

Social Media and Democracy: An Investigation Into the Role of Social Media Platforms in  
Election Interference in the United States

Nicole Cheng

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Professor T. Edgar

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# Introduction

With the advent of social media, people began to live more and more of their lives in the digital space, rather than just through face-to-face interactions. With the adoption of social media, we were given the means to communicate with one another far more easily, transcending physical and temporal barriers that had once hindered interaction. Social media platforms allowed people from all over the world to be connected with relative ease, thus creating a global social network. We then gained the ability to share our thoughts and opinions with a wide audience and have public online discussions. Through such discussions, we could get into a fervorous debate with those who opposed us, and we could group ourselves with those with similar sentiments to ours. This aspect of social media is extremely to us, as people are infatuated with both drama and validation.

Stirring up drama is exciting and gets the blood pumping, and people are most passionate when they are defending themselves, which comes from our natural survival instincts of self-preservation. On the other hand, we seek validation of those around us, because even with the pursuit of our own self-interest, we are inevitably pack animals. This means, on social media, we not only wish to win an argument, but we also want others to agree with us and support us. This is inherent in human nature and precedes social media. We want people to match our sentiments and passions, because "[m]an, [...] conscious of his own weakness, and of the need which he has for the assistance of others, rejoices whenever he observes that they adopt his own passions, because he is then assured of that assistance"<sup>1</sup>. It is through appealing to these basic human emotions that social media has been able to gain such a foothold in our lives. Having touched almost the entire world, social media has truly transformed what it means to be a

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. 6th ed., 1790, p. 9.

member of society, in that, people now interact with one another in such different ways and the digital world has created more societies and communities than could have ever been possible without the introduction to social media.

Most of us have seen firsthand how social media is extremely prevalent in our lives, because of the conveniences and pleasures that it affords us in our everyday lives. On the other hand, however, social media has great potential for harm, and most of us have unfortunately also seen this in action. Social media is far from perfect, and especially for those of us who grew up side-by-side with social media, we have experienced the experimental pitfalls of social media. Ranging from toxic media culture and cyberbullying to organizing literal revolution and undermining democracies, we have seen how much damage that social media can do to not only individual people, but quite literally, nations and communities. One particular instance in which social media played a large role in causing harm to my own communities that resonates the most with me is the election interference during the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Moreover, this event unveiled other weaknesses in our treatment of social media companies from the perspectives of social media companies, users, and government. These areas of potential harm remain relevant today, as we are still trying to navigate best practices on social media, as well as the policies that should govern social media platforms and their users.

## Statement of Intent

Throughout the semester, I have been learning about and investigating the trajectory that technology has followed in recent decades. Surely, technology has changed very drastically the ways in which we do everyday tasks, but it has also transformed our systems of communication, sentiment, and politics. With the devastating social media involvement in the 2016 presidential election, we were given a wake-up call to change the ways in which we engage with social media platforms. We have learned to be more mindful of what information we make available to the public web, to check the sources and validity of news we see on our social media feeds, and to approach one another with more skepticism and critique. Social media companies have reacted by hiring thousands of more content moderators, by dedicating resources to fact-checking algorithms, and by adjusting their content policies.

In this project, I explain what occurred in 2016 that enabled foreign interference in the presidential election and how different stakeholders, such as the government, social media companies, and users responded. I will examine how public opinion and sentiment shifted between the two landmark presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. I will also investigate what steps social media companies have taken, their motivations for doing so, their effectiveness, and the change effected after 2016. Through this project, I hope to learn more about what needs to be done by different parties in order to ensure that social media companies are held accountable to their actions, because their purpose is to connect the world and provide platforms for open communication — not undermine our democracy and spread fake news. Additionally, I hope to learn the ways in which we, as social media platform users, can create better online communities to fill in the gaps. I also will learn about what policies are currently in place, as well as what policy reforms should be done in order to protect users and democracy.

I see this project culminating in a paper containing: (1) the background information and an exposé of what happened leading up to the 2016 presidential election; (2) what happened after 2016 in terms of public sentiment shifts, legislation reforms, and social media companies' responses; and (3) what still needs to be done by the aforementioned three parties. This is extremely important because our nation's foundation is our democracy. In the past few years, we have seen increased violence, polarization, hurt, and distrust in both the system and each other (think about the role that social media companies have had in mass disinformation, inciting revolutions, encouraging race wars, and spreading hate speech). There is no doubt that we live in an extremely broken country, and although there were some changes made after 2016, those reforms were a mere bandaid for greater problems that will inevitably present themselves. This project seeks to gain a deep understanding of social media's roles in the United States democracy and to make recommendations (and calls to action) for what else must be done.

