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Literature Review: Social Media's Role in Planning and Inciting Civil Unrest and Violent Protests.

This literature review provides background details for Dr. Alexander Heinze' upcoming discussion of the following topic: "Making a Rioter – Social Media's Role in Planning and Inciting Civil Unrest and Violent Protests." Comparisons are made between the roles of social media and conventional media, and details are provided regarding the unique qualities of activism that spreads across social media. Some authors detail how social media has been used during popular uprisings in recent history, in the United States and elsewhere. Then, specific tools of social media protest are also discussed. One report uses Facebook as a model for how algorithms target users, which, combined with the isolating nature of online echo-chambers, can fuel violent actions in real life. There are also concerns about the technologies that are being developed, and enabled by social media, for mass surveillance by various governments and large corporations. Finally, the review concludes with mention of new issues created by social media surrounding the dynamics of accountability, both for the users who may incite violence and for the companies that enable it, and how to interpret human rights law for private enterprises.

Omar Wasow of Princeton University compares the galvanizing role of today's social media to that of its predecessor, conventional media, using examples of police brutality revealed in the cases of Rodney King and George Floyd (Ovide, 2020). He believes that organizing has been made easier with the visibility of certain issues being more widespread, especially among groups who wouldn't have been exposed otherwise. Ovide (2020) then discusses comments made by Thomas Studdard, a legal scholar, who emphasizes the beneficial quality of social media, which is the ease of organizing and coordinating, and the negative quality, which is oftentimes the absence of a deep connection or trust among the demonstrators. Lastly, social media not only fills the role of conventional media, but also permits another form of activism, made possible for groups such as the chronically ill, who are bedridden and would otherwise be unable to demonstrate outside, so they do it online.

During recent uprisings foreign and domestic, social media has been an important tool utilized by activists, particularly during the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, along with other upheavals in various countries (Wu and Gerber, 2018). The study by Wu and Gerber (2018) finds that civil unrest in the real world often occurs following a surge of online content or conversation published across social media platforms. Detailing their research on the Arab Spring, the authors found, "locally created social media content a suitable source from which to measure features of public behaviors." They also noted that certain biographical traits affected whether a person using social media would later engage in real-life protests, such as marital status, having children, or employment.

In some cases, social media enables the spread of activist training. For example, seasoned protesters have spread activist guides, such as teaching others how to "blur faces in photographs," (Hu, 2020). Other methods include "e-mail and phone-call templates, pre-scripted and mass-circulated. Webinars about police abolition." Hu (2020) refers to this type of information sharing as "activist media." She also cites scholar Zeynep Tufecki, who compares the old forms of protest to what is possible now with social media, emphasizing the difference being a requirement for centralized organization. Previously, a degree of centralized organization was required, but now, events can spread online "without building any substantial organizational capacity…" Another scholar and seasoned organizer, Rachel Kuo, talks about the importance of

behind-the-scenes work that fuels online communications, such as mastering digital platforms like "Google Drive, Signal, Messenger, Slack, or other combinations of software, for collaboration, information storage, resource access, and daily communications," which goes far beyond the common hashtags or memes that are more publicly visible.

Research presented by Taub and Fisher (2018) describe how Facebook's algorithms promote content to maximize user engagement by tapping into base emotions like anger or fear. They make note of a particular term recognized among heavy social media users, called "irony poisoning," which refers to when a user loses sight of the difference between online "trolling" and sincere hatred. Taub and Fisher offer the example of a small German town, Altena, where the real-life interactions between residents and refugees were cordial, but a minority group online started generating large amounts of hateful content. They claimed that the echo-chamber effect of Facebook's algorithm led to multiple attacks. In one case, a fire was set to a group home of refugees, and in the other, the mayor was stabbed. In both cases, the researchers found spikes in locally generated hateful content. They argue that using Facebook diminishes a person's ability to consider traditional behavioral cues and become susceptible to a fringe online world as they browse in isolation. They also accuse Facebook of targeting users with their algorithm and facilitating the widespread messaging of "superposters" whose ideas are not necessarily credible but can enjoy a large platform because they generate a lot of content.

