control society.⁹¹ This is due to the availability of various low-cost surveillance tools exported by China and Russia.⁹²

The Iranian regime, which learned from the 2009 unrest, is an example of a weak authoritarian regime that took the use of social media platforms for surveillance to the next level. It combined using surveillance tools with exerting strict control over the domestic internet infrastructure. The development of Iran’s state-controlled National Internet Network significantly enhanced the government’s ability to restrict, block, and monitor internet use in Iran,⁹³ providing it with one of the world’s most sophisticated mechanisms for controlling and censoring the internet and allowing it to examine the content of individual online communications on a massive scale.⁹⁴ In 2009, mass surveillance operations significantly aided the authorities’ ability to identify, track, arrest, and imprison protesters.⁹⁵

During the unrest that swept through Iran at the end of 2017, the authorities implemented major disruptions to internet access by slowing it down, blocking social media platforms (such as Instagram and Telegram) that were used by the protesters to mobilize street protests, and briefly cutting off Iranians’ access to the global internet. Some weak authoritarian governments have also learned to control the networked public sphere through “surveillance and repression, using fear, blocking of information, mobilizing armies of supporters or paid employees who muddy the online waters with misinformation, doubt, confusion and distraction.” This makes it hard for ordinary people to “navigate the networked public sphere and sort facts from fiction.”⁹⁶ Instead of denying internet access to dissidents, which is sometimes difficult to do, these governments prefer to “deny attention, focus, and credibility.”⁹⁷

Clarke and Koçak claim that social media platforms were, and still are, relevant because dissidents in authoritarian environments have simply switched to new social media platforms that the government hasn’t started monitoring yet.⁹⁸ The new generation of dissidents uses messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. Activists used these apps instead of Twitter in the 2018 revolt in Armenia and have used “Facebook live” for real-time coverage of anti-governmental protest activities in Nicaragua.⁹⁹

In summary, social media can have a destabilizing political effect in weak authoritarian regimes. Social media (a liberalizing force) can help to create and mobilize domestic opposition by making it easier to alert and connect people who have shared interests. It also helps people to organize more easily and lets protesters know that they

87 Golnaz Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution,” *Foreign Policy*, June 8, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twitter-devolution/>.

88 Etling, Faris, and Palfrey, “Political Change in the Digital Age,” 37–49.

89 Sean Aday, et al., *Blogs and Bullets II: New Media and Conflict After the Arab Spring*, United States Institute of Peace, July 10, 2012, 5, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/07/blogs-and-bullets-ii-new-media-and-conflict-after-arab-spring>.

90 Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs: 2011), 1–32.

91 Ronald J. Deibert, “The Geopolitics of Internet Control: Censorship, Sovereignty, and Cyberspace,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard (London: Routledge, 2009), 323–36; and Shahbaz and Funk, “The Crisis of Social Media.”

92 Polyakova and Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism.”

93 *Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet in Iran*, Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 2018, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/EN-Guards-at-the-gate-High-quality.pdf>.

94 Christopher Rhoads and Loretta Chao, “Iran’s Web Spying Aided by Western Technology,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124562668777335653>.

95 Karen Kramer, “Iran’s Information Minister Is not the Solution. He’s Part of the Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 4, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/04/irans-information-minister-is-not-the-solution-hes-part-of-the-problem>.

96 Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 28.

97 Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, 71.

98 Killian Clarke and Korhan Koçak, “Eight Years After Egypt’s Revolution, Here’s What We’ve Learned About Social Media and Protest,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/25/eight-years-after-egypts-revolution-heres-what-weve-learned-about-social-media-and-protest/>.

99 Neil MacFarquhar, “Behind Armenia’s Revolt, Young Shock Troops from the Tech Sector,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/europe/armenia-revolt-tech-sector.html>; and “Journalist Shot Dead While Broadcasting Live in Nicaragua as Death Toll Hits 25,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/22/journalist-among-25-killed-as-unrest-escalates-in-nicaragua>.



are not alone. Facebook's filter bubbles may help to convince people that there is more support for their position than there really is, thus generating a self-fulfilling prophecy that drives people to the streets. Although social media may not be the only reason why a revolution takes place, it can certainly play a significant role. However, in the last several years, many weak authoritarian regimes have been able to afford the purchase of surveillance systems from China and Russia that monitor social media platforms and assist the repressive governing regime, deterring and countering dissidents during organization stage.¹⁰⁰ The governing regime also uses social media platforms to spread misinformation, leading people to doubt what they read on these platforms and perhaps deterring them from joining a potential uprising.

The Radicalizing Effect in Weak Democratic Regimes

Social media is a low-cost and convenient communication tool that can be used by opposition populists to reach their supporters, by the governing regime to engage directly with the electorate, and by malign external forces to spread fake news. These platforms can be exploited to spread fake news and narratives that are polarizing, divisive, and anti-liberal because they lack the fact-checking found in traditional media outlets. Social media helps populists (both as candidates and as part of the governing regime) to aggregate and unify people to promote a shared cause against the liberal establishment and liberal freedoms and to erode democratic pillars. Malign external actors use social media to intervene in democratic elections in weak democratic countries to cause further erosion of trust in the democratic system. These combined actions create a radicalizing effect in weak liberal democracies that can potentially turn a liberal-democratic regime into an illiberal regime, or even an autocratic one.

There are several examples of weak liberal-democratic regimes worldwide, namely new democracies in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Latin America. Freedom House's freedom score has declined in some of these countries over the last several years: From 2016 to 2020 Brazil's score dropped six points, from 81 to 75; the Philippines fell six points, from 65 to 59; and Mexico lost three points, going from 65 to 62. This decrease in freedom scores may be explained by the rise of populist leaders in these countries and the erosion of democratic pillars, such as free and unbiased elections.¹⁰¹ According to the *Democracy Report 2020*, Latin America has regressed to a level of democracy last recorded around 1992.¹⁰²

In the last decade, Latin American presidents and candidates started using social media to engage directly with the electorate. Social media is perceived as the voice of the people and more authentic than the mainstream media, "which responds to the agenda of their super-rich owners and their political allies, rather than to the real needs and interests of the public."¹⁰³ By 2014, the region had the world's highest use of social media by politicians.¹⁰⁴

According to eMarketer, people in Latin America are the most avid social media users in the world.¹⁰⁵ The vast majority of them get their news straight from social media services because they place less trust in traditional media. For example, WhatsApp has 120 million users in Brazil, a country with a population of 200 million. Thirty-five percent of these users regularly rely on the messaging platform for their news consumption, which makes WhatsApp networks "fertile for planting false information that can spread quickly from group to group until it is out of control."¹⁰⁶ These countries are therefore more susceptible to efforts to promote divisive and anti-liberal narratives, whether by domestic opposition or malign external forces, via online platforms. Moreover, polarization is a significant characteristic of Latin American politics, and the use of fake news communicated via social media platforms has proved to be more effective within

100 Shahbaz and Funk, "The Crisis of Social Media."

101 Amy Erica Smith, "Signs of Democratic Demise in Latin America," *Vox*, Feb. 14, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2018/2/14/17012770/latin-america-democratic-demise>; and Kurt Weyland, "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 2013):18–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0045>.