## Social Impact Implications

Communities have grown increasingly polarized, largely thanks to social media companies and their money-making algorithms. Facebook, for example, after accusations that their platform was creating a more divisive world, launched an internal investigation to see whether this was true — and it was. Having found statistically significant evidence that their news feed algorithm was, indeed, polarizing their user base, they halted the investigation and threw out their findings<sup>2</sup>. Facebook decided that it was important that they continue to use their brilliant algorithm to generate revenue and foot traffic, despite the negative impact that this type of content curation has on their users. This profit-first model and mentality within several large social media companies raises concerns about the future of our communities as people spend more and more time on social media, being fed stories and posts deliberately selected to rile them up and stir up conflict. Sure, people are being brought closer together in one sense, but communities are being torn apart in this world war of ideas<sup>3</sup>.

The possibility of social media being a platform to instigate hate and violence is no longer just a hypothetical. In fact, it became evident a decade ago in the early 2010s when Facebook played a crucial role in Arab Spring, a series of anti-government rebellions in multiple Arab countries. Egypt's revolution was catalyzed by Wael Ghonim when he started a Facebook page exposing the Egyptian government's cruel wrongdoings and gained serious attention<sup>4</sup>. There is no doubt that social media platforms are extremely powerful tools that, when leveraged

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<sup>2</sup> Seetharaman, Jeff Horwitz and Deepa. "Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive." *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2020, sec. Tech.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-1159050>

<sup>3</sup> Bump, Philip. "Analysis | The Partisan Divide Keeps Growing." *Washington Post*, October 11, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/11/partisan-divide-keeps-growing/>.

<sup>4</sup> Vargas, Jose Antonio. "Spring Awakening." *The New York Times*, February 17, 2012, sec. Books.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html>.

correctly, can bring about literal revolution. There was of course retaliation both in the physical world and on social media, and opposing groups became more vocal and divided. With the potential to have such grave impact on communities, there must be stringent requirements for social media companies, governments, and users to follow.

In Tunisia, a country that relatively recently adopted widespread internet and social media use, rebellions utilized a plethora of social media platforms as tools to spread word of the prevailing injustice and to coordinate protests. They made a fake website and Twitter account for the Tunisian prime minister, they used Skype and Mumble to communicate, and they used Foursquare and Facebook for location-sharing and -tracking<sup>5</sup>. While social media allows people to be more connected to one another by providing means of communicating and sharing and reacting to content, the content that people are seeing may be intentionally sensationalist or even fake. This enables conspiracy theories to propagate and shape people's opinions, and the clash of truth leads to general distrust and hits to morale.

In the United States, the increasingly large divide between the political left and right has led to online communities filled with hate, fear, and violence. Especially with the highly contentious 2020 presidential election that we just had, the two sides of the political spectrum have been extremely passionate and vocal in their fights. In fact, it seems that "American polarization, fear, and rage have grown so great that a recent poll showed that Americans believe we're two-thirds of the way to a civil war"<sup>6</sup>. Political violence has relatively recently become a reality, and when people turn to violence rather than other means of mediation, it is an indicator of a failing political system. It either means that the person in charge, in this case the president, is

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<sup>5</sup> Rosen, Rebecca J. "So, Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?" *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/09/so-was-facebook-responsible-for-the-arab-spring-after-all/244314/>.

<sup>6</sup> French, David. "The Growing Danger of Political Violence Threatens to Destabilize America." *Time*, October 14, 2020. <https://time.com/5899579/danger-american-political-violence/>.



unable to control the outbursts of violence, or that they are not even trying to address it. The latter is what we have been facing over the past four years.

In our communities, fear of physical harm has plagued us, clearly affecting socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and those who preach more liberal ideals. However, it soon became apparent that the president not only did not do anything to counteract it, but used it to their advantage<sup>7</sup>. With the calls for violence that have propagated throughout social media, there is no wonder why people are inspired to take up their arms and harm their fellow Americans. They no longer view themselves as part of one country, but rather, have been primed by social media to believe that they are to be mortal enemies and that they can never reconcile. This is a result of people and their own actions, but it is enabled and exacerbated by social media platforms that intentionally feed users this divisive content that gets people the most riled up. Through their algorithms, social media companies end up spreading around very widely controversial posts and even propaganda and fake news, and since these posts muster up the most foot traffic and user engagement, these are the posts that companies *want* to promote, knowing that this will generate profits for them. As a result, with the already strong headed nature of human beings, the addition of social media's ability to curate divisive content for users further divides what used to be the *United* States of America. With the loss of our mutual trust and morale, the nation will inevitably continue to crumble — and we must fix it before it is simply too late to salvage our nation.

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<sup>7</sup> Fausset, Richard. “‘It Has to Stop’: Georgia Election Official Lashes Trump.” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2020, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/us/politics/georgia-election-trump.html>.

