



ORIGINAL PAPER

From clicks to convictions: investigating the spread and influence of political messages on social media

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Abstract:

This research seeks to understand the effects of social media on political discourse, information access, and democracy by examining the interplay between message spread, algorithms, and citizen behaviour. To clarify the complex relationship between online platforms and political activity, this study draws on examining theoretical concepts such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020), echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009), social media filtering algorithms (Bozdag, 2013), and digital citizenship (Ribble & Park, 2022). This study aims to investigate how political messages are disseminated and how public attention is drawn to particular messages, thus influencing the political discourse in online spaces. It will also explore how social media algorithms filter and deliver content to users, possibly forming echo chambers that limit exposure to opposing points of view and strengthen pre-existing ideas.

Keywords: *agenda-setting, echo chambers, social media algorithms, digital citizenship.*

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Introduction

Even though social media sites are frequently cited as drivers for more political activity (Getachew & Beshah, 2019; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), especially among youth, the nature of this engagement is still intricate and multidimensional. This theoretical analysis dissects the different ways social media platforms and young political activity intersect by exploring the body of existing literature. The paper offers a critical grasp of the theoretical environment beyond straightforward like-and-share interactions, examining ideas like digital citizenship, information filtering, and agenda-setting. The current study intends to shed light on the route of political communications within the complex digital ecosystem, from clicks to potential convictions, by bridging the gap between social network analysis and political communication research. These insights will be useful for future research and practice.

When analysing the impact of political messaging on social media, Romania is an intriguing case study. With an estimated 13.50 million active social media users as of January 2023, the nation enjoyed a thriving online community that included a sizeable section of the population (Data Reportal, 2023). The current internet world creates a special setting for political discourse.

Research indicates that individuals have a strong inclination to use social media as a means of obtaining information (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow & Adamic, 2012; Data Reportal, 2023). A comparable receptivity to political messaging is indicated by the fact that over half of the world's social media users actively look for brands on these networks (Statista, 2022). Moreover, more than half of internet users attribute their knowledge of current events, both locally and globally, to social media. This demonstrates how political players have the power to use social media to influence public debate strategically.

However, the sheer amount of data available online demands a critical approach. Given that Romanians use the internet for more than six hours a day on average (Statista, 2022), political messages compete for users' attention with an endless supply of content. When evaluating a message's potential impact, it becomes essential to comprehend how it breaks through the clutter and engages users.

The following segments of this research will examine the factors that need to be taken into consideration when analysing the influential power of social media to deliver political messages in greater detail.

Understanding the influence

Understanding the political messages on social media allows individuals to critically evaluate information, make informed decisions, actively participate in public discussions and develop effective communication strategies (Ausat, 2023). Individuals are empowered by social media literacy (Cho, Cannon, Lopez & Li, 2024), particularly when it comes to political messaging. Citizens can become skilled information consumers by deconstructing these messages and distinguishing between fact and fake.

Gaining an understanding of how political statements are received on social media is essential for at least two reasons. Firstly, *social media political messaging can influence public opinion* (Neubaum, 2022). People can share information, have conversations and voice their opinions on social media platforms. Thus, people's perceptions of political topics, candidates and policies can be influenced by these messages. Comprehending this influence enables people to assess messages critically,

take into account various viewpoints and arrive at well-informed judgements. A social media campaign that emphasises a candidate's perspective on a vital subject, for instance may resonate with people and impact their thinking. However, if the campaign uses emotionally charged language or omits crucial elements, a well-informed individual can see these approaches and seek extra information before forming an opinion.

Secondly, *political messages can be amplified and made viral through social media* (Larsson, 2020). Users who find a message meaningful may like, share, or comment on it which expands its visibility and audience. Political statements have the ability to go viral and swiftly reach a large audience, overcoming barriers like geography and conventional media outlets (Mwangi, 2023). These messages therefore have the power to greatly influence public opinion and public conversation. Consider a social media post on a political scandal. If the message is written boastfully and appeals to users' emotions, it may be extensively spread, potentially harming a candidate's reputation or changing public opinion against a specific proposal. Understanding how communications spread allows people to be more cautious about the information they share and promotes appropriate online behaviour.

Effective critical thinking encourages informed decision-making and increased participation in public discourse. Furthermore, understanding the tactics utilised in political messages allows people to devise communication strategies for effectively advocating their ideals in the digital age. The following section looks into the architecture of social media influence, looking at how filter bubbles, fake news, and AI algorithms contribute to the transmission and reception of political content.

Beyond clicks: exploring the architecture of social media influence

When diving into the diverse landscape of social media's impact on political decision-making, it is necessary to examine various major aspects. The most prominent of these is the *filter bubble*, a phenomenon in which users only come across content that primarily confirms their own opinions and views. Pariser (2011) first used the term "filter bubble" to describe the personalised material that social media sites show their users according to their past interactions and preferences. This phenomenon, which is characterised by information uniformity, presents a significant obstacle to the development of varied perspectives that are necessary for sound decision-making operations.

