

Social Media for Social Good or Evil: An Introduction

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Abstract

In the heyday of social media, individuals around the world held high hopes for the democratizing force of social media; however, in light of the recent public outcry of privacy violations, fake news, and Russian troll farms, much of optimism toward social media has waned in favor of skepticism, fear, and outrage. This special issue critically explores the question, “Is social media for good or evil?” While good and evil are both moral terms, the research addresses whether the benefits of using social media in society outweigh the drawbacks. To help conceptualize this topic, we examine some of the benefits (good) and drawbacks (evil) of using social media as discussed in eight papers from the 2017 International Conference on Social Media and Society. This thematic collection reflects a broad range of topics, using diverse methods, from authors around the world and highlights different ways that social media is used for good, or evil, or both. We conclude that the determination of good and evil depends on where you stand, but as researchers, we need to go a step further to understand who it is good for and who it might hurt.

Keywords

social media, social networks

When many scholars began conducting research on social media, we were inspired by what we thought of as the democratizing possibilities and effects of social media platforms. For Tunisia in the Arab Spring of 2011, the Spanish *indignados*, and later Occupy Wall Street (Gerbaudo, 2012), social media platforms—like Twitter—were lauded as key tools to facilitate the organization of social movements by serving as a stitching mechanism. That is, protestors were able to use Twitter to stitch together a network of both human and technology-based networks (Agarwal, Bennett, Johnson, & Walker, 2014; Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). Research has repeatedly evidenced that activists were successfully recruited on social media platforms (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011), and activists also embraced social media to share news, information, and statements of solidarity (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015; Nahon, Hemsley, Mason, Walker, & Eckert, 2013; White, Castleden, & Gruzd, 2014). More recently, however, the media is inundated with stories of Russian trolls maliciously trying to influence elections and votes in the United States (Timberg, 2017), Germany (Nik, 2018), and Brexit (Burgess, 2018). Research has subsequently shown that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, approximately 20% of political discussion on Twitter came from automated accounts

(Bessi & Ferrara, 2016). Armies of bots have been used to counteract criticism toward the sitting government in Mexico during elections (Salge & Karahanna, 2016), and Venezuelan oppositional parties used bots to attack the regime and spread misinformation (Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández, & Savage, 2015). In short, social media is being weaponized in a growing information war (Gardels, 2018). Accordingly, we ask, is social media a force for good or evil?

While good and evil are both moral terms, we aim to capture and address whether the benefits of using social media in society outweigh the drawbacks. To understand this issue, we highlight some of the benefits (good) and some of the drawbacks (evil). Thus, our operationalization of the words “good” and “evil” are intended to draw attention to and facilitate the discussion of the positive and negative impact of using social media in our society.

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This special issue contains eight papers from the 2017 International Conference on Social Media and Society, held in Toronto, Canada. The research reflects a broad range of topics, which highlight different ways that social media is used for good, or evil, or both. The papers are methodologically diverse, including experimental designs, qualitative analysis, inferential statistics, and computational approaches. The authors come from a range of countries, such as Canada, Italy, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the scholarship represents fields such as business, communication, information, political communication, and sociology. While we recognize that this collection of papers cannot exhaustively address the complexity of this topic, the special issue offers a breadth of views, experiences, and perspectives to begin to critically interrogate the question.

Social Media for Evil

We start on the dark side of social media with Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch's (this issue) article, "The Clickwrap: A Political Economic Mechanism for Manufacturing Consent on Social Media." A clickwrap is a "digital prompt that facilitates consent processes by affording users the opportunity to quickly accept or reject digital media policies." Clickwraps have become the dominant form of "consent" on social media platforms that a person would encounter and click through when setting up an account. In their research, Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch use qualitative survey data to assess participants' interactions with consent materials when signing up for a fictitious social media platform. The authors show that clickwraps tend to divert attention away from the policies related to privacy and reputation protections by suggesting that consent materials are unimportant. The result is a normalization of circumvention of legal consent materials that give platforms legal rights to users' data in ways users are largely unaware of. In other words, platforms may use clickwraps to discourage meaningful engagement with the consent process, and, instead, manipulate users into agreements that provide economic advantages to companies.