## Goals

With this project, I wish to expand the knowledge of all those who read it. I am writing this paper for an audience that is seeking to learn more about their own role in our digital democracy. I hope that those who read this would understand what happened during the 2016 presidential election with respect to foreign interference and how this interference made an impact through social media platforms. By exposing the shortcomings of how social media platforms deal with content, of what policies are in place governing social media platforms, and of the way in which users interact with social media and its content, we can gain insight into what our next steps must be to protect the sanctity of online communities and our democracy. Through this uncovering of how each stakeholder played a role in the 2016 presidential election interference events, I want to reveal and highlight the importance of our own vigilance in our virtual communities and in our futures. I urge my peers who go on to work at social media platforms and in government to hold onto these lessons in their day-to-day work to ensure that their work is being guided by moral principles and with the goal of strengthening our communities and democracy. I want to imprint on the broader user base of social media the realization that social media companies often intentionally curate content that will provoke us and get us to engage with others, for better or for worse (it is usually the latter) — and so, we should be mindful of how we communicate with people on public platforms, and we should also be cautious of what news we are consuming. In other words, we must practice social media literacy to protect ourselves and each other from the dangers of social media.

## The 2016 Presidential Election

There was suspected to be collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian actors during the 2016 election. Investigations were thus launched, and they unveiled that the Russian Internet Research Agency did, indeed, attempt to influence the 2016 election especially through social media platforms<sup>8</sup>. Russia, in this way, tried to undermine the democratic system, and the investigations found that the Trump campaign had encouraged the IRA to leak certain documents which would create even more American distrust. Additionally, the Trump campaign had been in contact with WikiLeaks throughout 2016 and afterward, whose direct messages with Donald Trump Jr. seemed pro-Russia and pro-Trump<sup>9</sup>. It seems that the American intelligence community generally agrees that the Russian government primarily used WikiLeaks as a means of propagating their hacked — and thus, illegally obtained — materials<sup>10</sup>. These materials were also strategically leaked in a manner that clearly benefited the Trump campaign and hurt the Clinton campaign. For example, when WikiLeaks received anti-Trump information, they contacted Trump Jr. so that their campaign could investigate and handle it as they saw fit<sup>11</sup>. WikiLeaks also provided Trump Jr. with resources to better disseminate Clinton leaks, which Trump Jr. utilized in a public tweet a couple of days after their exchange<sup>12</sup>.

In another instance, WikiLeaks released some hacked emails from the Clinton campaign manager's — John Podesta's — personal email account “less than an hour after the Washington

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<sup>8</sup> Mueller, Robert S. “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ioffe, Julia. “The Secret Correspondence Between Donald Trump Jr. and WikiLeaks.” *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-secret-correspondence-between-donald-trump-jr-and-wikileaks/545738/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Mueller, Robert S. “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>, 60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Post released the Access Hollywood tape, in which Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women”<sup>13</sup>. This diverted attention from the unflattering news about Trump to Clinton instead. As news and scandals often infiltrate social media platforms in waves, the Trump campaign (and its supporters) clearly took advantage of this to cover up reports that would expose Trump by instead flooding the internet with a different scandal that they spent a lot of time and human capital to publicize and disseminate. By leveraging the way that social media platforms’ news feed algorithms work, the Trump campaign was able to strategically leak news such that the most circulated posts would be the anti-Clinton ones, thus burying Trump scandals under the troves of posts that exist on such platforms.

In addition to uncanny timing of news releases, the Trump campaign also took advantage of the fake news spheres of social media. It was found that the IRA’s Facebook accounts reached up to 126 million people. Just between January 2015 and August 2017, Facebook uncovered over 80,000 Facebook posts created by 470 IRA-controlled Facebook accounts<sup>14</sup>. Employees of the IRA created accounts and groups pretending to be linked to activist and political organizations, seeking to feign legitimacy and influence Americans. This caused political and social polarization, and conspiracy theories and disinformation became widespread.

The IRA and other foreign actors involved in the swaying of the 2016 presidential election often had offices of people dedicated to spreading certain types of news stories, often through fake accounts. There are a couple of approaches that they can take. The main two are: (1) creating higher-quality, “believable” accounts that build up a social network and more gradually disseminate certain information and stories, and (2) creating lower-quality accounts en

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<sup>13</sup> Ioffe, Julia. “The Secret Correspondence Between Donald Trump Jr. and WikiLeaks.” *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-secret-correspondence-between-donald-trump-jr-and-wikileaks/545738/>.

