Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?

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Twitter

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I've noticed two distinct ways social media have changed the way we talk to each other about politics. Clearly, they have changed a lot, maybe *everything,* but two fairly new phenomena stand out.

One happens on Facebook all the time. Just about all of your friends are posting about the election, nonstop. And there are a few who brag about deleting friends, or who urge friends to unfriend them over their political leanings: "Just unfriend me now." Or something like "If you can't support candidate X/Y, we don't need to be friends anymore." Or "Congrats, if you're reading this, you survived my friend purge!" Etc. You know how it goes. This public declaration, if not celebration, of the end of *friendships* because of politics.

And then on Twitter, there's the public shaming of those who dare disagree with or insult you. (I am guilty of this.) Someone tweets at you with something incendiary, bashing the article you just shared or the point you just made, mocking something you said about politics, calling you stupid. You quote the tweet, maybe sarcastically, to prove it doesn't affect you. But it does! You tweeted it back, to all of your followers. It's an odd cycle. A rebuttal of nasty political exchanges by highlighting nasty political exchanges.

This is our present political social life: We don't just create political strife for ourselves; we seem to revel in it.

When we look back on the role that sites like Twitter, Facebook (and Instagram and Snapchat and all the others) have played in our national political discourse this election season, it would be easy to spend most of our time examining Donald Trump's effect on these media, particularly Twitter. It's been well-documented; Trump may very well have the most combative online presence of any candidate for president in modern history.

But underneath that glaring and obvious conclusion, there's a deeper story about how the very DNA of social media platforms and the way people use them has trickled up through our political discourse and affected all of us, almost *forcing* us to wallow in the divisive waters of our online conversation. And it all may have helped make Election 2016 one of the most unbearable ever.

A problem with format

Fully understanding just how social media have changed our national political conversation means understanding what these platforms were initially intended to do, and how we use them now.

Both the technology itself, and the way we choose to use the technology, makes it so that what ought to be a conversation is just a set of Post-it notes that are scattered.

At its core, Twitter is a messaging service allowing users (who can remain anonymous) to tweet out information, or opinions, or whatever, in 140-character bursts. For many critics, that DNA makes Twitter antithetical to sophisticated, thoughtful political conversation.

"Both the technology itself, and the way we choose to use the technology, makes it so that what ought to be a conversation is just a set of Post-it notes that are scattered," Kerric Harvey, author of the *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics,* said of Twitter. "Not even on the refrigerator door, but on the ground."
She argues that what we do on Twitter around politics isn't a conversation at all; it's a loud mess.

Bridget Coyne, a senior manager at Twitter, points to several features the company has added to those 140-character tweets: polls, photos, video, Moments and more. She also told NPR that the 140-character limit reflects the app's start as a mobile-first platform, and that it's different now. "We've evolved into a website and many other platforms from that." And she, like every other spokesman for any major social media platform, argues that sites like Twitter have *democratized* the political conversation, helping give everyone a voice, and that's a good thing.
But even accepting that point, and respecting every new addition to Twitter's list of tools, we find a way to keep arguing. Even the candidates do it.

One particular exchange between Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush (remember him?) illustrates this new political reality. On Aug. 10, 2015, Clinton's Twitter account posted a graphic with the words: "$1.2 trillion, the amount 40 million Americans owe in student debt."
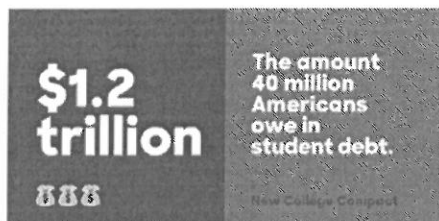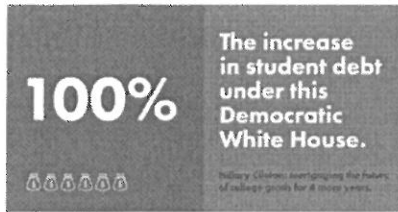

Follow

Hillary Clinton
Cost won't be a barrier to an education. Debt won't hold you back. Read Hillary's plan: http://hrc.io/college

2,0122,012 Retweets   1,6691,669 likes

Jeb Bush's campaign replied, tweaking Clinton's own graphic to read "100%, The increase in student debt under this Democratic White House."