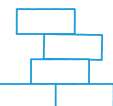
102 Lührmann, et al., *Democracy Report 2020*.

103 Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 1–14.

104 Latouche, "Latin American Presidents."

105 "Latin Americans Are the Most Avid Social Media Users," eMarketer, Jan. 28, 2016, <https://www.emarketer.com/Article/Latin-Americans-Most-Avid-Social-Media-Users/1013517>.

106 Noah Kulwin, "WhatsApp Is Causing a Serious Fake News Problem in Brazil," *Vice*, Jan. 17, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mbpkyv/whatsapp-is-causing-a-serious-fake-news-problem-in-brazil.





polarized societies.¹⁰⁷ This environment is primed for the rise of populist candidates who are inclined to promote an illiberal regime and can further foster radicalization and change toward a national-populist, illiberal, and even autocratic regime. This is especially true given that the checks and balances in states with only a short democratic history are less effective than in long-established liberal states.¹⁰⁸

Populism is an ideology that views society as divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite — “us” versus “them.”¹⁰⁹ Populists portray themselves as anti-elitist, anti-pluralist, supporters of moralism, and the exclusive legitimate representatives of the people in defiance of the unresponsive political elites. The rhetoric used by populist leaders generally focuses on the perception of a state in a crisis that needs to be resolved. Populists often use a dramatized and discursive repertoire that creates tension between antagonistic blocks.¹¹⁰ Pippa Norris notes that populism undercuts the legitimacy of the checks and balances on executive power that were “protecting citizens from strong leaders advocating authoritarian values attacking the heart of liberal freedoms, social tolerance, and cosmopolitanism.”¹¹¹

Populism exists across the political spectrum. According to Paolo Gerbaudo, the populist right “tends to take highly exclusionary and xenophobic forms, whereby the people are constructed in opposition to the Other, and in particular migrants and ethnic and religious minorities.” Left-wing populism, on the contrary, opposes “immoral

privilege, as embodied by greedy bankers, rogue entrepreneurs, and corrupt politicians accused of exploiting the people.”¹¹² Postill also discusses centrist populists — opportunistic technocrats who borrow populist rhetoric and blend it with a pro-market language of job flexibility, entrepreneurship, and economic growth.¹¹³

Gerbaudo, who studies the relationship between populism and social media, explains that social media provides a platform for populists to gain people’s support against a liberal establishment that is supposedly victimizing them.¹¹⁴ Populists are able to unify otherwise dispersed and divided people to promote a shared cause, exploiting the platforms’ “economy of attention” and filter bubble effect. In this way, populists develop online followers of like-minded individuals and “siloe communities that experience their own reality and operate with their own facts.”¹¹⁵

In Brazil’s 2018 elections, Bolsonaro, a far-right candidate, was elected president with 55 percent of the vote, putting an end to the social-democratic pact that had been established after the end of the military dictatorship in the 1980s. In these elections, the far-right opposition movement “Brazil over Everything, God above Everyone” overtly used the spread of misinformation and fake news through social media to advance its discourse. This included attacks against the Workers’ Party, the group’s main competitor, associating them with child abuse, female nudity, and more. Bolsonaro’s campaign also used social media platforms to attack feminists and minority groups, including the LGBT community, blacks, and indigenous people.¹¹⁶

107 Julia Gurganus, “Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>; Felicitas Carrique, “Another Chapter on Facebook’s Privacy Woes Is Being Written in Latin America,” *Techcrunch*, March 30, 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/03/30/another-chapter-on-facebooks-privacy-woes-is-being-written-in-latin-america/>; Brian Fonseca, “Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America,” *Dialogo*, July 24, 2018, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/russian-deceptive-propaganda-growing-fast-in-latin-america/>; and Kate Linthicum, “Mexico Has Its Own Fake News Crisis. These Journalists Are Fighting Back,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-mexico-fake-news-20180415-story.html>.

108 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 5, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/how-democracies-fall-apart>.

109 Bruno Araújo and Hélder Prior, “Framing Political Populism: The Role of Media in Framing the Election of Jair Bolsonaro,” *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 2 (2021): 226–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1709881>.

110 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2018), 1–20; Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Pennsylvania: Penguin Books, 2017), 19–25; and Linda Bos, Wouter van der Brug, and Claes de Vreese, “How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders,” *Political Communication* 28, no. 2 (April 2011): 182–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.564605>.

111 Pippa Norris, “Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, HKS Working Paper No. RWP17-012, March 16, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2933655>.

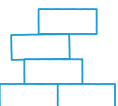
112 Gerbaudo, “Social Media and Populism,” 747.

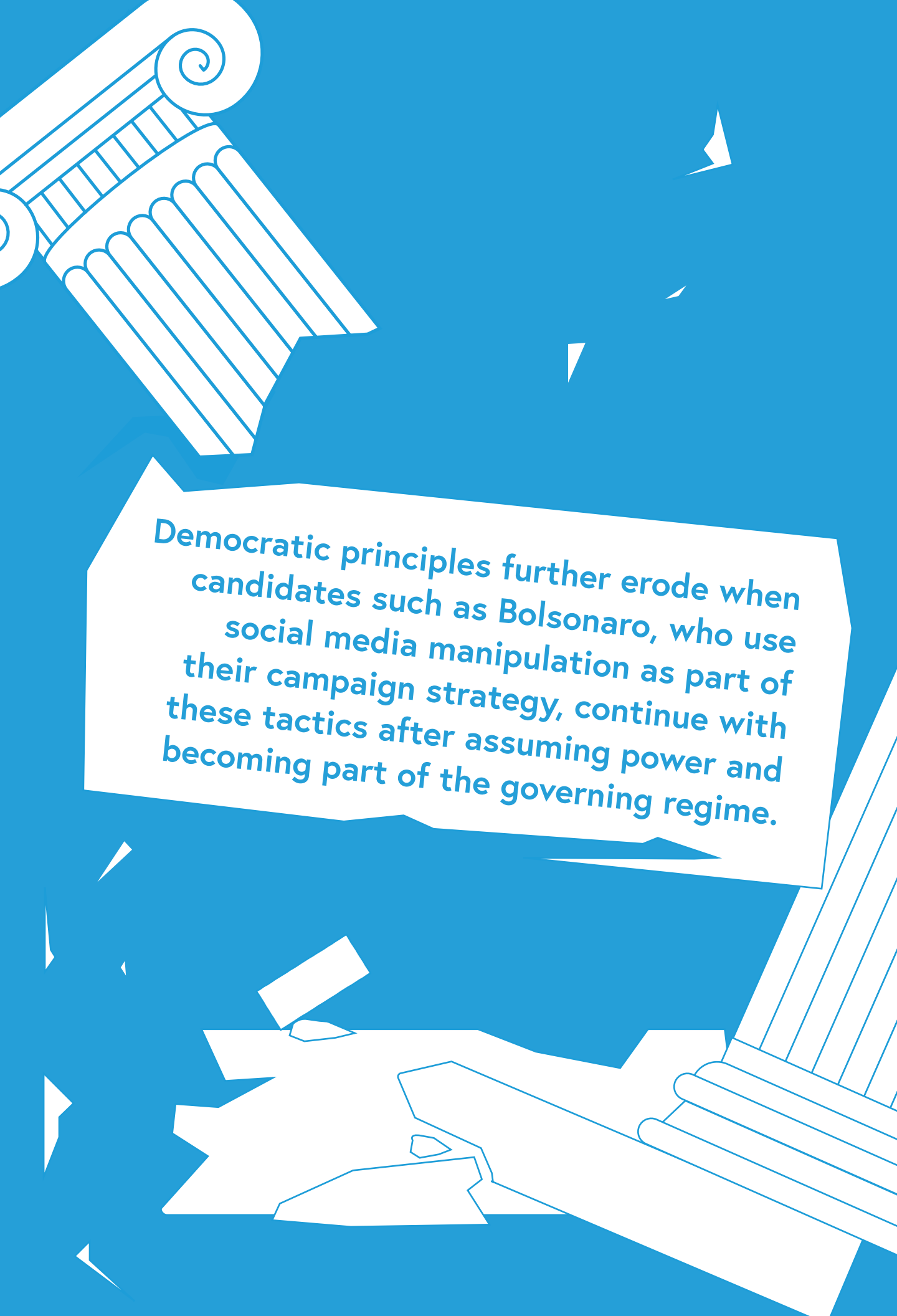
113 John Postill, “Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective,” *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (July 2018): 754–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0163443718772186>.