<sup>14</sup> Mueller, Robert S. “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, March 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>, 15.

masse, such as an army of bots, to flood platforms with posts, hoping that some of them survive and gain traction. During the 2016 election, we saw both of these methods in use. However, the most impactful posts and activity came from the former, where foreign adversary-controlled accounts pretended to be an important American figure, often political leaders, activists, or someone else who emanated legitimacy and authority. Some of these fake accounts gained popularity and quite a follower base, and they were ultimately able to use real users to spread their agenda. It was found at the beginning of 2018 that Twitter had found 3,814 IRA-controlled accounts on their platform<sup>15</sup>. As a consequence, Twitter had to notify about 1.4 million people that were thought to have interacted with an IRA-controlled account<sup>16</sup>. Even though these posts and accounts were eventually removed from the various social media platforms that they had infiltrated, the damage was already done. The damage to American morale, trust, and knowledge had been done, and there was little that could be done to reverse it before the 2016 presidential election. As a matter of fact, we are still working on it, and as we try to attempt to recuperate what was lost during 2016, we are constantly being bombarded with even more content and online interactions that are designed to manipulate us.

On several levels, the Russian actors involved in the 2016 election interference achieved their goals. Their candidate of choice got elected. Americans grew increasingly polarized. Their social media presence reached millions of Americans. Americans lost faith in the nation's democratic process. The events in 2016 cultivated a deep feeling of distrust amongst Americans — one that we believe that we are still trying to recover from. And this was exactly what our foreign adversaries wished to achieve. To us, this is the crumbling of a democracy; to the IRA, this was just a game. It seems like, to them, this was fun — being able to control masses of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 15.

Americans, as if they were puppet masters. They took pride in their ability to get Americans to unknowingly push their agenda. The Mueller Report notes a blatant example of the IRA's flippant attitude toward this:

In May 2016, IRA employees, claiming to be U.S. social activists and administrators of Facebook groups, recruited U.S. persons to hold signs (including one in front of the White House) that read "Happy 55th Birthday Dear Boss," as an homage to Prigozhin (whose 55th birthday was on June 1, 2016).<sup>17</sup>

For context, "Prigozhin is a wealthy Russian businessman who served as the head of Concord," a company that funded the IRA<sup>18</sup>. The IRA was conscious of exactly what they were doing and how much power they had over Americans. These fake accounts had gained trust amongst some Americans to the extent that they could be so explicit as to have Americans hold up "Happy Birthday" signs for one of the IRA's funders. Sure, the Americans maybe did not know what they were holding up these signs for or who "Dear Boss" was, but that is perhaps even more concerning. Without doing their due diligence, these Americans were willing to hold these signs in front of the White House — and we learn later that similar techniques could be used to get Americans to take up arms and spread the calls to violence.

Eventually, the effects of social media in our day-to-day lives became frightening, and we realized how dangerous these platforms really were. We began to recognize the ways that we and our communities have been hurt because of the way that we have interacted with social media platforms. In response to this series of shared trauma, people on both sides of the political spectrum have put social media platforms and Section 230 under increased scrutiny because neither seem to be as effective as they should be. Social media companies responded in various ways. Twitter censored illegally-obtained content and provided fact checking, while Facebook

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 16.

has taken a far more neutral stance on the content of their sites. Facebook refuses to step in to moderate their content, but they did update their terms and policies for posts and advertisements that were specifically catered to the prevention of election interference<sup>19</sup>. How effective these measures are is still unknown. Almost all major social media companies in the months leading up to the 2020 election did encourage voting among their users. It seems that the efforts of social media companies were enough to get us over the top this time around, but there is clearly still more work to be done.

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<sup>19</sup> Horwitz, Robert McMillan, Dustin Volz and Jeff. "Twitter and Facebook Contend With Concerns Over Election Interference, Censorship." *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2020, sec. Tech. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-twitter-and-facebook-treated-new-york-post-articles-as-possible-election-interference-11602857651>.

## Reactions to the 2016 Election Interference

While Facebook and other social media giants have worked hard to correct their mistakes during the 2016 presidential election by trying to remove fake user accounts and encouraging people to vote, there is still much to do. Facebook still faces the issue of being a platform filled with deception and hate speech, and this needs to be changed. Several large platforms, notably Twitter and Youtube, have taken concrete steps to remove accounts for policy violations, conspiracy involvement, and encouragement of violence<sup>20</sup>. However, a group of twenty state attorney generals decided to call out Facebook for not doing its due diligence in combating the disinformation, discrimination, and harassment on the platform<sup>21</sup>. This came as a reaction to the wave of disinformation and controversial material surrounding the 2020 presidential election, the pandemic, and the Black Lives Matters movement.