The increase in student debt under this Democratic White House.

100%

Jeb Bush
@HillaryClinton
2,7272,727 Retweets   2,4672,467 likes

Those two tweets seem reasonable enough. But there was more. In response to the Bush campaign's response, Team Clinton scratched out the words in Bush's redone graphic, added its own scribbled letters, and etched a large "F" on top, for the "grade given to Florida for college affordability under Jeb Bush's leadership." The campaign tweeted the image with the caption "Fixed it for you."

The GRADE GIVEN TO FLORIDA FOR COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY under JEB BUSH'S LEADERSHIP
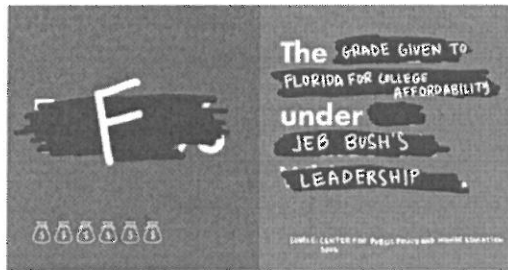
Hillary Clinton
.@JebBush Fixed it for you.
8,0658,065 Retweets   12,15112,151 likes

And *then*, the Bush account replied once more, turning Clinton's "H" logo, with its right-pointing arrow, by 90 degrees, sending the arrow point skyward, with the word "taxes" printed behind over and over. That caption was "fixed your logo for you."

It was an exchange nearing petty; these two candidates were trolling each other. But for the most part it seemed totally normal in a campaign season like this one, and in the digital age in which we live. Establishment political figures like Bush and Clinton (or at least their young staffers) had co-opted the language of social media and mastered the formats, with all the snark and back and forth that come along with it, and with an extra incentive to adopt some of the meanness Trump has exhibited online.

There may be even more problems for Twitter than what real live people are doing on the app. A recent study conducted by a research team at Oxford University found that during the period of time between the first presidential debate and the second, one-third of pro-Trump tweets and nearly one-fifth of pro-Clinton tweets came from automated accounts. Douglas Guilbeault, one of the researchers in the study, told NPR that hurts political discourse. "They reinforce the sense of polarization in the atmosphere," he said. "Because bots don't tend to be mild-mannered, judicial critics. They are programmed to align themselves with an agenda that is unambiguously representative of a particular party. ... It's all 'Crooked Hillary' and 'Trump is a puppet.' "
So, if Twitter is a bunch of Post-it notes thrown on the ground, we now have to consider which of those notes are even *real*.
The company would not offer its own estimate on the number of bots on its app, or any on-the-record rebuttal to the study's findings, besides the following statement: "Anyone claiming that spam accounts on Twitter are distorting the national, political conversation is misinformed."

Even if there are questions about the number of bots on Twitter, the tone of the conversation there increasingly can't be denied. A recent study from the Anti-Defamation League found "a total of 2.6 million tweets containing language frequently found in anti-Semitic speech were posted across Twitter between August 2015 and July 2016," with many aimed at political journalists. And a Bloomberg report found trolling on the service is keeping the company from finding a buyer.

Facebook and the "echo chamber"
Facebook fares no better in garnering scathing critique of its influence on the political conversation. At its core, it's a platform meant to connect users with people they already like, not to foster discussion with those you might disagree with.

Facebook's News Feed, which is how most users see content through the app and site, is more likely to prominently display content based on a user's previous interests, and it also conforms to his or her political ideology. A Wall Street Journal interactive from May of this year shows just how much your feed is affected by your political leanings.
The company also faced rebuke from conservatives when it tried to share trending news stories on users' homepages: they said the shared articles reflected a liberal bias. And after trying unsuccessfully to begin filtering out fake news stories from users' feeds, Facebook has been increasingly accused of becoming a hotbed of fake political news. The most recent allegation comes from a BuzzFeed report, which found that a good amount of fake — and trending — Donald Trump news is coming from business-savvy millennials. In Macedonia.
In response to these critiques, Facebook pointed NPR to a September post from the company's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in which he said, "Whatever TV station you might watch or whatever newspaper you might read, on Facebook you're hearing from a broader set of people than you would have otherwise."

