



Digital Democracy in the Age of Disinformation: Musk, Social Media, and the Future of Free Speech

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Introduction:

Digital Democracy and Social Media

In the 21st century, social media has democratised individuals' participation in the public sphere, heralding a new digital era. Platforms like X, Facebook, and Instagram offer vast opportunities for access to information and freedom of expression while also providing a ground for the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and digital manipulation. Particularly, Twitter has become a critical tool for social movements and political campaigns, favoured by the American public more than other social networks, and it attracts a user profile that tends to have higher household income and education levels than the general adult population. However, these tools' boundaries and ethical responsibilities continue to be debated (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019).

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now known as X) in 2022 and his support for Donald J. Trump in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election intensified these debates to an unprecedented degree. Musk aimed to redefine the boundaries of digital democracy by turning the platform into a "bastion of free speech" (Hull et al., 2022). This reshaping process highlighted the delicate balance between freedom of expression and disinformation. Musk's changes to the platform reopened discussions on the relationship between hate speech, misinformation, and freedom of expression.

Jurgen Habermas's Public Sphere theory provides an essential perspective for understanding this transformation of social media. Social media, breaking the one-way information flow of traditional media, facilitated individuals' direct participation in societal discussions. However, this sphere also risks

becoming a "digital anarchy" where manipulative content spreads easily and is shaped by algorithms. Musk's influence over Twitter brings to light a crucial debate for the future of digital democracy: Is social media a tool for freedom of expression or a source of uncontrolled digital anarchy?

The social and political impacts of digital platforms have deepened in content creation and the information ecosystems they establish in users' daily lives. The disinformation campaigns conducted by Russian trolls via social media during the 2020 U.S. presidential election marked the starting points of concerns about social media's role in democratic processes (Kroll, 2020). The false information spread on Twitter and other platforms during the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol is a concrete example of these concerns.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election also highlighted the impact of social media on democratic processes once again. The false information and manipulative content spread through platforms like X and Facebook directly influenced voters' perceptions, threatening their informed decision-making processes. Examples of disinformation aimed at the campaigns of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during the election campaigns clearly show the extent of this problem.

This discussion paper examines social media's democratic potential by analysing how social media, particularly in the context of the X platform, affects the balance between freedom of expression and disinformation and its reflections on American politics and society.

Social Media as the Public Sphere

The role of social media in modern democracies gains a deeper meaning when examined through conceptual frameworks such as Jürgen Habermas's Public Sphere and Manuel Castells's Network Society theories. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a forum where individuals can address public issues through rational discussions. While traditional media has long controlled this sphere, social media platforms have broken this control, enabling broader participation. However, this digitalisation has brought serious threats like information pollution, disinformation, and democratic potential (Bruns, 2015).

In Habermas's theory, the function of the public sphere relies on a culture of critical debate. However, on social media, especially with algorithm-driven content flows, echo chambers have formed where individuals are exposed only to content that supports their own views (Fuchs, 2015). This situation deepens polarisation instead of promoting rational discussion. Elon Musk's attempt to reshape Twitter as a centre of free speech has made this public sphere even more complex. While Musk eased content moderation to strengthen free speech, he paved the way for spreading hate speech and disinformation (Vidgen, 2022).

The Public Sphere theory emphasises the importance of a space where individuals discuss societal issues and form public opinion. According to Habermas, the function of the public sphere is to provide a democratic platform where social and political decisions are critically discussed. However, social media has enabled the realisation of this ideal and created significant threats. Platforms like Twitter, while creating a digital public sphere with a large participant base, have also become venues where disinformation and hate speech spread. The rapid dissemination of false election date information on the platform before the 2024 U.S. presidential elections is a concrete example of how voter manipulation can occur. Such misinformation is one of the latest examples showing how social media can undermine its public sphere function and harm democratic processes.

Manuel Castells's Network Society theory is crucial in understanding the relationship between social media and individuals' participation in political processes. According to Castells, networks connect individuals, increase access to information, and offer effective tools for organising social movements. However, these networks also create a structure where manipulation and information asymmetry can easily spread (Anttiroiko, 2015). In this context, allegations

about Musk's influence over algorithms and the reflection of his personal preferences on content flow question the neutrality of networks. Twitter algorithms' prioritisation of certain content, resulting in users being exposed only to content that aligns with their views, exemplifies the risks Castells outlined, manifesting as "digital anarchy."

Understanding the role of social media platforms in modern politics is also valuable from the perspective of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic politics approach. Mouffe argues that public debates do not necessarily need to achieve consensus but rather require an understanding that recognises conflict and focuses on managing this conflict democratically. However, on social media, conflict often becomes a tool that fosters polarisation rather than democratic engagement (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2016).