When Trump posted "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" this past summer, multiple companies such as Twitter labeled such posts with a content warning<sup>22</sup>. However, Facebook decided to not remove or label this post, even though it clearly encouraged violence, going against their Community Standards, which is a sanitized, user-facing version of the internal company Implementation Standards, and says, "We remove content that glorifies violence"<sup>23</sup>. After being criticized by several politicians, civil rights leaders, and users, Facebook has begun to flag and remove "violating posts from politicians," particularly posts that "incite

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<sup>20</sup> Alba, Davey. "Facebook Must Better Police Online Hate, State Attorneys General Say." *The New York Times*, August 5, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/technology/facebook-online-hate.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Lerman, Rachel, and Craig Timberg. "Bowing to Pressure, Facebook Will Start Labeling Violating Posts from Politicians. But Critics Say It's Not Enough." *Washington Post*. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/26/facebook-hate-speech-policies/>.

<sup>23</sup> Marantz, Andrew. "Why Facebook Can't Fix Itself." *The New Yorker*. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/19/why-facebook-cant-fix-itself>.



violence or attempt to suppress voting"<sup>24</sup>. This marked a change in Facebook's policy, with its "new willingness to affix warning labels on problematic posts," even though Mark Zuckerberg had brushed off this problem for a long time and Facebook generates more revenue from controversial, melodramatic posts<sup>25</sup>.

Social media companies like Facebook that have claimed to take the “hands-off” approach to content regulation often use two main arguments: (1) the First Amendment protects users’ rights to express themselves however they want, and (2) Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act gives social media companies (as well as other internet sites) the right to moderate content as they see fit and not be held liable for anything posted by a third party. While it is true that American citizens are given the freedom of speech and expression, an important point to underline is that the First Amendment is provided to *American citizens*, not to foreign adversaries; this is to say, perhaps things posted by American citizens can be protected by the Constitution, but it certainly does not extend to just anyone. Furthermore, the First Amendment protects free speech — not deception and disinformation<sup>26</sup>. Not only is disinformation not protected by the First Amendment, but in its extreme form, can also be arguably considered to be a form of treason, as defined in the Constitution to be “levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort”<sup>27</sup>. While this is admittedly a stretch, if social media platforms are intentionally aiding foreign adversaries by giving them a platform to spread their propaganda, we enter a gray area of whether these social media companies should be held liable for these “third party damages.”

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<sup>24</sup> Lerman, Rachel, and Craig Timberg. “Bowing to Pressure, Facebook Will Start Labeling Violating Posts from Politicians. But Critics Say It’s Not Enough.” *Washington Post*. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/26/facebook-hate-speech-policies/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> “Martha Minow — The Changing Ecosystem of News and Challenges for Freedom of the Press - YouTube.” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9WsRgS7CCM&ab\\_channel=WatsonInstituteForInternationalandPublicAffairs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9WsRgS7CCM&ab_channel=WatsonInstituteForInternationalandPublicAffairs).

<sup>27</sup> National Archives. “The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription,” November 4, 2015. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

Social media giants also love to hide behind Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which was signed by President Clinton in 1996 and in essence allows social media companies to choose how much they wish to moderate their content<sup>28</sup>. They are able to moderate and censor heavily, but they also are able to sit back and let whatever gets posted be posted and not be held liable for this content, as long as the company itself does not create the content<sup>29</sup>. In this way, sites that allow the publication of user-created content are able to choose how they wish to regulate their sites. At one end of the spectrum, they can censor and scrutinize everything, making them practically the arbiter of truth on their site, or they can be a wallflower and only remove posts that they must, such as content explicitly banned such as child pornography.

Following 2016, trust in social media platforms plummeted, from both users and policymakers. Originally, the Republican stance on Section 230 was that it was crucial to make way for free speech, while the Democrat stance was that it was too lenient. However, with the role that social media played in 2016, both sides have become more adamant about effecting some change to the policy, which was signed over two decades ago, when the internet was just becoming popularized<sup>30</sup>. The two political parties are approaching this change from very different angles, though. Democrats generally believe that the law enables hate, election meddling, and disinformation. Republicans, on the other hand, think that allowing social media platforms to handpick what to censor hurts their party, since these companies tend to be more liberal, and in their moderation, censor Republican ideas and candidates. While the two major

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<sup>28</sup> “47 U.S. Code § 230 - Protection for Private Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material.” Cornell Law School. Legal Information Institute. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230>.

<sup>29</sup> Masnick, Mike. "Hello! You've Been Referred Here Because You're Wrong About Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act." TechDirt, June 23, 2020. <https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20200531/23325444617/hello-youve-been-referred-here-because-youre-wrong-ab-out-section-230-communications-decency-act.shtml>.

<sup>30</sup> Wakabayashi, Daisuke. “Legal Shield for Social Media Is Targeted by Trump.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/business/section-230-internet-speech.html>.

political parties are both pushing for Section 230 reform, they are doing so for very different reasons, and whether they will find consensus in how it should be reformed is still up in the air.