114 Gerbaudo, “Social Media and Populism,” 745–53.

115 For the quote, see Renee Diresta, “Social Network Algorithms Are Distorting Reality by Boosting Conspiracy Theories,” *Fast Company*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3059742/social-network-algorithms-are-distorting-reality-by-boosting-conspiracy-theories>. See also, Gerbaudo, “Social Media and Populism,” 745–53.

116 Fabrício H. Chagas-Bastos, “Political Realignment in Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro and the Right Turn,” *Revista de Estudos Sociais*, no. 69 (2019): 92–100, <https://doi.org/10.7440/res69.2019.08>.





Democratic principles further erode when candidates such as Bolsonaro, who use social media manipulation as part of their campaign strategy, continue with these tactics after assuming power and becoming part of the governing regime.



Up until the 2018 election, political television advertising was the primary means of reaching out to Brazil's electorate. Bolsonaro's low-budget campaign, however, relied heavily on political micro-targeting via social media to directly engage with his electoral base.¹¹⁷ His early supporters distrusted mainstream media and assumed that social media is more genuine "because it's filled with friends and family."¹¹⁸ The campaign focused on professionalizing a fake news industry by using WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.¹¹⁹ Bolsonaro's entire campaign was built upon "exploiting a political behavior tied into a sense of fear — fear of being shot, of crime, of unemployment — that ends up creating space for the acceptance of authoritarian feelings latent in society."¹²⁰

Angered by violence, scandals, and a deep recession, voters were ready for Bolsonaro's messages about crime, corruption, and family values. He energized voters who disliked the ruling party and who detested all the other candidates.¹²¹ He benefited from the high levels of cognitive dissonance that some voters were experiencing — between their image of the country and the world as it is.

Over the years, Bolsonaro has repeatedly called for Congress to be closed and has said that he would "start a dictatorship right away if elected president."¹²² During the 2018 election, he continued his attacks on the idea of liberal democracy and the legitimacy of the media as well as on other political opponents.¹²³ His final speech before election day was a direct attack on several dem-

ocratic norms, reiterating the central themes of his campaign: diluting the power of minorities, closing down non-government organizations, and promising to imprison his opponent in the race, Fernando Haddad.¹²⁴ Democratic principles further erode when candidates such as Bolsonaro, who use social media manipulation as part of their campaign strategy, continue with these tactics after assuming power and becoming part of the governing regime.¹²⁵ For example, since assuming power, Bolsonaro has used different means, including fake news, to discredit Brazil's electoral processes (such as when he questioned the integrity of the 2020 municipal elections), lash out at the Brazilian Supreme Court and Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and fight federal police on investigating him and his allies.¹²⁶

Support for democracy in Brazil dropped from a peak level of 55 percent in 2009 to 34 percent in 2018.¹²⁷ By 2020, only 15 percent of Brazilians said they were satisfied with democracy, a drop of 35 points compared to 2014.¹²⁸ Bolsonaro's election thus marks the intensification of a process of decay that has affected Brazil's democratic system for some time. Brian Winter suggests that Bolsonaro, when faced with resistance as a president, "will ignore or trample democratic practices and norms to get his way."¹²⁹ Since the checks and balances in Brazil, as in many other Latin countries, are weak and insufficient, such action by the president could further weaken democratic institutions and lead to regime change.

117 Araújo and Prior, "Framing Political Populism."

118 "Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's President, Is a Master of Social Media," *The Economist*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/03/14/jair-bolsonaro-brazils-president-is-a-master-of-social-media>.

119 Ciara Long, "Did Coordinated Misinformation Campaigns on Social Media Affect the Brazilian Presidential Elections?" *Pacific Standard*, Nov. 2, 2018, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/misinformation-campaigns-mar-brazilian-elections>.

120 Chagas-Bastos, "Political Realignment in Brazil," 92–100.

121 Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power, "Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (January 2019): 68–82, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0005>.

122 Brian Winter, "What to Expect from Jair Bolsonaro," *Americas Quarterly*, Oct. 9, 2018, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/what-to-expect-from-jair-bolsonaro/>.

123 Tom Daly, "Populism, Public Law, and Democratic Decay in Brazil: Understanding the Rise of Jair Bolsonaro," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, April 3, 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3350098>.

124 Daly, "Populism, Public Law, and Democratic Decay."

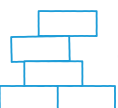
125 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," University of Oxford, Computational Propaganda Research Project, Working Paper No. 2017.12, 2017, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>; and Shahbaz and Funk, "The Crisis of Social Media."

126 Robert Muggah, "Bolsonaro Is Following Trump's Anti-Democracy Playbook," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 14, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/14/bolsonaro-brazil-trump-anti-democracy-elections/>; Rafael Moro Martins, "After a Fight Over Control of Brazil's Federal Police, Raids Target Bolsonaro's Political Rivals," *The Intercept*, May 31, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/31/police-raids-bolsonaro-political-moro/>; and Mica Presley, "Democratic Backsliding and Personalization of Power in Brazil," *V-Dem*, Feb. 18, 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/news/democratic-backsliding-and-personalization-power-brazil/>.

127 Marina Pasquali, "Level of Support for Democracy in Brazil from 2008 to 2018," *Statista*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/782384/brazil-democracy-support-rates/>.

128 *Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020*, Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2020, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/DemocracyReport2020.pdf>.

129 Winter, "What to Expect from Jair Bolsonaro."



In addition to the domestic attack on democratic institutions, Brazil is also experiencing external intervention as part of Russia's propaganda operations in Latin America aimed at promoting divisive narratives through online platforms.¹³⁰ According to Brian Fonseca, Russia's objective is "to erode confidence in Western institutions such as democracy and free trade, as well as Western-dominated sources of information."¹³¹ Moscow has been using social media platforms to exaggerate, distort, and fabricate falsehoods regarding U.S. and Western activities in the region.¹³² As a liberal-democratic regime, Brazil has only a limited set of tools to defend itself from the malign use of social media both from outside and within the country.

