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Chloe Krempasky
ckrem945@live.kutztown.edu

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Chloe Krempasky

The United States of America seems divided more than ever as a nation. There are multiple protests, a pandemic, and to top it all off, a presidential election. It's not these topics that are causing The United States to feel divided but rather the fact that as a nation we cannot agree to simple solutions to these problems. It seems that every suggested solution regarding a major issue is either far left or far right, and that there will never be a middle solution that satisfies the needs of both Democrats and Republicans. Sadly, our country seems to be at a halt when it comes to progress and if people cannot agree on solutions, our democracy as we know it will not survive. We have a wicked problem of how divided the nation is which could lead to a civil war and as a result, cause a serious threat to our democracy. When we dig deep into the cause of this wicked problem, we can see that social media is at the center and the reason why all of this is happening, therefore social media companies have a responsibility to stop this wicked problem from getting worse with solutions that could help unite our nation again.

Everyone has their own opinions on how they view a specific topic, especially when it comes to politics. America is known for its two party system where each side shares different opinions on topics ranging from climate change to abortion. This two party system is essential for our society to be balanced. However, how one views an opinion on these topics starts from their childhood. How a child grows up and what opinion they grow up knowing influences how they will view things when they are older. Authors Doris Graber and Johanna Dunnaway state in their book *Mass Media* that, "Children usually learn basic attitudes towards authority, property, decision making, and veneration of political symbols from their families during early childhood" (346). For example, children growing up in a Republican household will most likely grow up to

be a Republican, the same is to be true with children growing up in a democrate household, because they will think that what their parents believe in is the right thing to believe in and will rarely drift off and form their own opinions aside from their parents. Another factor that can sway people's influence on opinions is through the information that they see around them. Through media outlets such as television, newspapers, and journals, information about politics is talked about widely. It may be easy for these media outlets to sway the opinions of some who are using these outlets to gain knowledge and form their own opinions. On the other hand, it may also be hard to sway the opinions of some who form opinions based off of personal experiences or values (Graber and Dunnaway 349). These forms of media outlets are starting to be used less as a way to express political opinions for younger generations as one form of media is taking over our society, social media.

   As our society started to become more advanced with the technology we were creating, so did the use of social media. Social media is now used all over the world as a fast way to communicate and spread messages to a wide audience. That is why politics is a popular topic seen on all social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. It is so easy for one to post their opinion about politics and to see other posts that support their opinions. However, it is rare that one's feed will be filled with posts about opinions that they don't agree on. For instance, if a person supports Donald Trump, their feed will be full of information and content that praises him and his work. The same is true with someone who supports Joe Biden. The apps favor whoever you support. It is also rare that everything someone sees on the internet is true, as social media allows for people to read and write things online without providing credible evidence. And as social media tools are becoming more advanced, it is easier for third party outlets to make bots online in order to sway people's opinions. All of these things that are

happening on social media regarding politics are slowly causing a decline in our democracy with the fact that if we continue to be this divided, a civil war will be in the near future.

Social media companies create what is called Echo Chambers. Echo Chambers are when "people are surrounded in online social networks by like-minded people and opinions that reinforce their own belief systems" (Margetts 11). With these Echo chambers, people are only seeing posts that relate to their personal opinions rather than being exposed to the wide opinions of others. This is done through data collection that social media companies take based on what links people click, who they follow, or what they like. Author Cass Sunstein thinks, "At best, it's a problem. At worst, it's dangerous" (84). Sunstein points out that being exposed to different viewpoints is an essential part of democracy, as it may help others' lives in a fundamental way and that many people in society share common experiences, which provide a form of social glue when it comes to decision making or problem solving that make society work (85). Without the opinions of others being shared, society will lose these things, increasing a threat to our democracy. This can be illustrated with our government now. If President Donald Trump made decisions based solely on his own opinions without the opinions of others in the government, it would not be a democracy but rather a dictatorship.

The term "fake" news has been a recurring theme in the past couple of years. It is a term that is used to represent the use of false information on media outlets, especially social media. According to author Helen Margetts it is most used "for the purposes of disruption or for financial gain and highly targeted political advertising". It is more common now than ever that Presidents and government officials share information that may not be true through their Twitter accounts, which makes it easier for misleading information to be public knowledge. The main problem with this is that people actually believe these false stories without doing research

themselves to see if it is true. "These false and distorted pieces of information can intensify divisiveness and make it difficult for people to trust both what they read as well as the people and institutions they are reading about" (Omidyar 43). People don't know who to believe anymore or what media outlets to use when it comes to gaining information on political topics. Author Chuck McCutheon who wrote "Trust in Media" describes how this has caused a breach of trust with journalists. People only read certain articles that they find on social media platforms, or that government officials that they look up to encourage them to read that pertain to their political views. Because of this, people who read articles that don't pertain to their views automatically believe that what they are reading or found on social media is fake information, therefore they do not trust the journalist that wrote those articles or created the posts. As a result, this creates even more of a division with political parties (484). He quotes a television correspondent Marvin Kalb in warning that if journalists can't gain the trust back of people, then society as a whole will continue to fail, including the democratic system as the division between the American People will increase to the point where no one will believe anyone or anything anymore.

