

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Culture: A Comparative Perspective

Author: Hamid Najafi

Affiliation: Independent Researcher

ORCID: 0009-0001-2133-9148

Abstract

This article examines the role of social media in shaping political culture in contemporary society. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter have transformed political communication by enabling rapid information dissemination, direct interaction between citizens and political actors, and new forms of political mobilization. Drawing upon critical theory, public sphere theory, and existing scholarship on digital political communication, the article analyzes both the opportunities and challenges associated with social media as a political arena.

The study demonstrates that social media can strengthen democratic participation, broaden access to political discourse, and amplify marginalized voices. At the same time, these platforms may reproduce inequalities through algorithmic control, commercialization, disinformation, political polarization, and digital surveillance. The article concludes that social media has become a central yet ambivalent force in contemporary political culture, requiring critical awareness, media literacy, and appropriate democratic regulation to ensure its contribution to an inclusive and informed public sphere.

Keywords: social media, political culture, public sphere, democracy, political communication, digital media, critical theory

1. Introduction

Social media has become one of the most influential arenas for political communication, public debate and political participation in contemporary society. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter have developed from entertainment and networking tools into powerful spaces for political influence, mobilization and identity formation. These platforms affect how individuals access information, express political opinions and participate in democratic discussions.

The relationship between media and political culture has therefore become increasingly important. Political culture refers to the values, attitudes, beliefs and practices through which citizens understand and engage with politics. In the digital age, social media contributes to shaping these values by influencing how political issues are communicated, interpreted and debated.

Social media provides opportunities for direct communication between politicians, organizations and citizens. It allows political actors to reach broader audiences and tailor messages to specific groups. At the same time, it enables citizens to participate in political conversations, organize campaigns and challenge dominant narratives. However, this development also raises serious concerns. Disinformation, echo chambers, algorithmic manipulation, surveillance and commercialization can weaken democratic debate and reinforce existing inequalities.

This article explores how social media shapes political culture from a comparative perspective. It focuses especially on the relationship between social media, democratic participation, political mobilization and the challenges of disinformation and power structures.

2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this article is to examine how social media influences and shapes political culture in modern society. The article focuses on the opportunities and challenges that arise when platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter become central arenas for political interaction.

The article addresses two main research questions:

1. How does social media influence the formation and development of political culture, particularly in relation to citizens' participation in democratic discourse?
2. What opportunities and challenges arise from the role of social media as a platform for political mobilization, political interaction and information dissemination?

3. Theoretical Framework

This article is based primarily on critical theory and theories of the public sphere. Critical theory argues that media and communication technologies are not neutral tools. Instead, they are embedded in social, economic and political power structures. From this perspective, social media must be understood not only as a space for participation, but also as part of a capitalist system characterized by commercialization, data extraction and unequal power relations (Fuchs, 2014, p. 23).

Fuchs argues that social media offers new possibilities for participation and dialogue, but also creates risks of manipulation, superficiality and inequality. Algorithms, commercial interests and corporate ownership influence what information users see and how political debate is structured (Fuchs, 2014, p. 199). This means that social media can both enable democratic engagement and reproduce existing forms of domination.

The article also draws on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Habermas's theory emphasizes communication, rational debate and democratic legitimacy. However, this theory has been criticized for underestimating exclusion and inequality within public debate. Dean (2001) argues that traditional understandings of the public sphere often overlook marginalized groups and alternative forms of political participation. Social media can therefore be seen as both a challenge to and an extension of the traditional public sphere.

Critical theory helps explain this dual role. On the one hand, social media enables citizens to communicate, organize and participate in political life. On the other hand, these platforms are shaped by capitalism, surveillance, algorithms and commercial interests. This makes social media a contradictory political space: it can support democratic participation while also reinforcing inequality and manipulation.

4. Social Media and Political Culture

Social media plays an increasingly important role in shaping political culture. It affects how citizens encounter political information, how they discuss political issues and how they understand their role in society. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter provide spaces where political opinions are expressed, shared and contested.

Different groups may use different platforms for political communication. Younger citizens may be more active on TikTok and Instagram, while older groups may rely more on Facebook or X/Twitter. Studies by Pew Research Center show that platforms such as TikTok, X, Facebook and Instagram are important spaces where Americans encounter political content and navigate political information (Pew Research Center, 2024). This suggests that social media has become deeply integrated into everyday political life.

Social media has also contributed to a shift from traditional public spheres dominated by elites toward more decentralized forms of political communication. Citizens, activists and marginalized

groups can use social media to express concerns, challenge dominant narratives and mobilize support. In this sense, social media can broaden political participation and contribute to a more inclusive political culture (Dean, 2001, p. 251).

However, this inclusiveness is not automatic. Digital divides, unequal access, platform algorithms and commercial interests influence who is heard and which messages receive visibility. Social media can therefore strengthen participation while also reproducing inequalities in political communication (Fuchs, 2014, p. 192).