In that same post, Zuckerberg also pointed out studies showing that increasingly, more young people are getting their news primarily from sites like Facebook, and that young people have also said it helps them see a "larger and more diverse set of opinions." And Zuckerberg said the company is trying to do a better job of sifting out fake news.

Late last month, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg said Facebook had helped more than 2 million people register to vote.

It's not just the social networks
Social networks are built the way they're built, but how we've used them this year says just as much about our shortcomings as about any particular network's flaws.

Data tracking trending topics and themes on social networks over the course of the campaign show that for the most part, America was less concerned with policy than with everything else. Talkwalker, a social media analytics company, found that the top three political themes across social media platforms during the past year were Trump's comments about women, Clinton's ongoing email scandal, and Trump's refusal to release his tax returns.

"Social media may have played a role in creating a kind of scandal-driven, as opposed to issue-driven, campaign," said Todd Grossman, CEO of Talkwalker Americas, "where topics such as Trump's attitude towards women, Trump's tax returns and Clinton's emails have tended to dominate discussion as opposed to actual policy issues."

And Brandwatch, another company that tracks social media trends, found that on Twitter, from the time Trump and Clinton formally began their campaigns for president, aside from conversation around the three presidential debates, only two policy-driven conversations were in their top 10 most-tweeted days. Those were Trump calling for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States, and Trump visiting Mexico and delivering a fiery immigration speech in Arizona in the span of 24 hours. Brandwatch found that none of Clinton's 10 biggest days on Twitter centered on policy, save for the debates. (And even in that debate conversation, topics like "nasty woman" and "bad hombres" outpaced others.)

Looking to the future
So we end this campaign season with social media platforms seemingly hardwired for political argument, obfuscation and division. We are a public more concerned with scandal than policy, at least according to the social media data. And our candidates for higher office, led by Trump, seem more inclined to adopt the combative nature of social media than ever before.

It's too late to fix these problems for this election, but a look to the social networks of tomorrow might offer some hope.

Snapchat has emerged as the social network of the future. Data from Public Opinion Strategies find that more than 60 percent of U.S. smartphone owners ages 18 to 34 are using Snapchat and that on any given day, Snapchat reaches 41 percent of all 18- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. Any hope for the social media discourse of the future may be found with them.

Peter Hamby, head of news at Snapchat, says the platform is a "fundamentally different" experience than other social media platforms, in part because, he says, on Snapchat, privacy is key. "I think that people want to have a place where they can communicate with their friends and have fun, but also feel safe," Hamby said.

He also said he is working on figuring out what young people want in a social network and how to make it better. And, he said, social media users increasingly want to rely on their social networks to make sense of the flood of political opinions, reporting and vitriol they're being bombarded with. "One thing that me and my team have tried to do," Hamby told NPR, "is explain the election. ... Because a lot of stuff you see on the Web, and TV, is pretty noisy."

In asking whether social media ruined this election or not, I had to ask myself how my actions on social media have helped or hurt the country's political dialogue — what my contribution to all that noise has been. I'd have to say that even when I've tried to help, I'm not sure I've done enough.

Last month, I shared an article about something political on Twitter. Two women got into an argument in the replies to my tweet. I could tell that they didn't know each other, and that they were supporting different candidates for president. Every tweet they hurled back and forth at each other mentioned me, so I got notifications during every step of their online fight. At one point, they began to call each other names, with one young woman calling the other the "C" word.

I stepped in, told the two that they maybe should take a break from Twitter for a bit, do something else (or at least remove me from their mentions). Both responded. They apologized to each other and to me, and they both promised to log off for a bit. One mentioned trying to play a role in creating a nicer world after the election.

I left it at that, but should I have done more? Should I have urged the two to message each other privately, try to talk politics civilly, maybe think about ways to have enriching, productive conversations online (or better yet, in person)? Should I have asked myself if the words I used in sharing the original article helped lead to the argument? Should the three of us have made it a teachable moment?

Instead, they retreated from their battle positions for a few hours at best, never getting to know the stranger they insulted. And I moved on, and just kept tweeting.

But I had to, right? Making the social Web nicer always takes a back seat to just trying to keep up. There were more tweets to see, more stuff to read, more Internet Post-it notes to throw along our social media floor.

If social media ruined 2016, it's because of that: We haven't stopped long enough to try to sort it all out