The second article, "How People Weave Online Information Into Pseudoknowledge," by Introne, Yildirim, Iandoli, Decook, and Elzeini (this issue), also unearths the dark side of social media by exploring misinformation and how false narratives are constructed and adapted. Understanding the dynamics of false narratives is important because, unlike an individual item of fake news, narratives are constructed from multiple sources and slowly emerge as a plausible reality. The authors use the term "pseudoknowledge" to describe false narratives that have become accepted within a community as a plausible reality. Using content analysis, visualization, narrative analysis, and contextual analysis, the research analyzes 10 years of posts from a popular online discussion focused on the existence of alien "stargates" on Earth. The authors find that pseudoknowledge thrives on the Internet and is dynamic and constructed by multiple actors over time. Importantly, the article argues that

fake news is not a requirement for false narratives. Individuals manufacture credibility by reinterpreting a wide range of online sources—including some scholarly sources—to support, defend, and sharpen the narrative when attacked. Given the presence of actors committed to defending pseudoknowledge, the research concludes that squelching pseudoknowledge online will remain a serious challenge.

The final article in this section, "Refugee or Migrant Crisis? Labels, Perceived Agency, and Sentiment Polarity in Online Discussions," by Lee and Nerghes (this issue) analyzes how the use of labels on social media shapes public opinion, alters people's views, and dictates the ways displaced peoples are perceived, and, ultimately, received—with a focus on migration issues. For example, labels such as "European migrant crisis" on YouTube videos encourage people to think of migrants entering Europe as a crisis, which can harden people's perceptions of the incoming refugees and the civil war in Syria. Using topic modeling and sentiment analysis, Lee and Nerghes find that the tone and sentiment of the comments on the videos tends to be aligned with the framing of the video: positive or negative toward refugees. For the more negative videos, the labels become increasingly negative over time, which suggests that earlier negative labels may influence later labels. If these results are generalizable, then this provides further evidence that social media may support a negativity spiral with respect to labeling situations and individuals.

Social Media for Good

Of course, social media can also be used for good. In "Visualizing Climate Solutions: Media and Climate Stakeholder Social Media During the COP21 Paris Climate Talks," Hopke and Hestres (this issue) analyze the visual framing of climate solutions by various stakeholders on Twitter during the 2015 meeting in Paris for the Conference of the Parties (COP21). Using visual content analysis, the authors find that the news media and climate stakeholders tend to post tweets that functioned similarly in discussing climate solutions. In contrast, the fossil fuel industry and trade associations' posts presented a perceived lack of support for President Barack Obama's climate policies. By focusing on the relationship between the textual and visual information of social media posts, the research contributes to the ongoing climate policy conversation by understanding how various stakeholders discuss and visualize climate solutions on Twitter.

Also situated in the Social Media for Good section, Rathnayake and Suthers (this issue) introduce the concept of *momentary connectedness* in "Twitter Issue Response Hashtags as Affordances for Momentary Connectedness." The authors contend that many of the concepts developed to describe offline phenomena—such as communities—that are now used by social media researchers, can be problematic and they argue for new conceptions that are native to the

emerging digital landscape. They introduce a new term “momentary connectedness” to refer to “an interactional and phenomenological computer mediated publicness that allows polymorphism across layers of communication.” Using a case study of an issue-response network, Rathnayake and Suthers contend that hashtags organize instances of momentary connectedness into networks. Hashtagged tweets can support broad and vague audiences where clusters with different orientations can co-exist within the same topical network, which allows for actors to connect—momentarily—in socially meaningful ways that are good for them and, perhaps, for society at large.