Theoretically, social media platforms have the capacity to enhance freedom of expression. However, this freedom depends on how platforms manage the risks of manipulation and disinformation. When considering Habermas's public sphere ideal alongside Castells's network society risks, restructuring the X platform for freedom of expression highlights the complexity of digital democracy. This theoretical framework provides a basis for understanding how Musk's changes to Twitter impact digital democracy. The question of how social media can balance freedom of expression with disinformation is a critical issue that needs to be addressed theoretically and practically.

One of the biggest challenges social media platforms face regarding freedom of expression is determining what content qualifies as "freedom of expression." After acquiring Twitter, Elon Musk attempted to redefine these boundaries. Musk claimed to make the platform a freer space by easing moderation policies. However, this step brought both positive and negative outcomes.

On the positive side, users could express a wider range of opinions, and accusations of censorship decreased. On the negative side, the increase in disinformation and hate speech rates damaged the platform's reliability and democratic function. According to Habermas's ideal of the public sphere, the primary goal of public discussions is to create a consensus based on information. However, social media has sometimes undermined this goal, creating a space where the masses act on emotional reactions.



(Selçuk Acar - Anadolu Agency)

Freedom of Expression, Perception Management, and Disinformation

Social media platforms democratise information sharing but have also become central to debates about freedom of expression and censorship. Their impact on democratic processes creates multifaceted problems, such as the blurring of boundaries between accurate information and disinformation, deepening societal polarisation, and potential tensions in international relations.

Content moderation and censorship practices on these platforms necessitate a complex balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility. The attack on the Capitol after the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and the subsequent suspension of Donald Trump's Twitter account on January 8, 2021, sparked serious debates on how platforms should handle political content (X, 2021). While

Twitter made this decision to combat misinformation and hate speech, some, especially Trump supporters, viewed it as an interference with freedom of expression. This decision exemplifies social media's challenges in implementing censorship practices and their impact on free speech.

Similarly, Meta's Facebook and Instagram have been at the centre of debates regarding freedom of expression. The censorship faced by users supporting Palestine in light of Israel's actions in the region raises questions about how well these platforms protect freedom of expression. The removal or reduced visibility of pro-Palestinian content has created significant concerns about the neutrality of these platforms and their capacity to protect free speech (Luscombe, 2023). Such practices strengthen the percep-

tion that social media platforms restrict freedom of expression to support specific political or ideological interests.

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now known as X) in 2022 reignited debates on freedom of expression and the ethical responsibilities of digital platforms. One of Musk's initial major steps was to ease Twitter's content moderation policies. Musk argued that the platform should be a space where users can freely express their opinions. However, this policy change failed to prevent the spread of hate speech and misinformation. Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that, after Musk's acquisition, racist hate speech on Twitter increased by 202%, and misogynistic posts rose by 33% (Lavalle, 2023).

Additionally, Musk's influence on the platform added a new dimension to concerns about the neutrality of algorithms. In 2023, it was revealed that X's algorithm prioritised Musk's own posts (Cuthbertson, 2024). This situation highlights the opacity of how algorithms operate on X and other social networks, revealing that social networks can serve as tools for individual interests. These personal interests, through social media, play a significant role in shaping public perception and politics both narrowly at the individual level and broadly at the societal level.

According to Derman, perception management is one of the most influential yet controversial elements of modern political landscapes. During election campaigns, perception management encompasses strategies, from framing candidates' messages to reach voters to tactics to weaken opponents (Derman, 2021).

The primary role of digital platforms in modern perception management has added a layer of complexity to these campaigns. The effective use of social media as a weapon has not only increased the speed at which voters access information but also facilitated the widespread dissemination of disinformation and the use of disinformation in perception management. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory offers an important framework in this context. This theory suggests that media shapes individuals' perceptions, with repeated negative messages fostering a view of the world as a more dangerous and insecure place. Within this framework, disinformation impacts not just individual perceptions but also the collective dynamics of societies. False information further sharpens existing ideological divisions.

One of the most striking impacts of disinformation on political processes is the manipulation of voter behaviour. Disinformation campaigns mislead the public by distort-

ing truths about candidates or policies, especially during election periods. For instance, studies on the spread of fake news on Facebook and Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election highlight the extent of this impact. Research published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* revealed that during the 2016 election, fake news received more engagement on social media than real news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2021).

Disinformation content spread on social media typically targets specific ideological groups, causing these groups to become more entrenched in their reality bubbles. This phenomenon, known as echo chambers, leads individuals to only encounter information confirming their beliefs, weakening the grounds for societal consensus. This situation misleads individuals, undermines democratic norms, manipulates voter behaviour, and deepens political polarisation.