Brazil is not the only country in which democracy has been deteriorating. In Mexico, internal support for democracy dropped from 48 percent in 2015 to 38 percent in 2018,¹³³ and a far-left populist, anti-establishment candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was elected in 2018 in a campaign that made heavy use of social media. Since his election, democratic institutions in Mexico have been under attack. For example, Obrador has stated that the National Electoral Institute and the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary "were created to prevent democracy."¹³⁴ Another example is the actions taken by Obrador to weaken the autonomy of the judiciary and to replace some judges with Obrador's close allies. Mexico has also been the target of Russian propaganda operations.¹³⁵ Other Latin American countries with characteristics similar to those of Brazil and Mexico are at risk of following the same path of eroding democratic norms.¹³⁶

In summary, social media platforms have a radicalizing effect in weak liberal democracies, facilitating the rise of populist candidates who erode the country's democratic norms and institutions

and may lead to regime change. Social media is a playground for spreading fake news and narratives that are polarizing, divisive and anti-liberal — without the fact-checking filter of the traditional media. It helps populists to aggregate and unify people to promote a shared cause against the liberal establishment or the corrupt elites, positioning themselves as worthy alternatives to the existing governments. Malign external forces also try to use social media platforms to intervene in these countries' democratic elections.¹³⁷

The Intensifying Effect in Strong Authoritarian Regimes

Social media platforms can intensify the power of strong authoritarian regimes by helping them, directly or indirectly, to become "digital dictatorships."¹³⁸ These regimes use the knowledge power of social media platforms as part of their surveillance machine. They can monitor and block social media platforms to hinder the ability of dissidents and domestic opposition groups to organize and mobilize. Authoritarian regimes also use social media platforms as tools to apply sharp power against liberal-democratic countries worldwide and as a way to spread fake news in democratic elections.

Between 2000 and 2017, 60 percent of all dictatorships faced at least one anti-government protest of 50 participants or more. Ten authoritarian regimes fell during this period and 19 were replaced through elections, many of which came in the wake of mass protests.¹³⁹ According to *Democracy Report 2020*, pro-democracy protests reached an all-time high in 2019 as people took to the streets to protest the erosion of democracies and to challenge dictators.¹⁴⁰ The leaderless nature of 2019 Hong Kong

130 Julia Gurganus, "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>.

131 Brian Fonseca, "Russian Deceptive Propaganda Growing Fast in Latin America," *Global Americans*, Aug. 7, 2018, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2018/08/russian-deceptive-propaganda-growing-fast-in-latin-america/>.

132 Fonseca, "Russian Deceptive Propaganda."

133 Marina Pasquali, "Level of Support for Democracy in Mexico from 2008 to 2018," Statista, April 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/990671/mexico-democracy-support-rates/>.

134 Alejandro García Magos, "Is AMLO Undermining Democracy in Mexico?" *OpenDemocracy*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/democratic-backsliding-mexico-force-for-good-bad/>.

135 Fonseca, "Russian Deceptive Propaganda."

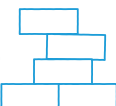
136 For more on the effect of social media in Latin America see also Will Worley, "Misinformation Is Shaping the Colombian Election," Centre for International Government Innovation, June 13, 2018, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/misinformation-shaping-colombian-election/>; and Noam Lupu, Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, "Social Media Disruption: Messaging Mistrust in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 160–71, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/social-media-disruption-messaging-mistrust-in-latin-america/>.

137 Fonseca, "Russian Deceptive Propaganda."

138 Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, "The Digital Dictators."

139 Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, "The Digital Dictators," 105.

140 Lührmann, et al., *Democracy Report 2020*.





protests against China, for example, was made possible by social media. Protesters took their cues from more than 100 groups on the instant messaging app Telegram, dozens of Instagram pages, and online forums like LIHKG. These groups were used to post everything from news on upcoming protests and tips on defending oneself from tear gas canisters fired by the police to the identities of suspected undercover police and the access codes to buildings in Hong Kong where protesters could hide.¹⁴¹ Overseas Chinese dissidents and activists played a crucial role by assisting and even guiding activists in Hong Kong. Chinese expatriates connected with those in Hong Kong via social media to get information about what was going on to journalists, non-governmental organizations, and activists in other countries.¹⁴²

In the last 20 years, the more durable authoritarian regimes have been those that have implemented digital repression.¹⁴³ In order to avoid regime change, strong authoritarian regimes have used their economic strength and coercive power to embrace technology and become “digital autocracies.” That is, they restrict their citizens’ use of the internet and social media while harnessing a new arsenal of digital tools to deal with mass anti-government protests.

China has long maintained strict regulations that determine which websites and social media platforms are accessible in the country and which are blocked behind its “Great Firewall” of internet censorship, which is part of the country’s “cyber sovereignty” model.¹⁴⁴ In 2003, Debora Spar claimed that “if people in China want to get information from sites in Silicon Valley, even the most omnipotent of governments will be hard-pressed to stop them.”¹⁴⁵ But recent years have proven her wrong. China

blocked YouTube in March 2008, the same month that a significant wave of protests-turned-riots swept Tibet. It blocked Facebook and Twitter the next year, soon after an outbreak of ethnic unrest rocked Xinjiang in July 2009.¹⁴⁶

China employs advanced technology to censor its citizens on social media (and access their private information). This technology, combined with laws, regulations, and ramped up enforcement, is increasingly being used to repress dissidents and domestic opposition voices and shape the online conversation.¹⁴⁷ Many of the state’s censorship tactics operate with a “light touch,” so that Chinese internet users do not necessarily detect the filtering and deletion of material that is going on behind the scenes. There are seven topics that social media content shouldn’t contravene according to the Chinese government: “China’s rules and laws, the socialist system, the country’s national interests, the legitimate interests of citizens, public order, morality, and authentic information.”¹⁴⁸ Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and Sina Weibo have no choice but to actively participate in the monitoring and censorship of their users in order to stay in business.¹⁴⁹

U.S. social media platforms, which could potentially act as a liberalizing external force, cannot operate in China without becoming active partners in the government’s efforts to silence dissent through censorship, mass surveillance, and the use of criminal charges.¹⁵⁰ In December 2017, an official from China’s Cyberspace Administration stated: “If they [foreign social media] want to come back, we welcome [them]. The condition is that they have to abide by Chinese law and regulations and that they also would not do any harm to Chinese national security and national con-

141 James Pomfret, et al., “Inside the Hong Kong Protesters’ Anarchic Campaign Against China,” *Reuters*, Aug. 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/hongkong-protests-protesters/>.

142 “Forbidden Feeds: Government Controls on Social Media in China,” PEN America, March 13, 2018, https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PENAmerica_Forbidden-Feeds-3.13-3.pdf.

143 Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, “The Digital Dictators,” 106–08.

144 Paige Leskin, “Here Are all the Major US Tech Companies Blocked Behind China’s ‘Great Firewall,’” *Business Insider*, Oct. 10, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/major-us-tech-companies-blocked-from-operating-in-china-2019-5>.