In addition to policymakers, regular users of social media platforms also believe that social media companies should take on more responsibility for the content that circulates their sites. As most Americans get their news from social media, the fact that a lot of this news could be fabricated is disheartening. So many Americans were entangled with all of the fake news that spread through social media, and finding out that they were being deceived felt like betrayal and devastation<sup>31</sup>. Although a significant portion of Americans have extremely limited knowledge about Section 230, many agree that it should be modified in one way or another to ensure that we do not repeat what happened in 2016.

Social media companies benefit from Section 230, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg would likely go to the ends of the Earth to defend it. As some social media companies profit highly off of fake, sensationalist content and stand on a platform of allowing for pure, unfiltered free speech, Section 230 is a godsend. However, some social media companies like Twitter have taken an opposing stance<sup>32</sup>. Perhaps it comes from a fundamentally different moral compass or from an attempt to preserve their reputation, but Twitter has taken a firm position against allowing fake news to remain on their site. Twitter has been proactive in labeling posts with warnings that they deem may contain false information. Rather than defend Section 230 like some of its social media counterparts have done, Twitter has actually requested that Facebook and similar companies be held more accountable to the content on their sites<sup>33</sup>. This plea comes

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<sup>31</sup> Goldsmith, Belinda. "Trust the News? Most People Don't, Social Media Even More Suspect - Study." Reuters, June 22, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-media-news-survey-idUSKBN19D015>.

<sup>32</sup> Horwitz, Robert McMillan, Dustin Volz and Jeff. "Twitter and Facebook Contend With Concerns Over Election Interference, Censorship." *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2020, sec. Tech. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-twitter-and-facebook-treated-new-york-post-articles-as-possible-election-interference-11602857651>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

at least in part from the fact that the diminishing trust in social media companies has hurt Twitter, even though they have generally done their part in taking down fake accounts as fast as possible and preventing the spread of fake news and illegally-obtained content.

We begin to see more division amongst social media companies with regards to Section 230, as some companies abuse their protections, when really, the law was made with the intention that social media companies would still do their due diligence in maintaining their sites' integrity<sup>34</sup>. Other companies, however, are not taking advantage of the law — at least not to the extent that would constitute abuse. Thus, we see some contention as to what social media platforms' duties are when it comes to being platforms of sharing information and content amongst billions of people. Regardless, most major social media platforms, whatever their motive may have been, spent a good deal of time and effort in the time ramping up to the 2020 election encouraging people to vote; even Facebook ran ads all over the place, perhaps in an attempt to rectify their wrongdoings four years prior. Twitter has taken this a step further, hiding tweets behind warning labels and limiting user engagement with questionable posts, especially around election time, to prevent outbreaks of mass hysteria and sensationalism<sup>35</sup>.

There are calls for change coming from various stakeholders, albeit for a very diverse set of reasons. Changes have been taking place in how users interact with social media, in how social media platforms regulate their content, and even in how policymakers view Section 230. Nonetheless, the lack of consensus with regards to how to handle this new era of social media governance still poses an obstacle for us, and we will have to continue to work on ways to maintain the benefits of social media, without compromising our democracy and wellbeing.

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<sup>34</sup> Sevanian, A. M. (2014). Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act: A "Good Samaritan" Law Without the Requirement of Acting as a "Good Samaritan". *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, 21(1). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7g87m864>

<sup>35</sup> "US Election: Twitter Hides Trump Tweet about 'disappearing' Lead." *BBC News*, November 4, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54809165>.

## Recommendations

As it stands, social media companies (along with other websites) are protected by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which acts as a "good Samaritan" law. Under this policy, sites take on the role of distributors of content, rather than publishers. This is to say, sites can choose to moderate their sites to remove certain content, but will not be held liable as moderators for other content. This allows platforms to remove stuff like nudity, without having to worry about verifying posts and removing fake news. Although this section is known as a "good Samaritan" law, it protects even those who are not acting as "good Samaritans"<sup>36</sup>.

Since social media companies do not really need to worry about the legal repercussions of content posted by third-party end users, some platforms like Facebook intentionally leave up sensationalist content<sup>37</sup>. Ashok Chandwaney recently quit their job as a Facebook engineer, because they could no longer bear to work at an organization that was "profiting off hate"<sup>38</sup>. Facebook has made it clear that their priorities include their ads, foot traffic, and of course, reputation. Chandwaney notes how Facebook would immediately fix code bugs, but did little to even address hate speech, as "it is more interested in PR than implementing real change"<sup>39</sup>. Facebook has been putting bandaids on their issues, avoiding making the necessary systematic changes in their business model and culture.