5. Political Communication and Mobilization

One of the most important effects of social media is its potential for political communication and mobilization. Platforms such as X/Twitter, Facebook and Instagram allow political actors and citizens to communicate quickly and directly. They enable real-time discussion, campaign organization and the rapid spread of political messages.

Fuchs argues that social media can create spaces for “subpolitics”, meaning political discussions and actions that occur outside traditional governmental or parliamentary structures (Fuchs, 2014, p. 180). This allows citizens and activists to participate in politics beyond formal institutions.

Examples such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the Hong Kong protests show how social media can support political mobilization. Activists have used digital platforms to organize demonstrations, share evidence, raise awareness and build international solidarity (Fuchs, 2014, p. 11). Social media can therefore function as a tool for political participation and collective action.

At the same time, scholars disagree about how much social media directly causes political change. Fuchs warns against technologically deterministic explanations that exaggerate the role of platforms while ignoring broader social, economic and political conditions (Fuchs, 2014, pp. 180–181). Social media may support political movements, but it does not replace organization, leadership, ideology or structural conditions.

6. Information Dissemination and Disinformation

Social media enables the rapid dissemination of political information. Political news, campaign messages and public debates can spread instantly across national borders. This can make citizens more informed and politically engaged. Shirky argues that digital media can strengthen the public sphere by improving access to information and enabling collective action (Shirky, 2011, pp. 1–5). However, the same mechanisms that allow information to spread quickly also allow disinformation and manipulation to spread. False information, propaganda and misleading content can influence political opinions and deepen polarization. Algorithms may reinforce filter bubbles by showing users content that confirms their existing beliefs. This can limit exposure to alternative perspectives and weaken democratic debate (Fuchs, 2014, p. 12).

Social media therefore has a double function. It can support democratic communication by giving citizens access to information and diverse perspectives. At the same time, it can undermine democratic culture by spreading disinformation, emotional polarization and manipulated narratives.

7. Opportunities and Challenges

Social media creates several opportunities for political culture. It can increase participation, especially among groups that are excluded from traditional political arenas. It gives citizens tools to organize, debate and challenge power structures. It can also amplify marginalized voices and create new forms of political engagement.

At the same time, the challenges are significant. Social media platforms are owned by commercial companies that profit from user engagement, data collection and advertising. This means that political communication takes place within systems designed primarily for profit, not democratic deliberation (Fuchs, 2014, pp. 12, 17). Algorithms often prioritize content that generates strong emotional reactions, which can encourage conflict and polarization.

Another challenge is surveillance. Governments and political actors can monitor activists, control narratives and use digital platforms for propaganda. Activists and journalists may therefore face risks when using social media for political work (Fuchs, 2014, pp. 12, 17).

There is also the problem of “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”. This refers to forms of low-risk online engagement, such as liking, sharing or signing digital petitions, without deeper political involvement. While such actions can raise awareness, critics argue that they may create an illusion of participation without producing meaningful political change (Fuchs, 2014, p. 12).

8. Analysis and Discussion

Social media has become a central part of political culture because it shapes how people communicate, interpret and participate in politics. It allows citizens to engage in political issues beyond traditional institutions and provides new opportunities for democratic expression. In this sense, social media can contribute to a more open and participatory political culture.

However, critical theory shows that social media cannot be understood only as a democratic tool. These platforms are also shaped by capitalism, commercial interests, algorithms and surveillance. Political communication on social media is therefore influenced by hidden power structures. What appears as free communication is often filtered and organized by corporate platforms seeking profit.

Habermas’s theory of communicative action is useful for understanding this tension. Communicative action is based on dialogue, understanding and cooperation. Social media can support this type of democratic communication when citizens use platforms to discuss, organize

and challenge injustice. However, social media can also encourage strategic action, where political actors use manipulation, propaganda and targeted communication to influence citizens. This means that social media has an ambivalent role. It can strengthen democracy by expanding participation and political visibility. But it can also weaken democracy through disinformation, polarization, surveillance and commercialization. The political effects of social media therefore depend on how platforms are structured, regulated and used.

9. Conclusion

Social media has fundamentally changed political communication and political culture. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X/Twitter have created new opportunities for participation, mobilization and public debate. They allow citizens, activists and political actors to communicate directly and rapidly, often outside traditional political institutions.

At the same time, social media presents major democratic challenges. Disinformation, algorithmic filtering, commercialization, surveillance and polarization can undermine political trust and weaken democratic discourse. Social media can amplify marginalized voices, but it can also reproduce inequality and manipulation.

The article concludes that social media is neither purely democratic nor purely harmful. It is a complex and contradictory political arena. To understand its role in shaping political culture, it is necessary to combine optimism about participation with critical awareness of power, capitalism and technological control. A democratic use of social media requires media literacy, transparency, ethical responsibility and stronger public debate about the role of digital platforms in political life.

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