145 Debora L. Spar, *Ruling the Waves: Cycles of Discovery, Chaos, and Wealth from Buccaneers to Bill Gates* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 381.

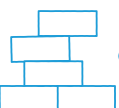
146 Simon Denyer, “China’s Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works,” *Washington Post*, May 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html.

147 Tara Francis Cahn, “China’s ‘Great Firewall’ Is Taller than Ever Under ‘President-for-Life’ Xi Jinping,” *Business Insider*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-great-firewall-censorship-under-xi-jinping-2018-3>; and PEN America, “Forbidden Feeds.”

148 Cahn, “China’s ‘Great Firewall.’”

149 Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “We (Can’t) Chat: ‘709 Crackdown’ Discussions Blocked on Weibo and WeChat,” *Citizen Lab*, April 13, 2017, <https://citizenlab.ca/2017/04/we-cant-chat-709-crackdown-discussions-blocked-on-weibo-and-wechat/>; Eva Dou, “Jailed for a Text: China’s Censors Are Spying on Mobile Chat Groups,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/jailed-for-a-text-chinas-censors-are-spying-on-mobile-chat-groups-1512665007>; and “China’s Cyber Watchdog Orders Top Tech Platforms to Increase Self-Censorship,” *Reuters*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-censorship/chinas-cyber-watchdog-orders-top-tech-platforms-to-increase-self-censorship-idUSKBN1A41CS>.

150 PEN America, “Forbidden Feeds.”





sumers' interests."¹⁵¹ Collaboration with the Chinese government contradicts the liberal agenda of most of these corporations, which see themselves as champions of free expression. However, some of them, including Google, are directly and indirectly helping China to enhance its internet surveillance capabilities and censorship technology.¹⁵²

Russia, another strong authoritarian regime, lives in constant fear of U.S. efforts to interfere with the Russian regime. After witnessing the role that social media played in the Arab Spring, Russia became increasingly concerned that America had "found a truly magic tool that could bring people to the streets without any organizing structure."¹⁵³ This fear was amplified by several statements made by Alec Ross, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clin-

ton's senior adviser for innovation at the U.S. State Department, including his comment in 2011 that "the Che Guevara of the twenty-first century is the network" and "dictatorships are now more vulnerable than they have ever been before ... because of the devolution of power from the nation-state to the individual."¹⁵⁴ This fear became a reality when protests erupted over irregularities in the 2011 Russian legislative elections — protests that were facilitated by Facebook and Twitter.¹⁵⁵

Sergei Smirnov, director of the FSB (Russia's security agency), stated in 2012: "New technologies are being used by Western special services to create and maintain a level of continual tension in society with serious intentions extending even to regime change." He emphasized that Russia needed

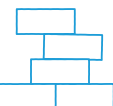
151 Tom Miles, "Internet Giants Told: Accept Cyber Curbs to be Welcome in China," *Reuters*, Dec. 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-cyber/internet-giants-told-accept-cyber-curbs-to-be-welcome-in-china-idINKBN1EC1MQ>.

152 Bryan Menegus, "Google Employees Demand Company Kill Censored Chinese Search Product," *Gizmodo*, Nov. 27, 2018, <https://gizmodo.com/google-employees-demand-company-kill-censored-chinese-s-1830673390>; Ryan Gallagher, "Google Plans to Launch Censored Search Engine in China, Leaked Documents Reveal," *The Intercept*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/google-china-search-engine-censorship/>; and Ryan Gallagher, "How U.S. Tech Giants Are Helping to Build China's Surveillance State," *The Intercept*, July 11, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/07/11/china-surveillance-google-ibm-temptation/>.

153 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 125.

154 Josh Halliday, "Hillary Clinton Adviser Compares Internet to Che Guevara," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jun/22/hillary-clinton-adviser-alec-ross>.

155 Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web*, 145.





to develop ways to respond to such technologies.¹⁵⁶ In June 2012, legislation was introduced in the Duma, the lower house of parliament, to impose a nationwide filtering system on the internet. The legislation was approved a month later. In 2013, a system for social media monitoring — *Mediaimpuls* — was introduced. Russian law allows the authorities to block online content, including social media websites whose activities are deemed “undesirable” or “extremist,” and to prevent users of social media and communications platforms from remaining anonymous.¹⁵⁷ Under its 2019 Sovereign Internet Law, Russia is centralizing internet traffic in the country and creating chokepoints (similar to China’s Great Firewall). The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (or *Roskomnadzor*) is exercising its authority inside Russia and outside its borders to silence protesters and anti-Russian voices.¹⁵⁸

China and Russia have started to proliferate their models of digital authoritarianism across the globe. China is exporting its digital tools for domestic censorship and surveillance to different countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela. Russia is disseminating its tightened information control model coupled with intimidation of internet service providers, telecom providers, private companies, and civil society groups.¹⁵⁹ Russia’s model may be an appealing, relatively low-tech, and inexpensive alternative to the Chinese model because it does not require information filtration capabilities and can be implemented without a pre-existing government firewall.¹⁶⁰

In addition, some of these tools that were initially developed for domestic use are now being used as part of the “sharp power” campaign that Russia is waging against liberal-democratic regimes. This includes using automated accounts (“bots”) on social media to manipulate and “amplify influence campaigns and produce a flurry of distracting or misleading posts,” sowing confusion and uncertainty through the dissemination of alternative narratives.¹⁶¹ Another tool, the use of internet

trolls, involves paying people to disrupt online discussions by deliberately posting inflammatory or off-topic messages over social media platforms in order to provoke and intimidate. Russia conducted a massive troll attack against Ukraine and other countries after annexing Crimea.¹⁶² Both trolls and bots have been used by Russia through social media platforms in democratic elections across the world in the last five years.¹⁶³ They helped to elect populist nominees or promote their agendas, deepening domestic polarization, ethnic tensions, and anti-migrant and anti-minority sentiments while eroding democratic institutions.

To summarize, American social media platforms may intensify the power of strong authoritarian regimes by helping them, directly and indirectly, to become digital dictatorships. They use the knowledge power of compliant platforms as part of their surveillance machine while blocking those platforms that refuse to play by their rules.

China and Russia export their restrictive practices to other authoritarian states, helping them to adopt similar practices in their countries. Russia also uses social media platforms as tools to apply sharp power against liberal-democratic countries around the world.

The Weakening Effect in Strong Democratic Regimes

The spread of fake news, disinformation, misleading information, and falsehoods through social media platforms as part of malign “perception management” orchestrated by domestic populists and external forces (such as Russia) may weaken strong liberal-democratic regimes. Such social media campaigns amplify extreme views, polarization, conspiracy theories, and doubts about democratic institutions and processes and weaken people’s trust and confidence in these institutions and processes. In strong democracies, the erosion of democratic pillars is less dramatic than in weak

156 Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web*, 163.

