

How Politicians Use Your Social Media Data & How to Combat False or Misleading Information Before the Election

By Digital Markets Initiative Team

Digital Markets Initiative

Executive Summary

Since the first Obama presidential campaign, social media experts have assumed major roles in shaping political communication. Social media has proved effective to influence voters' perceptions, beliefs, and decisions. Unfortunately, significant amounts of information spread through Internet platforms have generated false, misleading and dangerous claims, images, and fabricated news.

Studies conducted at such credible institutions as University of Florida confirm that growth of social media influences an increasingly wide range of individuals and groups. Every day millions of people rely upon reports, news articles, and opinions broadcast by social media platforms. The quality of information varies widely from reliably factual reporting to rumored conspiracies parading as unvarnished truth.

As the November 2020 election approaches amid the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and increased isolation of individuals has enhanced the influence of social media as principal sources of information.

What can be done and by whom to reduce the influence of false and dangerous information on social media? A natural temptation is to create and impose new government regulations to restrain and discipline political social media.

Beginning with testimony by Mark Jamison, Ph.D., the director and Gerald Gunter Professor of the Public Utility Research Center (PURC) at the University of Florida, to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, the following analysis discusses how politicians use your social media data. The analysis also offers numerous alternative recommendations other than new governmental regulations to address the spread of unreliable and deliberately false information over time.

Introduction

Social media has fundamentally altered political communication throughout the United States, both for better and for worse. Social media has benefited individuals by fostering new and lasting connections with others, by reducing personal isolation, by providing valuable information, and by solving problems. Social media has proven to be politically valuable as well. The two Obama presidential election campaigns demonstrated that sophisticated Internet platforms can influence voters' attitudes and decisions on behalf of policies and candidates.

From the beginning, President Obama's campaigns obtained and leveraged Facebook data and tools. Supporters used their Facebook accounts to log into My.BarackObama.com—a website where supporters could join local groups, create events, get updates, and engage in fundraising.

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With supporters using their Facebook account information to participate in Obama's campaign, the campaign team then gained access to their Facebook data. Here are a few examples of how politicians can utilize your social media data:

- Microtargeting
- Demographic, Behavior, and Browser History Analysis
- Volunteer Network Development
- Advertising Messaging Curation & Development

However, unfortunately, social media has also created serious problems affecting groups and individuals - problems that are too often invisible, manipulative, deceptive, and dangerous. One of the most egregious and widely publicized examples - the scandal involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica - exposed the method by which a political consultant could secretly collect, sell and use personal data among millions of Internet users, including their friends, colleagues, and even casual acquaintances, without obtaining permission.

As policy makers sought ways to remedy such abuses, among several options they naturally considered governmental intervention through imposition of strict regulations.

Dr. Jamison testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee (May 16, 2018) to explain why a simplistic policy response could compound existing problems.

He explained his analysis in three main points:

1. Using Facebook and other social media data in ways that are not transparent to users is not unusual in modern political activity.
2. Facebook's problems in 2016 appear to have resulted from a rapidly changing company allowing its business model to drift from forming communities to serving advertisers and developers, not from a lack of regulation.
3. New regulations aimed at Facebook's errors are more likely to protect the business from competition than benefit consumers.

Search for Solutions Remains Ongoing

The need for solutions to address problems associated with social media became apparent both in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. Those campaigns have revealed many ways that Internet platforms can be used to spread false and misleading information. These platforms can even be used to suppress voting by broadcasting inaccurate information about essential details such as dates, locations, rules, voting procedures, required credentials, and laws. Social media content can intimidate and threaten targeted communities, groups, institutions, organizations such as businesses, and individuals to voting.

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Issues surrounding such problems affect all of the most popular Internet platforms: Facebook and Instagram, Google, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. All told, these platforms serve many millions of voters.

The dilemma that bedevils all of them continues to be how to combat false and misleading election information, including explicit threats to suppress voting in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. These highly visible platforms, together with the policies and practices they foster, influence the nature of political beliefs, discourse, and support of democratic principles.

As the 2020 U.S. presidential election approaches, a critical priority for all political campaigns has become how to figure out reliably safe methods to accommodate voters while contending with COVID-19. The pandemic continues to shape how as well as where people vote, whether by mail, dropbox, or polling place. In this “new normal” era, a nationwide priority must be to counteract election misinformation.

Building upon Dr. Mark Jamison’s testimony summarized above, following are sample recommendations other than imposition of new governmental regulations for how platforms and policymakers can develop and improve resources to protect the public from false, misleading, and potentially harmful content.

Although they do not provide comprehensive guidance, they do indicate and briefly explain exemplary approaches designed to address endemic and persistent issues surrounding social media. These issues are bound to arise repeatedly in future presidential, congressional, state and local contests.

Recommendations for Social Media Platforms

- Social media platforms that provide election-related information should be made optimally accessible -- for example, information about voting requirements (registration, procedures, dates, locations, options such as voting by mail, etc.)
- Companies should provide adequate transparency and accountability around policy enforcement to effectively address the spread of election-related misinformation and disinformation.
- Ensure transparency and accountability around ways that platforms handle election misinformation and disinformation and determine how effective their methods are.
- Advertise authoritative, reliable sources of information for platform visitors’ optimal impartial independent and informed decision making.
- Conduct regular audits of algorithmic tools (e.g. recommendation systems), and recalibrate them to avoid misleading content when visitors to the website search for election-related topics.

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Conclusion

The ways politicians use users' social media data are available to those who are participating in this year's election. The exemplary recommended policies and initiatives discussed above are available to decision makers in varied capacities throughout social media. This analysis illustrates a wide range of actions and policies other than government regulations designed to address false and misleading, and deliberately deceptive election-related information on social media.

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