Quinn’s (this issue) article, “Cognitive Effects of Social Media Use: A Case of Older Adults” is the final article in the Social Media for Good section. Using a wait-list control design, the research analyzes the cognitive effects of social media training for older adult, novice social media users. The research focuses on the effects of social media engagement in four cognitive domains: attention, processing speed, working memory, and inhibitory control. The findings indicate that merely using social media may have positive effects for older adults; the benefits of using social media extend beyond mere social engagement, and can also support their well-being by improving the processing of information and cognitive functioning.

Social Media for Either

While the previous articles have persuasively evidenced how social media has been used in particular spaces by particular actors for good or evil, an understanding of whether social media can also be situated outside of the dichotomy of good or evil. This concluding section includes examples of how social media can be used for good *and* evil, and further explores how both may exist simultaneously. Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy’s (this issue) article, “Constructing the Platform-Specific Self-Brand: The Labor of Social Media Promotion,” explores how online content creators present themselves and their work across different social networking sites. Using 52 in-depth interviews with designers, artists, writers, and marketers, their work suggests that cultural workers’ self-presentation activities depend on socially constructed imaginations of different platform’s affordances, audiences, and their own self-concept. Creative professionals’ self-presentation activities emerge as a result of a negotiation among these imaginations and a perceived need for self-branding. The research concludes by addressing what is at stake in a highly competitive and hyper-saturated job market that requires incessant platform-specific self-branding, and consequently, continuous cross-platform labor. The platform-supported affordances that enable self-branding are not strictly good, nor is it evil. Perhaps it is both.

In “Social Media, Opinion Polls and the Use of Persuasive Messages During the 2016 U.S. Election Primaries,” Rossini, Hemsley, Tanupabrungsun, Zhang, and Stromer-Galley (this

issue) evidence how social media can be used for both good and evil. The research assesses the relationship between the national polls and the social media use of the U.S. Presidential candidates during the 2016 election primaries. Using automated content analysis and inferential statistics on Twitter and Facebook data, the authors find that higher standing in the polls were related to candidates’ posting more attack and advocacy messages in the period following the release of the polls. Furthermore, candidates’ messages tended to be aimed at image-building rather than issues. While political attacks on opponents may be considered a form of evil and advocacy as possibly good, these attacks help the public become cognizant of candidates’ flaws. Again, we are left with a sense that in one context, we might categorize something as evil that can, from another view, be considered good.

Is Social Media Neutral?

In this introduction, we have set out to consider the question, is social media for good or evil? Three of the articles evidence that social media can be used for good, another three articles highlight how social media could be used for evil, and the final two articles present a more ambiguous response. Considering the diversity of these data-driven research projects, this leads to the question, is social media neutral? The question of whether technology can be considered neutral is certainly not new. Some scholars have argued that politics are embedded in all technologies (Winner, 1980) and that in social media specifically, neutrality is the exception, not the norm (Nahon, 2016). While some scholars have made the case that technology simply amplifies the actions of the wielder (Toyama, 2011), Latour (1999) argues that the technology itself shapes not only the actions we might take, but the kinds of actions we might want to take. As such, social media cannot be neutral. While the affordances of social media inspire us to act in new ways, embedded in those affordances are the politics of the platforms’ various stakeholders. Thus, we have clickwraps that manufacture consent, false narratives that proliferate online, and labels that shape public opinion, while social media is also used to support well-being, facilitate social momentary connectedness, and discuss climate solutions. Whether the actors are high-level politicians or precarious creative workers, the determination of good and evil depends on where you stand. Social media companies have created technologies that have afforded a transformation in the ways humans socialize—for good or evil.

As noted at the beginning of this introduction, social media can be used for social good, such as overturning oppressive regimes or bringing income inequality to the forefront of national and international discussions. At the same time, there will always be those who leverage technology in ways that were unintended by the designers. Some interventions, such as the hashtag (Halavais, 2013), will be adopted as features by the developers; other interventions, such as fake news and trolls, will continue to surface as

“whack-a-mole” problems: as soon as a solution is found, inventive actors will find ways around them. As researchers, we need to go further than simply asking if social media is a tool for good or evil and instead attempt to understand who it is good for and who it hurts.

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