157 Polyakova and Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism,” 9.

158 Michael Birnbaum, “Russia Threatens BuzzFeed with Ban in Escalated Campaign Against News Outlets,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 6, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-threatens-buzzfeed-with-ban-in-escalated-campaign-against-news-outlets/2014/12/06/731dd69e-bcc7-4a9a-a20b-3e511938ae24_story.html; and Andrew Roth and David M. Herszenhorn, “Facebook Page Goes Dark, Angering Russia Dissidents,” *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/23/world/europe/facebook-angers-russian-opposition-by-blocking-protest-page.html>.

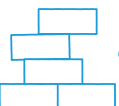
159 Robert Morgus, “The Spread of Russia’s Digital Authoritarianism,” in *Artificial Intelligence, China, Russia, and the Global Order: Technological, Political, Global, and Creative Perspectives*, ed. Nicholas D. Wright, (Washington, DC: United States Department of Defense, 2018), 86.

160 Polyakova and Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism,” 2.

161 Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, “Digital Dictators,” 110–13; and Polyakova and Meserole, “Exporting Digital Authoritarianism,” 6.

162 Soldatov and Borogan, 216–17.

163 Alandete and Verdú, “How Russian Networks Worked to Boost the Far Right in Italy.”



democracies because the checks and balances of strong democratic regimes remain a solid protection against domestic populist opponents and malign external actors.

The use of social media for political campaigning is not new to liberal-democratic regimes. American President Barack Obama used big data and individual marketing to drive people to the voting booths in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.¹⁶⁴ What is new is the malign use of these platforms and their mobilization by external forces and populist domestic opponents to change people's perceptions. The dependence of democracies on free and open political discourse provides opportunities for external forces to infiltrate their information ecosystems.¹⁶⁵ Researchers identify the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as a watershed moment in terms of the impact of fake news on social media platforms on presidential elections.¹⁶⁶

A U.S. national intelligence report claims that Russia's Internet Research Agency, an army of social media trolls created in 2014, was part of Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 U.S. elections. This interference included propaganda campaigns in the media and a troll campaign on social media aimed at undermining public faith in the American democratic process.¹⁶⁷ The Internet Research Agency spent more than \$100,000 on Facebook political ads between June 2015 and May 2017, using 470 fake accounts.¹⁶⁸ Facebook reported to the U.S. Senate that Russian trolls created events on Facebook that were seen by more than 300,000 users be-

tween 2015 and 2017 and that around 62,500 people planned to attend these events. Russian accounts used Facebook to promote pro-Trump rallies, such as "Florida Goes Trump" in August 2016, as well as events in May 2016 protesting the opening of an Islamic Center library.¹⁶⁹ Facebook acknowledged that 146 million users might have viewed Russian misinformation on its platform during the election campaign, while YouTube identified 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter acknowledged 36,746 Russian-linked accounts.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, researchers discovered massive Russian meddling on Twitter in the lead up to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016.¹⁷¹ More than 150,000 Russian-language Twitter accounts posted tens of thousands of messages in English urging British people to vote to leave the European Union in the days prior to the referendum. Most of the messages sought to inflame fears about Muslims and immigrants and to intensify the polarization of the electorate.¹⁷² British Prime Minister Theresa May even publicly accused Moscow of seeking to "weaponise information" and "sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions."¹⁷³ She added that Russia's cyber activities included "deploying its state-run media organizations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images."¹⁷⁴ This phenomenon seems to be spreading and intensifying. In 2017, for example, one year after the U.S. presidential elections, at least 18 other national elections were targeted by social media manipulation and disinformation tactics.¹⁷⁵

164 Schneier, *Data and Goliath*, 63.

165 Laura Rosenberger, "Making Cyberspace Safe for Democracy: The New Landscape of Information Competition," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 3 (May/June 2020): 154, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-13/making-cyberspace-safe-democracy>.

166 Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Click and Elect: How Fake News Helped Donald Trump Win a Real Election," *The Guardian*, Nov. 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/14/fake-news-donald-trump-election-alt-right-social-media-tech-companies>; and Craig Silverman and Jeremy Singer-Vine, "Most Americans Who See Fake News Believe It, New Survey Says," *BuzzFeed News*, Dec. 6, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeed-news.com/article/craigsilverman/fake-news-survey>.

167 Katie Bo Williams, "Declassified Report: Putin Ordered Election Interference to Help Trump," *The Hill*, Jan. 6, 2017, <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/313108-declassified-report-putin-ordered-election-interference-to-help>.

168 Scott Shane and Vinu Goel, "Fake Russian Facebook Accounts Bought \$100,000 in Political Ads," *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/technology/facebook-russian-political-ads.html>; and Adam Satariano, "Facebook Identifies Russia-Linked Misinformation Campaign," *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/business/facebook-misinformation-russia.html>.

169 Donie O'Sullivan, "Russian Trolls Created Facebook Events Seen by More than 300,000 Users," *CNN*, Jan. 26, 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/26/media/russia-trolls-facebook-events/index.html>.

170 *The Economist*, "Threaten Democracy."

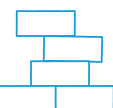
171 Adam Payne, "Russia Used a Network of 150,000 Twitter Accounts to Meddle in Brexit," *Business Insider*, Nov. 15, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-used-twitter-accounts-to-meddle-in-brexit-investigation-shows-2017-11>; and Robert Booth, et al., "Russia Used Hundreds of Fake Accounts to Tweet About Brexit, Data Shows," *The Guardian*, Nov. 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>.

172 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Signs of Russian Meddling in Brexit Referendum," *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html>.

173 "UK Cyber Security Chief Blames Russia for Hacker Attacks," *Business Times*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/uk-cyber-security-chief-blames-russia-for-hacker-attacks>.

174 *Business Times*, "Cyber Security Chief Blames Russia."

175 James Doubek, "How Disinformation And Distortions on Social Media Affected Elections Worldwide," *NPR*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/11/16/564542100/how-disinformation-and-distortions-on-social-media-affected-elections-worldwide>.





According to the U.S. Justice Department, the Internet Research Agency used Facebook's own tools to ensure that its propaganda was as effective as possible. These tools allowed the agency to receive real-time feedback about which ad campaigns were reaching their target audience and which posts were generating the most engagement with viewers.¹⁷⁶ These "active measures" of media manipulation and disinformation, using social media campaigns, fake news, and troll armies, are designed to exploit political division and subvert the democratic process in the United States and Europe, "destabilizing the society and the state."¹⁷⁷

Russian "perception management" during liberal-democratic elections is based on the art of disinformation, or "using false or misleading information and injecting it or getting it credited by legitimate and credible sources."¹⁷⁸ Russia typically manipulates information using social media platforms to sow confusion and disruption. The aim is to create the impression that truth does not exist, thus undermining trust and authority in democracies. Russian manipulators on social media amplify extreme views, conspiracy theories, and doubts about democratic institutions.¹⁷⁹ Russian intervention has found a receptive audience of people who believe that all truths are partial and that there are many legitimate ways to understand or represent an event.¹⁸⁰ Using disinformation and fake news in the public sphere may diminish the role of facts in public life and lead to what Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich call "truth decay."¹⁸¹ Truth is a cornerstone of democracies and what distinguishes them from autocracies. The decaying of truth is dangerous for American democracy.¹⁸²

But not everyone agrees that Russian intervention actually affected the 2016 election process. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow show in their research that exposure to fake news was insufficient to make a difference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and that the effect of fake news was smaller than Trump's margin of victory in key states.¹⁸³ Another group of researchers also claim that the advertisements that Russia reportedly bought on social media were not targeted effectively on battlegrounds states and that the money it spent was dwarfed by the money spent by Trump and Clinton. Although Russia bought thousands of ads, they constituted only a fraction of the overall posts and tweets circulated on social media in the months leading up to the election. Moreover, even if people engaged with Russian-sponsored content, there is still the question of whether and how it affected their voting behavior.¹⁸⁴ Even if Russian influence was not the main reason for Trump's victory in the 2016 election, the spread of fake news via social media platforms deepened liberal societies' distrust of political institutions and distrust of the media in particular.