In a period of rapidly increasing political polarisation in the U.S., the role of disinformation in accelerating this process is evident. For example, the conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns spread on social media before the January 6 Capitol attack laid the groundwork for such polarisation to turn into physical action. Claims about election results made by Donald Trump and his supporters led a significant portion of voters to lose faith in the election results. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, after the 2020 election, 59% of Americans believed that the elections were not conducted fairly (Caudell-Feagan, 2024). This situation threatens election processes and the general perception of democracy.

Finally, the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election intensely highlighted these dynamics, bringing the importance of perception management and the threat of disinformation to the forefront once again through campaigns conducted via both traditional media and digital platforms (WebPurify, 2024).

■ Donald Trump shared AI-generated images implying that Taylor Swift supported him. However, Swift has criticised Trump and declared her support for Kamala Harris. This highlighted how AI can be used for disinformation.

■ Similarly, a baseless claim emerged linking Kamala Harris's use of the word "joy" to the Nazi-era slogan "Strength through Joy." There is no connection between the two concepts.

■ Another claim, spread by pro-Russian accounts, suggested that Harris was involved in a car accident

in 2011. This false information was disseminated through an AI-generated video and was allegedly part of a Russian-backed disinformation campaign.

■ Another unfounded allegation against Harris was that she used an earpiece during a presidential debate. Some speculated that her pearl earrings were actually earpieces through which she received answers.

■ Donald Trump survived an assassination attempt during a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. The attacker, Thomas Matthew Crooks, fired an AR-15 rifle from a rooftop, injuring Trump and others. However, a quickly spreading false claim suggested that the attack was orchestrated by the Biden administration, the “deep state,” or even Trump himself. No evidence supported these claims.

■ The second assassination attempt on Trump at Mar-A-Lago also led to various unfounded allegations, including claims that it was planned by Russia, Democrats, or immigrants.

■ Among the false information about Trump’s Project 2025 agenda were claims of Social Security cuts and a Muslim ban. Although Trump denied supporting this plan, rumours persisted on social media that he backed it behind the scenes.

■ A rumour about Trump’s Vice-Presidential candidate JD Vance claimed that his book “Hillbilly Elegy” contained a confession of a sexual act involving a couch. This was entirely false, as there is no such content in the book, and the rumour originated from a social media joke.

■ Another false claim against Kamala Harris was that the crowd at a rally in Detroit was artificially inflated using AI. While it was alleged that her campaign showed fake images of the crowd, digital forensic analysis and local news sources confirmed that the crowd genuinely consisted of about 15,000 people.

During the U.S. presidential election process, misinformation campaigns spread through social media have created confusion among voters and undermined the transparency of the democratic process by making claims aimed at manipulating election results. Campaigns conducted through fake accounts, suggesting that voting machines were unreliable, specifically targeted voters in low-income areas to reduce voter turnout (Fowler, 2024).

Moreover, during the 2024 election process, the growing polarisation between Democrats and Republicans was clearly observed on social media. This situation demonstrates that social media platforms have diverged from Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, turning into “echo chambers” that expose individuals only to information that aligns with their views.

Algorithms wield significant power in determining which content social media users can access. However, the lack of transparency in these algorithms allows platforms to facilitate manipulative campaigns.

A study published by the Pew Research Center in 2022 revealed that 64% of Americans believe that social media platforms negatively impact elections (Wike et al., 2022). This perception not only threatens the election processes but also undermines the general public’s perception of democracy. The widespread belief that social media platforms are not impartial further deepens the lack of trust within society.

To mitigate the destructive impact of disinformation on democratic processes, social media platforms must make their algorithms more transparent, establish independent moderation mechanisms, and educate users on media literacy. However, implementing such solutions appears to be quite challenging due to political and economic obstacles. Social media platforms play a powerful role in shaping how users perceive the world. Particularly, platforms with a large user base like Twitter must take responsibility to prevent the spread of disinformation and the manipulation of democratic processes.

While perception management has become an indispensable tool for contemporary politics, using it in accordance with ethical and democratic norms is crucial for reducing social polarisation and strengthening democratic systems. The dangerous impact of disinformation on democratic processes underscores the importance of proposed solutions.

Seeking Solutions: Balancing the Information Ecosystem

One of the most significant challenges modern democracies face is ensuring individuals' access to accurate information and maintaining the reliability of democratic processes amidst the complexity of the information age. In an era where political manipulation, disinformation, and perception management are rapidly rising, comprehensive and multifaceted strategies must be developed to address these issues. However, this effort cannot be the responsibility of only one party; political actors, media organisations, social media platforms, and individuals must develop a shared sense of responsibility.