Social media platforms' inherent design encourages the development of filter bubbles (Kitchens, Johnson & Gray, 2020). Similar to independent information ecosystems, these bubbles typically provide consumers with content that supports their pre-existing opinions. There are multiple methods in which this occurs. First, in order to customise news feeds and recommendations, algorithms monitor user behaviour such as likes, shares, and comments. This produces an echo chamber effect by giving priority to content that is similar to previous exchanges. It is a common occurrence for social media users to choose communities and groups that align with their viewpoints (Kitchens, Johnson & Gray, 2020; Helberger, 2021). This further reduces the exposure to different points of view. Lastly, there is a role for the prevalence of *confirmation bias*, which is the cognitive propensity to favour information that validates our pre-existing ideas (Wason, 1960). As a result, when contradicting information emerges within the filter bubble, individuals may dismiss it as untrustworthy, confirming their biases. Users may thus get more and more cut off from a variety of perspectives, which impedes critical thinking and well-informed decision-making.

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While social media platforms provide unrivalled access to news and viewpoints, they also serve as breeding grounds for *fake news*. Fake news is defined as inaccurate or deceptive material that is reported as noteworthy events (Molina, Sundar, Le & Lee, 2021). Because of their extensive user bases, ease of sharing content and lax content management, social media platforms have come under fire for contributing to the rapid spread of false information (Rhodes, 2022).

The ease with which false or misleading information may be produced and disseminated online allows it to readily pass for real news (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020). Thus, individuals can use technology to build narratives that change images, videos and emotions, which are typically intended to target specific groups or exploit pre-existing biases.

The spread of fake news has altered global electoral processes, as misinformation operations target vulnerable groups to manipulate their political choices (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). The speed and scope of social media platforms allow politicians and interest groups to sway public opinion by spreading false narratives. As a result, voters' political perceptions become narrowed, influencing their voting behaviour and undermining overall trust in democratic institutions. This action further exacerbates the *echo chamber effect* by increasing isolation and perpetuating the spread of misleading data. The fast dissemination of fake news on social media platforms creates echo chambers and polarises society (Kaylor, 2019). Echo chambers are environments in which people associate mostly with those who share their views, reinforcing their previous beliefs (Sunstein, 2009).

Researchers are concerned about social media's ability to produce echo chambers and filter bubbles, which promote *the polarisation effect* (Arguedas, Robertson, Fletcher & Nielsen, 2022: 11). A major source of worry is ideological polarisation, which refers to the growing disparity in political opinions between competing parties (Spohr, 2017). Social media algorithms typically present users with content that promotes their existing beliefs, restricting exposure to competing opinions and instilling a sense of "us vs. them". This can result in more entrenched political viewpoints, making compromise and common ground more difficult.

Moreover, social media users are subjected to information that is biased and reinforces their preconceived notions, which erodes trust in traditional media sources and fragments social perspectives, eroding the shared reality that we once shared (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In addition, the prevalence of fake news feeds conspiracy theories, further dividing society and impeding constructive dialogue and cooperation (Spohr, 2017). According to recent studies, Romania's digital landscape is characterised by increasing fragmentation and polarisation within media settings (Buturoiu, Corbu, & Boțan, 2022). In line with worldwide trends (Van Aelst, Strömbäck, Aalberg, Esser, De Vreese, Matthes & Stanyer, 2017), Romanian media consumers prefer attitude-consistent information, which contributes to the spread of politically biased and fraudulent content across several channels. Notably, social media platforms appear to have a substantial role in increasing political polarisation, outperforming established media in this regard.

Biased content promoted by fake news is not the only factor contributing to the breakdown of shared realities and the decline in confidence in conventional media. Algorithms on social media platforms are also extremely important. These AI-driven systems prioritise content that supports a user's pre-existing opinions in an effort to keep them interested (Tomar, Raj, Singh, Marwaha & Tiwari, 2023). Social media networks

employ artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms that examine user behaviour and preferences to present tailored information. Content that is more likely to engage users is given priority by these algorithms, resulting in a more customised and individualised user experience (Bozdag, 2013).

Additionally, AI algorithms prioritise interaction metrics, resulting in sensationalised and false content gaining greater awareness than genuine information (Dujeancourt & Garz, 2023). As a result, disinformation propagates quickly across social media platforms, influencing public opinion, intensifying societal polarisation, and weakening trust in institutions, with possible political and economic consequences (Serrano-Puche, 2021). This emphasises the necessity to investigate solutions that target both the platform and user levels. Social media businesses must prioritise credible sources, remove incorrect content, and invest in fact-checking tools.

However, the responsibility does not rest simply with platforms. Equipping users with social media literacy (Cho et al., 2024) and critical thinking skills is just as crucial in the fight against fake news. The following section will look at the agenda-setting theory and the role of digital citizens in navigating the complex world of political communications on social media.