Social media companies have abused their protections under Section 230 and are not passive in their roles as content distributors. It is not the fact that they simply let content get

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<sup>36</sup> Sevanian, A. M. (2014). Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act: A "Good Samaritan" Law Without the Requirement of Acting as a "Good Samaritan". *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, 21(1). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7g87m864>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Facebook 'profits from Hate' Claims Engineer Who Quit." *BBC News*, September 9, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54086598>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

posted and circulated. Rather, they process the content, use their algorithms to get more engagement, target users with the relevant ads, and of course, earn a nice profit<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, social media companies should not be given "good Samaritan" protections if they do not act as such. It is evident that, left to their own devices, certain platforms such as Facebook will not reform their practices and the spread of disinformation and hate will only be exacerbated with the passage of time. Thus, it is crucial that policy makers step in to enact changes in what these companies can get away with on their platforms.

## Policymakers

Unsurprisingly, the United States is not the only country dealing with disinformation and election interference. Other nations have dealt with this through cybersecurity systems, applications, and task forces to counter disinformation from foreign sources. Some nations have placed more stringent requirements for creation of accounts, advertisements, and content, enforced by algorithms, network operators, moderators, and user reporting. Some governments have also opted to improve social media literacy by disseminating informational pamphlets and holding programs, teaching users how to protect themselves from disinformation<sup>41</sup>.

The U.S. Justice Department has taken a stance and made some formal recommendations for how to reform Section 230. Their suggestions include: (1) "Incentivizing Online Platforms to Address Illicit Content", (2) "Promoting Open Discourse and Greater Transparency", (3) "Clarifying Federal Government Enforcement Capabilities", and (4) "Promoting Competition"<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Levush, Ruth. "Government Responses to Disinformation on Social Media Platforms." Web page, September 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/social-media-disinformation/compsum.php>.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. Justice Department Issues Recommendations for Section 230 Reform. Press Release 20-556. 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-issues-recommendations-section-230-reform>.

The first suggestion regarding online platforms' responsibility to deal with illicit content strives to still provide Section 230 protections for these platforms, provided that the content being circulated is not illegal; however, if there is illegal content on the site, it must be dealt with within a certain amount of time, or else the platform must be charged with the consequences. The second recommendation is about transparency — social media sites especially should reveal how their algorithms curate content for users so that we can understand how our views are being molded. Social media sites should also be transparent in revealing what their stances are on different types of posts. As mentioned earlier, Facebook has Community Standards that are accessible only internally, and they only show the public their Implementation Standards, which is the vague, public-facing version of their actual policies; this way, Facebook maintains its standards and official content policies ambiguous and largely private<sup>43</sup>. The third suggestion requests that there be official documentation outlining the powers that the government has to enforce social media platforms' commitment to and compliance with the law. Finally, the fourth recommendation regarding promoting competition seeks to find opportunities to break up the social media monopolies that seem to have formed, because now, social media activity is very concentrated, giving a select few companies a lot of power over the public — and we saw firsthand how damaging that can be to our morale, trust, and democracy.

The Justice Department suggested that online platforms be more transparent in their operations, which is great — but the government should heed their own advice. For example, there was very little transparency surrounding Russian interference, and in the early stages of the investigations, the public was lacking concrete information and was forced to speculate. It was made public that Russia had been the ones who had hacked and leaked emails of prominent

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<sup>43</sup> Marantz, Andrew. "Why Facebook Can't Fix Itself." *The New Yorker*. Accessed December 5, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/19/why-facebook-cant-fix-itself>.

political figures, the Obama administration did not make clear the extent to which Russia had interfered in the 2016 election and how much they leveraged social media to do so. Trump continued this trend and exacerbated this by both publicly denying Russian interference and by offering a variety of conflicting statements on the topic. It was not until 2019 with the release of the Mueller Report and the Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Russian interference that the scope of the interference was formally recognized<sup>44</sup>. And it was not until late 2020 in later reports that the committee acknowledged the election was sabotaged in favor of Donald Trump. Hence, transparency should be increased not just in social media companies' operations, but also in the government, which is supposed to serve its constituents.

## Social Media Companies

Social media platforms have become the hub of online communication and discourse, and social media companies must assume the responsibility that comes with such great reach and power over our communities. As these platforms have been implicated in several instances of hate, violence, harassment, and more, changes must be made in the ways that they operate and in their priorities. Social media companies should work with the state attorneys general that have offered up their services to help “ensure that fewer individuals suffer online harassment and discrimination” in an effective and efficient manner<sup>45</sup>. Although social media companies try to paint themselves in the best light possible by glorifying every instance in which they remove a

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<sup>44</sup> United States Senate Intelligence Committee. *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 with Additional Views*. Report 116-XX. 2020.