Democratic systems rely on individuals making decisions based on accurate and impartial information. However, the current information ecosystem is unbalanced and oscillates between truth and disinformation, critical thinking and manipulation. Eliminating this imbalance in the information ecosystem is a prerequisite for the sustainability of democracy. During the 2024 U.S. presidential election process, the campaigns of Kamala Harris and Donald J. Trump exhibited typical examples of this imbalance. While Harris's campaign, with its theme of "hope and progress," emphasised social unity, many critics viewed it as a tool to overshadow the shortcomings of her policies. Conversely, Trump frequently resorted to polarising and tension-increasing rhetoric while attempting to build a strong leadership image to mobilise his supporters. These campaign strategies seem to have deepened the crisis of trust among the public. The uncontrolled dissemination of manipulative content by social media platforms further exacerbates this imbalance.

Social media algorithms, shaped by user preferences, expose individuals only to information reinforcing their beliefs, deepening societal polarisation. In this context, regulatory mechanisms and new approaches based on ethical principles are necessary to balance the information ecosystem.

In this regard, structural reforms and cultural changes play a critical role. Monitoring political campaigns and media outlets is important in preventing manipulations in the information ecosystem. In this context, political advertisements should be more transparent, and the sources of funding should be clearly disclosed. However, the complexity of factors such as 'dark money' and 'PACs' in the campaign donation process emerges at this point (Yüksel, 2024).

Furthermore, regulatory bodies should impose sanctions to ensure that social media platforms take more effective measures against disinformation. Media organisations and digital platforms should adopt a broadcasting policy considering social benefits. For example, a more ethical structure should be developed to prevent algorithms from promoting manipulative content. Additionally, media organisations should collaborate with independent fact-checking mechanisms.

Raising public media literacy levels should be a priority to mitigate the detrimental effects of disinformation on democracy. Educational institutions should offer programs that develop individuals' critical thinking skills. This process should be designed to include not only young individuals but also adults.

Political actors should avoid polarising rhetoric and develop inclusive language. Campaign messages used during election periods should address individuals' concerns from a solution-oriented perspective rather than manipulating them.

One of the fundamental principles of democratic systems is to ensure that societal differences can coexist. However, this becomes a particularly challenging goal in an environment where polarisation deepens. The 2024 elections were one of the processes where this tension was most clearly observed. Despite Kamala Harris's emphasis on inclusivity, her campaign often adopted a tone that appealed to specific groups, while Donald Trump, to a greater extent, deepened the "us versus them" divide to motivate his supporter base.

At this point, a balance in political communication is necessary. A societal dialogue environment must be created where individuals respect different views to sustain pluralism. This environment is not solely the responsibility of leaders; the media, education system, and civil society organisations must be part of this process. The future of democratic systems depends on coping with challenges such as perception management and disinformation.

Conclusion

The impact of social media platforms on democratic societies requires a delicate balance between potential benefits and dangers. Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and the reforms he implemented have highlighted the challenges of establishing this balance and renewed critiques about the future role of social media. The changes enacted under Musk's emphasis on "freedom of expression" highlight the critical issue of the fine line between free speech and responsibility.

According to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, the primary goal of public discourse is to create a consensus nurtured by information. However, social media risks creating a public sphere dominated by emotional and manipulative responses, facilitating the spread of disinformation instead of knowledge. Castells' Network Society theory supports this paradox, emphasising the potential of social media to increase political participation while simultaneously highlighting the risks of information asymmetry, polarisation, and manipulation.

In modern democracies, platforms like X are not limited to ensuring freedom of expression; they also include structural responsibilities such as combating disinformation, preventing hate speech, and ensuring algorithmic transparency. Musk's broad interpretation of freedom of expression has led to negative outcomes, such

as increased hate speech and disinformation, underscoring the need to strengthen social media platforms' social responsibilities. The disinformation Donald Trump and Kamala Harris faced during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign concretely demonstrates this necessity.

In this context, establishing international norms on social media ethics is a fundamental step to mitigate the harmful effects of these platforms on democratic societies. Algorithmic transparency, media literacy development, and enhancing users' critical thinking skills are essential. The future of democratic societies depends on the ethical, responsible, and accountable restructuring of social media platforms.

In conclusion, Musk's efforts to transform Twitter represent a turning point in balancing freedom of expression with responsibility in the digital world. However, achieving this balance is not solely the responsibility of platform owners; it is a shared responsibility of governments, civil society organisations, and individuals. Social media can become a source of hope for democratic societies through its capacity to provide solutions to crises, yet the success of this process relies on establishing an ethical and transparent digital order. The balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility is necessary for a sustainable political system.



(Paul Hennessy - Anadolu Agency)

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