From passive consumers to active citizens: agenda-setting theory and the importance of digital citizenship

In the ever-changing sea of online information, especially when it comes to political messaging, digital citizens – those who actively participate in the online world – can benefit significantly from understanding *the agenda-setting theory*. This theory postulates that the media, especially social media platforms, play an important role in influencing public opinion by selecting which subjects receive the greatest attention (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). Understanding how agenda-setting works can help digital citizens become more discerning consumers of online information and navigate the complexity of political discourse on social media.

Using digital technologies – including social media – responsibly and ethically is known as *digital citizenship* (Ribble & Park, 2022). Despite the initial appearance of disconnection between these two ideas, the agenda-setting theory can influence digital citizenship in various ways. Firstly, realising that social media platforms prioritise specific themes and impact public debate through the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence (Bozdag, 2013) encourages digital citizens to critically evaluate the material they receive and interact with online. This understanding enables consumers to navigate the carefully selected information environment with judgment, lowering the chance of falling victim to echo chambers and filter bubbles (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Furthermore, understanding the mechanisms by which agenda-setting operates in digital spaces promotes a sense of responsibility in digital citizens to actively shape the online narrative and advocate for diverse perspectives and issues that are consistent with democratic values and principles (Lee, White & Dong, 2021: 326). Digital citizens can strive to share reliable and verified information, avoiding the unintentional amplification of misinformation or biased content. By being responsible in their sharing practices, individuals can contribute to a more accurate and balanced digital discourse (Choi, Glassman & Cristol, 2017).

Additionally, individuals who are aware of the media's influence on public opinion might develop critical evaluation and analysis skills (Martens & Hobbs, 2015). Thus, developing social media literacy is critical in navigating the intricacies of digital

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communication landscapes. Drawing on Cho et al.'s (2024) conceptual framework, *social media literacy* goes beyond traditional media literacy paradigms, focusing on the user's active engagement with social media platforms, as well as the dynamic interplay between individual choices, values and the evolving characteristics of those platforms. This comprehensive understanding enables digital citizens to negotiate the social media environments with discernment, successfully limiting the effects of agenda-setting mechanisms while fostering a more educated and participatory online conversation.

By actively participating in digital conversations, individuals can influence the issues that gain prominence and challenge the dominance of certain agendas, fostering a more diverse and inclusive online environment (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020). This active interaction is consistent with the idea of digital citizenship in which individuals not only consume but also contribute to the building of digital places (Ribble & Park, 2022). Through their interactions and content creation, digital citizens shape the public agenda, boosting marginalised voices and tackling societal injustices (Choi, 2016). This participatory approach to agenda-setting emphasises the mutually beneficial relationship between digital citizenship and agenda-setting theory, as well as the transformational power of community action in transforming online discourse and furthering democratic principles.

Finally, understanding agenda-setting theory provides digital citizens with the critical thinking abilities required to successfully navigate the online environment. Recognising the forces that affect online information consumption enables users to make more informed decisions, engage in constructive conversation, and contribute to a healthier online information environment.

Conclusions

The complex reality of political messaging on social media necessitates a diversified strategy. Recognising that political messages do not only propagate and have a negative or positive impact on social media platforms is crucial. As shown in the studies presented in this article, social media can increase polarisation, disinformation, and manipulation while also promoting the sharing of important information and democratic engagement. As a result, a critical study should take into account the complex character of political messaging on social media and acknowledge both their advantages and disadvantages. While developing critical thinking abilities and fact-checking systems is vital for countering the spread of misinformation, further research is needed. Investigating the impact of algorithms in affecting the distribution of voices and content is critical to establishing a fairer online conversation.

While this analysis uses a comprehensive literature review to investigate the complex impact of social media on political messages, it has to acknowledge certain constraints. While the study's theoretical approach has merit, it may benefit from more empirical research, particularly in light of Romania's upcoming elections. Investigating real-world social media data and user engagement patterns during the election period would provide useful insights into how these platforms influence voter behaviour in Romania.

Future study options could include conducting surveys and interviews with Romanian social media users during the forthcoming electoral cycles. Furthermore, investigating the perspectives of political parties and social media platforms active in Romania would provide a more complete picture of the environment that influences political messages online. Additional studies might build on this theoretical framework

by including these factors, providing a more nuanced picture of Romania's complicated interaction between social media and political discourse.

Finally, maintaining a healthy online environment necessitates teamwork. Social media platforms must invest in effective content moderation systems and prioritise the spread of reliable information. Citizens, on the other hand, must become more discriminating consumers of online content, using critical thinking abilities to assess the messages they encounter. Only through a collective effort will we be able to realise the full promise of social media for political discourse while also avoiding its potential drawbacks. The path towards a more responsible and balanced online environment necessitates continuous research, teaching, and adaptation. As technology advances, so will our understanding and approach to the complex realm of political communications on social media.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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