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10/31/24

NMD 200

Social Media in America: How it's Harmful for Our Democracy

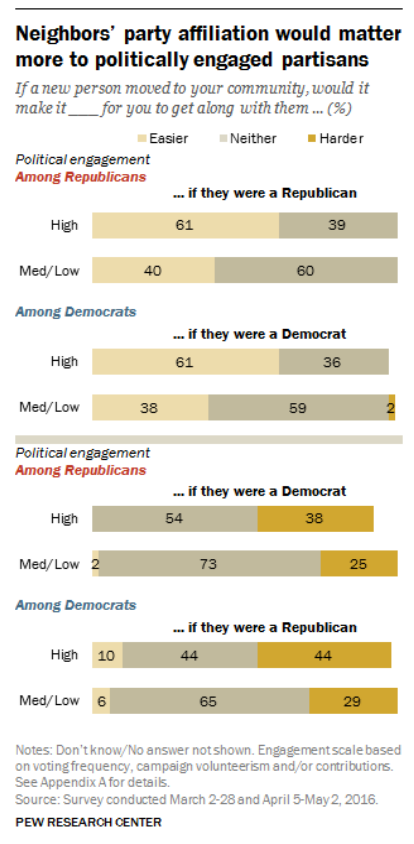
With household tech on the rise, so is our lack of privacy. It may not be evident, but these devices made for our quality of life have been harboring our data for an extensive profit. The data industry and surveillance capitalism isn't something that we're too aware about, and many don't care. To put it into perspective, surveillance capitalism is defined by Harvard University professor and author Shoshana Zuboff as the practice of collecting and selling data about people's activities, whether physical or online. This data is used by other companies for targeting marketing and advertising to improve their sales. Now this seems like something to be reasonably apathetic about, right?

Sometimes I like my ads to be more personalized so I can see more things that I'm interested in. That should be the extent of surveillance capitalism, but unfortunately it isn't. As the 2024 election approaches, surveillance capitalism is used not only to push products, but to sway voters as well. Through propaganda propagation, these algorithms raise critical questions about privacy, democracy, and this manipulation of voter outcomes through strategies based on their data.

To dive deeply, Zuboff writes "Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data." While some of this data can be beneficial to user experience, there's a surplus that's used to predict future behavior (i.e. where you're going to eat, what you're going to buy, etc.) This is a large

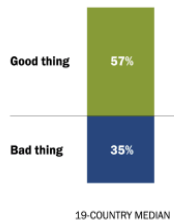
problem, as this data allows social media companies to produce manipulative algorithms that keep you attached and engaged in an excessive amount. Take Facebook/Meta for example. Leading up to this 2024 election, Facebook still uses its vast amount of user data to enhance political advertising strategies. The platform collects data from interactions including likes, comments, shares, and even time spent on content. This data is analyzed through algorithms that create a detailed profile that predicts their political preferences. They then used this to push misinformation of an agreed radical idea that garners engagement. Now this is good for social media, the more the engagement, the larger the user base, the higher the profit. But is this good for America? The statistics say no.

According to Pew research, our animosity towards fellow Americans has gone down. With social media putting identity politics into play, we're more polarized than ever as we deem the members of the opposite political party as someone inferior to ourselves. When it comes to being neighborly, we as Americans are less likely to get along with our political counterparts by a substantial amount. If our country is a melting pot of people from different races, religions, and ethnicities, then why can't we come to terms with differences of ideas? If countries around the world are more tolerant of each other's political views, why is social media something that's specifically harmful for America?

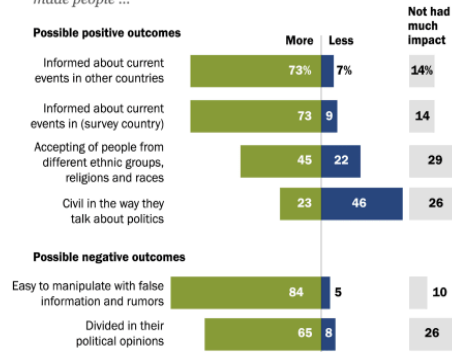


Most say that social media has been good for democracy but has had important negative and positive effects on politics and society

% who say social media has been more of a ___ for democracy in their country



% who say access to the internet and social media has made people ...



Note: Percentages are 19-country medians except for the question about political civility, which is an 18-country median and excludes Japan due to a translation error. Those who did not answer not shown.

Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey, Q28 & Q31a-f.

"Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier"

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In a more recent study by Pew, social media is largely seen as beneficial for democracy in a lot of countries, with the U.S. being the exception. In the 19 countries surveyed, the U.S. reports the most impact negatively, with 64% of Americans viewing social media as harmful to democratic health. In countries ranging from Singapore to Sweden, the

majority see it as a useful tool for public awareness and engagement. The issue that concerns many Americans today is misinformation and the threat it poses to our democracy.

This unchecked power of surveillance capitalism has severe implications for democracy in our country, especially as it influences this election on Tuesday. We live in a system where social media platforms are driven by profit to harvest many personal data to manipulate users into consuming radical political advertising. Although personalized ads can be beneficial for consumers commercially, the narrative changes when it's used to sway political opinions with lies and misinformation. Because of this we've become polarized and distrustful, unwilling to have a conversation and resort to our political bubble. Compared to other nations that utilize social media to be more connected, we use it to become reclusive. As we face the 2024 election, it's important to understand how surveillance capitalism not only affects individuals' choices, but the

future of our country. In this wild west age of the internet, we need measures to protect our privacy and reduce propaganda. If nothing is done to protect our vulnerabilities, social media may continue to encroach on these democratic ideals it vows to strengthen.

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