It can be hard to distinguish fake news and misinformation originating from external forces, such as Russia, from information coming from anti-establishment populist candidates in strong liberal democracies, such as Trump and Sen. Bernie Sanders in the United States and Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom.¹⁸⁵ These populists promote divisive narratives of "them" versus "us," the "pure" against the "corrupt," "the masses" against "the elite," "the people" versus "politicians/parliament/

176 Sheera Frenkel and Katie Benner, "To Stir Discord in 2016, Russians Turned Most Often to Facebook," *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html>; "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media," U.S. Senate, 116th Congress, 1st Session, 2019, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

177 Malcolm Nance, *The Plot to Destroy Democracy: How Putin and His Spies Are Undermining America and Dismantling the West* (New York: Hachette books, 2018), 95–12; and Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 135–50. For the quote, see, "Conceptual Views on the Activity of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Information Space," The Russian Ministry of Defense, 2011, available at the Pir Center, accessed June 24, 2021, <http://www.pircenter.org/en/articles/532-conceptual-views-on-the-activity-of-the-armed-forces-of-the-russian-federation-in-information-space>.

178 Nance, *The Plot to Destroy Democracy*, 95–120.

179 Rosenberger, "Cyberspace," 148.

180 Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*, 151–64.

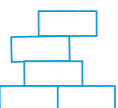
181 Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND corp., 2018), 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2314>.

182 Elias Groll, "Bipartisan Senate Report Undercuts Trump's Account of 2016 Meddling," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/08/bipartisan-senate-report-undercuts-trumps-account-of-2016-meddling>.

183 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 211–36, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>.

184 John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1–11.

185 Alexandre Bovet and Hernán A. Makse, "Influence of Fake News in Twitter During the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Nature Communications*, no. 10 (January 2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-07761-2>; and Lucia Graves, "How Trump Weaponized 'Fake News' for His Own Political Ends," *Pacific Standard*, Feb. 26, 2018, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/how-trump-weaponized-fake-news-for-his-own-political-ends>.



judges.”¹⁸⁶ These narratives deepen the polarization that already exists in these countries. The Fragile States Index shows that the Group Grievance and Factionalized Elites indicators in America and the United Kingdom doubled in the last 12 years.¹⁸⁷ This polarization may lead to brinkmanship or gridlock, making the country less functional. According to Nate Haken, in this situation of fragmentation “the usual brokers (media, state institutions, opinion leaders, religious and community leaders) lose relevance and legitimacy, making consensus-building difficult with no shared vision or context to build from and organize around.”¹⁸⁸

When populists mix divisive speech with fake news and disinformation, they further erode people’s trust in democratic institutions, processes, and the media. However, strong liberal democracies are still unlikely to undergo the same democratic decay experienced by some weak liberal regimes. While they are constrained in the means they can employ to counter the malign use of social

Even if Russian influence was not the main reason for Trump’s victory in the 2016 election, the spread of fake news via social media platforms deepened liberal societies’ distrust of political institutions and distrust of the media in particular.

media, their checks and balances are more stable and robust than in weak liberal democracies. Their greater resilience is grounded in a long-standing democratic tradition, and their checks and balances are less affected by recent actions, especially when the support for democracy among citizens is still high.¹⁸⁹

Social media platforms can be used to weaken strong liberal-democratic regimes. These regimes derive their power from liberal-democratic institutions, which need constant attention and reinforcement in order to serve as effective bulwarks of

democracy. It is also important to keep the media free, unbiased, and devoid of fake news and disinformation. The spread of fake news and disinformation on social media as part of malign “perception management” orchestrated by domestic populists and external forces may weaken liberal-democratic regimes. Liberal democracies are restricted in the means they can employ to counter the malign use of social media. For now, the checks and balances of liberal-democratic regimes remain a solid protection against domestic populist opponents and malign external forces.

Counterfactual Reasoning

The causal model presented in the article proposes that social media platforms are used by three types of actors — domestic opposition, external forces, and the governing regime — for political purposes, and that their overall influence on the political system is determined both by the state’s capacity and the type of regime. One may ask whether these same outcomes — destabilizing, radicalizing, intensifying, and weakening — would still take place without social media. The problem is that exposure to social media is so extensive that it is almost impossible to find examples where an uprising took place without social media. Nevertheless, we will mention

some counterfactual reasoning related to weak authoritarian and weak democratic countries found in our research.

According to one study, during the Arab spring in 2011, internet penetration was higher in the countries that were experiencing unrest than in those that weren’t.¹⁹⁰ Internet users made up just 1.1 percent of Iraqis and 3.4 percent of Afghans in 2010, for example, compared to over 21 percent of the population in Egypt, 34 percent in Tunisia, and 88 percent in Bahrain. In the first three months of 2011, the number of Facebook users in the Arab

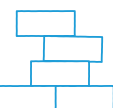
186 Matthew Flinders, “UK Election 2019: This Is What Populism Looks Like When Done by the British,” *The Conversation*, Nov. 12, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/uk-election-2019-this-is-what-populism-looks-like-when-done-by-the-british-126733>.

187 J.J. Messner de Latour, et al., “Fragile States Index 2020.”

188 Nate Haken, “Democracies Under Pressure,” *The Fund of Peace*, May 10, 2020, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2020/05/10/democracies-under-pressure/>.

189 Richard Wike and Shannon Schumacher, “Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them not Always Strong,” *Pew Research Center*, Feb. 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>.

190 Ekaterina Stepanova, “The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the ‘Arab Spring,’” *PONARS*, May 2011, http://pircenter.org/kosdata/page_doc/p2594_2.pdf.





world increased by 30 percent compared to an 18 percent growth over the same period in 2010.¹⁹¹ Countries where major civil movements have occurred have shown exponential growth in social media use during and after those movements. Still, it is hard to say that social media's absence decreased the probability of online mobilization campaigns against the governing regime taking form. Some of the unrest was also fueled by traditional media outlets, as discussed earlier.¹⁹² In addition, some protest movements were constrained by the ability of governments to block internet access, as was the case in Iran.