Computational propaganda is another major issue regarding social media and politics. This is when automated social media accounts, also known as bots, mimic real people through the use of information or fake news on social media platforms, with the intention of manipulating opinions (Margrett 111). This can cause a serious risk to our democracy (Yerlikaya 184) and can easily sway the opinions of people during an election year. This issue of computational propaganda was prevalent during the 2016 Election, also known as the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. According to Turgay Yerlikaya, "Cambridge Analytica gathered information about the electorate on Facebook and intervened in the 2016 U.S presidential election illustrating the

extent to which democracy is under threat (185). This scandal amplifies the idea that social networks are used as tools for easy manipulation strategies through third party outlets, in this situation the third party outlet being Russia, especially during very important democratic times (Yerlikaya, 185). It reiterates the fact that the use of social networks poses a severe threat to our democracy.

There are a couple of people or things that we can put the blame on for creating this wicked problem and they describe it in the documentary *Social Dilemma*. This documentary is a mix between interviews with people who worked for social media companies in the past and a fictional story. The documentary goes back and forth between these interviews and fictional stories in order to show from primary sources how social media is causing a threat to our future and how it can impact people's lives in all aspects. The documentary states two major reasons for this. One reason being the tools that were created by social media companies. In one of the interviews Tristan Harris, who formerly worked for Google, confirms that "we have created the tools to destabilize and erode the fabric of society in all countries with democracies". For example, when Russia manipulated the results of the 2016 election, they simply just used the tools that facebook created. The companies are making it easier for these manipulations to be done. As a result, these third parties are creating divieness in democratic societies, making them so divided to the point that no one wants to hear others opinions and people despise others who don't agree with them. The tools and artificial intelligence that these app creators developed is only going to get stronger and more powerful, which should make us fear that these tools are only going to make The United States more divided, which increases the risk of the demise of democracy. The other reason is because of the business model that these apps are structured on. Tristan Harris points out that there are economic incentives and shareholder pressure that are

keeping this business model the way it is, simply because it is working. These companies are making a ton of money on the way they are conducting these apps so there's no reason for these companies to change their business model.

It is very worrying that those means are causing the United States of America to be so divided. If this keeps getting worse, we could be on the verge of a civil war. In Cass Sunstein's book, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* he quotes, "To date, social media has not helped produce a civil war, but that day will probably come" (11). The fact that social media has the potential to make citizens of a country fight against each other instead of working togethering to solve problems is a scary thought. In order to prevent that from happening, there are some solutions that need to be discussed in order to prevent this wicked problem from leading in the wrong direction.

One solution to this is by putting a tax on data collection. An example of this that can be seen in the documentary *Social Dilemma* with the use of a water bill. The amount of money one pays on a water bill is determined by how much water they use. The same can be true with data. The more data these companies want to collect on people, the more money it should cost, and the government should be incharge of this because they have the authority to. Former experience design consultant at Google Joe Toscano states that, "this gives them a fiscal reason not to use every single amount of data that they can on app users". When companies don't gain data on their users, they will not be able to create echo chambers. Another possible solution is suggested by Cass Sunstein. Sunstein suggests that social media companies should create an opposing viewpoint button that people would push if they felt necessary, allowing this to shape people's conception of what information on social media is for. This way, "with an opposing viewpoint button, Facebook, or any other provider, would be saying, *" There are other positions out there.*

Want to take a look?" Many people would say yes" (Sunstein 232). This would allow for people to get the option to easily be exposed to other viewpoints on social media. Even though they still may not agree with the views suggested, it would be good to see what other people are thinking which is an important part of democracy, opinions being shared. Another possible solution to this problem is that if these social media companies own up to this mess that they have created. It seems a little far-fetched, but by the companies taking full responsibility, they can change the technologies they created. Just how they created them in the beginning but with a better understanding on how to make the apps humane and to the point where they won't be able to ruin our democracy. In the documentary Tristan Harris is asked, "do you think we're gonna get there" referring to there as the point where these technologies are changed for the better in which he answers, "We have to". That is a scary thought to think about, but it is the truth. We have to get to that point if we want our society, democracy, and our lives to get back to the point of where we can be united again.

In essence, whether it be through news outlets, childhood experiences, or personal values, we all have a stance regarding certain topics, most importantly politics. Social media takes our opinions and enhances them with the tools social media companies created to the point that we don't want to be associated with people who have a different opinion. That is not how a democracy was created to work. It is essential that different opinions and viewpoints be shared to solve problems and compromise solutions by getting rid of Echo chambers, making sure information is credible before being put out to the public, and by creating tools that are more difficult for third parties to use. If our society continues down the path it is going and if social media companies don't wake up and change the way they are allowing these apps to work, then this wicked problem will end badly, and there may not be hope to save America as we know it.

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