[https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report\\_Volume2.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Alba, Davey. “Facebook Must Better Police Online Hate, State Attorneys General Say.” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/technology/facebook-online-hate.html>.



set of fake users, they still fall short of what is needed to restore a healthy online environment. Facebook, for example, in a recent audit, was revealed to still allow religiously discriminatory advertisements to run on their site<sup>46</sup>. It is likely that there will be instances where hateful content will make it past the company's initial screenings, but there must be infrastructure set in place to minimize the number and magnitude of these mishaps. Social media companies must *enforce* their content policies *fairly* and not be more lenient with some groups than others. Similar policies should govern their advertisements. Specifically for Facebook, they should not approve ads that promote things that go against their community guidelines, even if that means that they will lose some ad revenue.

Social media companies should be transparent, and this can be done by allowing audits to be done of the company by the public — including governmental agencies — as well as third parties. These companies should also make use of their internal governance teams that are empowered to make changes where they see fit and keep the company in line with their mission. Social media companies should also invest in hiring and creating teams consisting of technical, legal, and human resources members that would perform impact analyses of the companies through algorithms, power tracing, compliance assessment, and other types of analysis. Their goal would be to ensure that the company's algorithms are working properly and in an ethical manner, and also that the site's content generally meets their standards. These teams should also release quarterly reports to the public to further increase transparency and accountability.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

## People

We, as members of the online communities on social media, have a civic duty to act responsibly. Fake news and polarizing algorithms really only hurt us because we allow them to. To minimize the power of fake news and fake accounts, we must be cautious of our social media activity. We must ensure that we are not contributing to the spread of fake news by engaging with false information and fake users. In fact, if we find fake accounts and posts, we need to report them. Sometimes algorithms and even human moderators might miss something — and we can promote a healthier online community by helping them out and speaking up when something is wrong. It has become clear that social media platforms are not always looking out for us, so at the very least, we must look out for each other.

As a generation that is quite well-versed in social media and technology in general, we must engage in the social issues surrounding disinformation, media, and data privacy. The rule of the free market is that supply will shift to meet demand, and if we demonstrate that these are issues we care about, then social media companies will be more likely to invest their resources to address these problems. Additionally, as many of us are computer scientists and will be working in technology, we must recognize and reflect on the power that we hold in this industry. Before doing anything, we should take a step back and assess the potential impact of our work. If we see that our work is involved in something that is morally questionable, we should bring it up with our team and upper management. We must be vigilant in carrying out our civic responsibilities, even if it is difficult or uncomfortable for us to do.

We come from privileged positions of having engaged with a lot of technology and having learned in one way or another how to navigate the online world. It feels like second nature to us to fact-check a ridiculous headline. We tend to scroll right past articles that look like

they came from a tabloid. However, this is not the norm, and it is a privilege to have been able to develop these skills. We must normalize technology and social media literacy for everyone so that they, too, can protect themselves from the sometimes cold, unforgiving world of social media. We can do this by creating tech literacy courses online, training children from a young age how to use the internet. We must instill in them the idea that not everything on the internet is true. We can include guidelines on how to identify fake posts and accounts, as well as how to find reliable sources. Additionally, by raising awareness of how social media sometimes attempts to manipulate our sentiments, people will be more conscious of how they should engage with content and other users. In this way, we can mitigate the potential harm of our social media adversaries. Programs should be created either by us independently, by organizations, or by the government — perhaps as a component of the general education curriculum.

## Closing Remarks

The 2016 presidential election unveiled to us the deep pitfalls of fragile democracy and of our lives' entanglement with social media. There was hate, violence, division, and of course, loss of faith in our democracy. The damage to our sense of unity and morale is still very present, and we are nowhere near fully recovered. If there is any silver lining to have arisen from this chaos, it is that we have learned. We have learned from our mistakes and we are slowly trying to make up for them. In the 2020 election cycle, we saw a huge shift in attitude from what it was in 2016. Social media companies prepared tirelessly for the election season, fully aware of what could happen if they did not. Policymakers watched carefully for any movement that could compromise our democracy. And of course, we voted. Voter turnout for the 2020 election was the highest it had been in over a century<sup>47</sup>.

Many of us volunteered for the elections, and many of us worked together in taking back social media for ourselves by leveraging it to promote our democracy. We worked to transform the social media platforms into tools for us to spread awareness, empathy, and unity. Obviously, there is still so much work to be done, and the things that we have accomplished thus far are just the beginning. However, we are now operating with more knowledge, more passion, and of course, more love. As we embark on this journey of fixing all that has been broken, we must stay true to our mission and to ourselves. We will revive our democracy and communities together, because change is effected by people, and those people are us.

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<sup>47</sup> Schaul, Kevin, et al. "2020 Turnout Is the Highest in over a Century." Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/elections/voter-turnout/>.

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