The research and advocacy group Freedom House ties together the rise of populism and far-right extremism along with a surge of hyper-partisanship in social media content (Shahbaz and Funk, 2019). They accuse social media platforms of facilitating the "dissemination of propaganda and disinformation during election periods," by authentic as well as fraudulent or robot accounts, which purposefully "lace their political messaging with false or inflammatory content," after building a large audience rooted in similar interests. In addition, the authors also claim that social media has enabled sophisticated mass surveillance to become more affordable and therefore more broadly utilized by a range of states, thus contributing to the decline of internet freedom. Freedom House research also indicates that artificial intelligence and surveillance tools are becoming widespread among both repressive and democratic governments, without adequate safeguards being set in place.

An emerging field of research within computer science, known as "civil unrest prediction," is being designed to forecast protests and forms of civil unrest, including labor organizing (Grill, 2021). The broad userbase of social media renders it susceptible to algorithmic surveillance and profiling. The technologies have been used in Walmart and Wholefoods stores, "using heat maps to visualize unionization risk scores…" Grill draws attention to the fact that much of this use is being done without any worker-centered oversight, thus putting their rights at risk. In addition to its use by corporations for labor unrest, governments also utilize the technologies for the sake of national security. However, much of this usage calls into question issues about privacy and the ethics of big data. Grill also notes that oftentimes, without such worker oversight, "unrest" has been narrowly defined to include "all unrest activity as equally risky and thereby prone to become dangerous," noting a lack of nuance, and that the users of such technology are typically those with great positions of power, such as law enforcement or large corporations. Without safeguards, this technology has been used to monitor groups like Black Lives Matter, a practice which "potentially undermines efforts to challenge structural racism."

Accountability has also been a debatable issue. Barrie Sander (2021) argues for a structural conception of human rights law, "characterized by an openness to positive state intervention to safeguard public and collective values..." He identifies the current interpretation of human rights law by social media platforms fitting with a neoliberal order. In opposition to a

structural approach, he claims the current marketized approach focuses its protections on individual freedoms, but fails to acknowledge power imbalances and predatory behaviors that manipulate individual choice. For example, social media companies are not transparent about how their algorithms moderate and promote content, or how a user's data is being monitored. Social media tends to prioritize emotionally charged forms of expression to maximize user engagement, which has led to widespread misinformation campaigns. Users have also been victims of targeted hate speech. Sander claims that social media companies also fail to adapt their moderation techniques for local contexts, resulting in the usage of coded language by devious groups. He argues that a more structural approach would emphasize better protections of data, confidentiality, and lead to more transparency about the visibility and permissibility of content. A structural approach would focus on systemic perspectives of content moderation and data surveillance.

According to Susan Benesch (2020), the business model of social media companies can also compromise the platform's decision-making when it comes to accountability. The companies permit dangerous content that can lead to violence, while not being held to the same accountability standards as public entities with similar functions. These functions refer to the governance and regulation of speech. Benesch points out that social media has evolved from users sharing personal thoughts with people they know online into a place of significant public discourse between strangers. Subsequently, the public discourse is considerably influenced by the regulatory policies set by companies that offer little in terms of transparency. The huge number social media users equates to a great magnitude of human rights governance on behalf of these private corporations. She argues that companies should conform to international human rights law, and that adhering to a single body of standards would benefit both the company and the user. Although she acknowledges that international human rights laws were not written for private enterprises, she insists that new interpretations can and should be applied.

Regarding the role of social media in pursuing accountability, Human Rights Watch (2020) has a specific concern about its handling of removed content. They argue that the policies of social media companies have obstructed or prevented criminal investigations by failing to preserve or share the content they remove from their sites. Although they do believe the companies should remove the content from their sites, doing so has prevented access for investigators who must obtain it for evidence. In various cases, journalists and independent organizations have documented war crimes and other atrocities, but later had trouble accessing content during judicial proceedings. HRW also points out that victims of serious crimes often face difficulties gaining the cooperation of social media companies when attempting to hold certain individuals accountable. Sometimes it can take years before a criminal investigation is launched, and by that time the content needed for evidence has already been removed. Therefore, HRW argues for a better means for archiving removed content that may potentially serve as evidence at a later time, and they suggest the current mechanism in place for cases of child sexual exploitation to serve as an example.

Social media, like any technology, has the potential to be useful or harmful. However, by recognizing the unique qualities of the technology, and understanding how it is being used, various policies can be proposed in order to limit the negative consequences. While correlations have been noted between social media activity and real-life civil unrest, some scholars debate claims of causation. Social media has been used by peaceful protestors and hate groups, and it has also facilitated the development of mass surveillance technologies. Many of these issues spur debates about privacy, big data, surveillance, accountability, freedom of speech, and whether social media can further, or diminish, human rights.

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