When it comes to Brazil, the percentage of people using the internet grew from 40 percent in 2009 to 70 percent in 2018, while support for democracy dropped from a peak level of 55 percent to 34 percent during the same time period.¹⁹³ Only 15 percent of Brazilians said they were satisfied with democracy in 2018 (a drop of 35 points compared to 2014).¹⁹⁴ A survey conducted in August 2018 by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics showed that only 25 percent of citizens trusted the federal government and only 18 percent trusted Congress.¹⁹⁵ These numbers may indicate that Brazil had been radicalizing and drifting away from democracy for several years in relation to the growth in use of social media. But several researchers question the assertion that social media platforms are solely responsible for the deterioration of Brazil's democracy, pointing to the many years of government corruption, rising crime, and economic recession.¹⁹⁶

The above examples show that social media platforms did affect the political system in several countries, but that there may have been other causes as well. Nevertheless, as Patrícia Campos Mello claims, "the use of WhatsApp and other internet platforms amplifies whatever a political group says in an exponential way ... If you find

the right conditions in a country, they are really dangerous tools to undermine democracy and manipulate public debate."¹⁹⁷

The Way Ahead

This article looked at four case studies to illustrate the varying effects of social media platforms depending on who is using them — domestic opposition, external actors, or the governing regime — the regime type of the country, and the state's capacity. In weak authoritarian states, social media can help dissidents to communicate and organize more easily (the destabilizing effect), while strong authoritarian states can use it as a suppressive tool to exploit the knowledge aggregated on the different social media platforms (the intensifying effect). When used to disseminate distorted information and fake news in strong liberal democracies, social media platforms can erode democratic institutions (the weakening effect). These platforms can facilitate populist leaders' rise in weak liberal states (the radicalizing effect), making them more susceptible to turning into an illiberal or even authoritarian regime.

The malign use of various inherent characteristics of social media platforms — such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, a low entry bar, aggregate knowledge about people, the lack of fact-checking, information cascades, and the automatic recommendation algorithm — may lead to the erosion of democratic principles and institutions in liberal democracies across the world.

Although the Russian intervention during the 2016 U.S. elections caught the attention of American policymakers and the American public, what has been less discussed is social media's impact on other liberal democracies and what that might mean for U.S. national security and the liberal

191 Fadi Salem and Racha Mourtada, "Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter," *Arab Social Media Report 1*, no. 2 (January 2011), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281748504_Civil_Movements_The_Impact_of_Facebook_and_Twitter/link/578cb44608ae7a588ef3b2d9/download.

192 Mohamed Ben Moussa, "From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2013): 47–68, <http://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.166>.

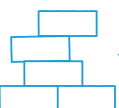
193 "Individuals Using the Internet (% of population) - Brasil," The World Bank, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=BR>; and Statista, "Level of Support for Democracy in Brazil from 2008 to 2018."

194 Bennett Institute for Public Policy, *Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020*.

195 Jamildo Melo, "Confiança Do Brasileiro Nas Instituições é a Mais Baixa Desde 2009," *Blog de Jamildo*, <https://m.logs.ne10.uol.com.br/jamildo/2018/08/11/confianca-do-brasileiro-nas-instituicoes-e-a-mais-baixa-desde-2009/>.

196 Eduardo Suárez, "You Can't Blame Platforms Alone, but in a Country with the Right Conditions They Can Undermine Democracy and Public Debate," Reuters Institute, June 4, 2021, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/you-cant-blame-platforms-alone-country-right-conditions-they-can-undermine-democracy>; Benjamin H. Bradlow, "Rightist Bolsonaro Takes Office in Brazil, Promising Populist Change to Angry Voters," *The Conversation*, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/rightist-bolsonaro-takes-office-in-brazil-promising-populist-change-to-angry-voters-106303>; and Zack Beauchamp, "Social Media Is Rotting Democracy from Within," *Vox*, Jan. 22, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/22/18177076/social-media-facebook-far-right-authoritarian-populism>.

197 Eduardo Suárez, "You Can't Blame Platforms Alone."



international order. The malign use of social media platforms is only one reason for the disruption of that order. Other factors include the 2008 financial crisis, job losses related to changes in trade and technology, and the increased flow of migrants and refugees, among others.¹⁹⁸ But when it comes to the abuse of social media platforms, America should not wait for social media companies to fix the problem themselves.¹⁹⁹

In order to prevent liberal democracies from becoming illiberal or autocratic regimes and potentially drifting into the Russian or Chinese spheres of influence, it is crucial that the United States and other democracies take action today. Maintaining the current liberal international order requires keeping the internet an American project led by private companies. This means countering Russia's and China's efforts to gain a greater voice in internet governance and to promote their agenda of cyber sovereignty, under which government control and internet regulations would replace a global and open internet.²⁰⁰

U.S. policymakers cannot rely solely on social media companies to implement policies and technological means to decrease the flow of hate speech and fake news on their platforms.²⁰¹ There are a number of possible approaches to this problem that have been suggested. One possible solution that the U.S. government can pursue is to reintroduce competition into this sector of the market by passing antimonopoly legislation in

order to dilute the concentrated power of social media platforms.²⁰² This approach views social media platforms as essential infrastructure (like public utilities) needing specific regulation.²⁰³ These regulatory tools would ensure that the infrastructure “serves the public’s needs — rather than incentivizing exploitative or exclusionary uses for private profit.”²⁰⁴ Relatedly, policymakers could consider breaking up or decentralizing these corporations.²⁰⁵ Other options are more concentrated on users and the data that these companies own. One possibility is to make the companies declare “platform bankruptcy,” whereby social media platforms would reset their entire user and group follower counts to zero and rebuild communities from the ground up, with the platforms’ current rules in place.²⁰⁶ Another approach is to make these corporations collect less data and adopt practices to treat that data in a “manner commensurate with its value.”²⁰⁷ The problem is that none of these solutions is a “silver bullet” and American legislators may risk trampling on the constitutional right to free speech that they are trying to preserve.²⁰⁸

Ultimately, the best way to counter the spread of authoritarianism is to defend and restore democracy: the rule of law, fair elections, free speech, and freedom of the press.²⁰⁹ The United States should join other like-minded democratic governments in asserting principles to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic, and objectively sourced information. This can be

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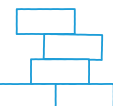
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done by securing free, independent, and reliable information and defending those who produce it.²¹⁰ One such effort to impose democratic safeguards on digital information and communications platforms was made in September 2019 by 30 countries (not including the United States) signing the International Partnership on Information and Democracy.²¹¹ But government legislation has its challenges and should be recognized as a potentially dangerous tool. One challenge of this approach is identifying who gets to decide what is objective and reliable. Another challenge is demonstrated in the Network Enforcement Act proposed in Germany, which has come under criticism for practically legitimizing a model of online censorship that was subsequently copied by 13 governments around the world, most of which do not share Germany's commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.²¹² An extreme measure suggested by Richard Clarke and Rob Knake is for the United States and its allies to create a digital bloc — an “Internet Freedom League” — in which data, services, and products can flow freely. Countries that do not respect freedom of expression or that engage in disruptive activity would be excluded from this internet realm.²¹³

Whatever action U.S. policymakers decide to take, it is imperative that they act quickly. Disinformation and fake news will continue to materialize on social media platforms in new ways that cannot be easily countered. Without taking strict and prompt action, democracies around the world will continue suffering the weakening and radicalizing effects of social media that some of them already suffer today. 

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