

Minimal Effects, Maximum Panic: Social Media and Democracy in Latin America

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Abstract

In face of public discourses about the negative effects that social media might have on democracy in Latin America, this article provides a qualitative assessment of existing scholarship about the uses, actors, and effects of platforms for democratic life. Our findings suggest that, first, campaigning, collective action, and electronic government are the main political uses of platforms. Second, politicians and office holders, social movements, news producers, and citizens are the main actors who utilize them for political purposes. Third, there are two main positive effects of these platforms for the democratic process—enabling social engagement and information diffusion—and two main negative ones—the presence of disinformation, and the spread of extremism and hate speech. A common denominator across positive and negative effects is that platforms appear to have minimal effects that amplify pre-existing patterns rather than create them de novo.

Keywords

social media, Latin America, minimal effects, fake news, political communication

With 67% of the population in South America and 64% in Central America actively using social media (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020), it is not surprising that research on social media use and democracy in Latin America has grown in recent years. The increase in research has been paralleled with rising interest among policymakers, journalists, and analysts, who have generally bemoaned the effects of these technologies on democratic processes. In particular, the Cambridge Analytica scandal exacerbated fears about the potential power of Facebook to derail electoral processes (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). In Latin America, Jair Bolsonaro's presidential election became a catalyst for dystopic discourse. *El Mundo* published an article titled "From Bolsonaro to Vox: How WhatsApp has become the most effective weapon of political propaganda" (Terrasa, 2019). It featured a picture of the late Eva Perón speaking at a rally with a WhatsApp logo superimposed above her face, and the platform's "read receipt" mark displayed along demonstrators. A widely circulated *New York Times* piece, "How YouTube radicalized Brazil," claimed that "as the system suggests more provocative videos to keep users watching, it can direct them toward extreme content they might otherwise never find" (Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Regardless of the political phenomenon, country, and platform under examination, the dominant media discourse

about social media exhibits a consistent dystopic tone of maximum negative effects for the body politic. A constellation of interpretive frames around propaganda, weapons, manipulation, and contagion, among others, accompanies visual representations of masses devoid of agency—as if the hard-fought democratic progress in Latin America could become undone by all-powerful platforms. This is consistent with what Orben (2020) has framed as the "Sisyphean cycle of technology panics" (p. 1)—a sequential interplay between the emergence and spread of a new technology, the appearance of public worries as displayed in mainstream news media, the moral concern of policymakers, and a wave of academic research seeking to garner evidence for tackling the presumable problem.

Are these concerns justified on the basis of the existing scholarship? To answer this question, we provide a qualitative assessment of the research about how these platforms are used, by whom, and with what consequences for the

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polity. Our evaluation concludes that social media appear to have minimal effects that amplify pre-existing patterns rather than create them *de novo*. We argue that the disparity between the scholarship and media discourses is partly due to the latter often focusing on short-term direct effects on individuals, and disregarding the scholarly tradition of “investigating the meaning of media texts and the interpretation of those texts in a way that is not reducible to effects, behaviorism, or stimulus and response” (Anderson, 2020, p. 17). Thus, we suggest deepening interpretive scholarship on social media and democracy in Latin America, and using the resulting findings to inform dialogue at the intersection of academic and practitioner work on platforms and politics in Latin America—and beyond.

Methodological Considerations

To answer whether moral concerns about social media and democracy in Latin America are justified on the basis of the existing scholarship, we conducted a narrative literature review (Bourhis, 2007) whereby we retrieved and analyzed articles from media and communication studies, political communication, and journalism and from gray literature published by organizations like Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, Kofi Annan Foundation, Atlantic Council, or Internet Policy Observatory. We retrieved texts using search engines such as Web of Science, Google Scholar, the Hispanic American Periodicals Index, and the digital libraries of the World Bank and UNESCO. From the final sample of 71 readings, 55 texts had been published in either academic journals, conference proceedings, or books, and the remaining 16 corresponded to gray literature. Following Baumeister and Leary (1997), “a narrative literature review is valuable [. . .] when one is attempting to link together many studies on different topics, either for purposes of reinterpretation or interconnection” (p. 312).

The initial search terms included “democracy,” “elections,” “voting,” “digital government,” “e-government,” “political participation,” “protests,” “social media,” “social networks,” “social networking sites,” “Latin America,” “Facebook,” “Twitter,” “Instagram,” “WhatsApp,” and their Spanish and Portuguese translations. The time frame was from 2008 to 2020, since social media’s ascent began around 2008. The resulting texts were thematically coded by the authors. Three main topics emerged: “uses,” “actors,” and “effects.” These stemmed both from the topics covered by the research examined, and from the crucial role that practices, such as campaigning, collective participation, interaction with government; actors such as politicians, social movements, and news producers and audiences; and phenomena such as information acquisition and engagement, play in functioning democracies (Brady et al., 1995; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Equal access to information and participation, and freedom to form associations and to run for government, are essential components of a

democratic regime (Dahl, 1989). A second round of coding further distinguished by platform and country. The examined research covered 19 countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay, and Venezuela—and one territory—Puerto Rico.

Latin America is a fruitful setting to examine research about social media and democracy due to two prevalent features in the political systems of many of its countries. First, after the wave of democratization in the 1980s and early 1990s, 13 of the 19 political regimes in the region are democracies, 3 are near democracies, and only Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are fully authoritarian (Levitsky, 2018). Second, several of these countries have witnessed the rise of polarization and populism (Béjar et al., 2020) which have been linked to social media use by populist leaders (Lupu et al., 2020). Because polarization, social movements, and populism exist in other regions, lessons from Latin America might have broader resonance.

Uses

Most studies under analysis have examined three types of uses: electoral campaigns (Corrales Mejías, 2015; Filer & Fredheim, 2017; Long, 2018; Santana & Huerta Cánepa, 2019); social movements and participation (Harlow, 2012; Hoskins, 2013; Masías et al., 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2016); and electronic government (Aguirre Sala, 2014; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Giraldo-Luque et al., 2017; Riorda & Conrero, 2017).

Electoral Campaigns

This scholarship has often focused on public debates (Batista et al., 2017; Harlow, 2017; Long, 2018; Senmartin, 2014) and voting practices (Bolgov et al., 2017; Filer & Fredheim, 2017; Navia & Ulriksen Lira, 2017; Rincón, 2011).

Regarding public debates, studies have explored platforms as discussion fora which tend to coexist with traditional public opinion spaces. Senmartin (2014) showed that Argentina’s 2011 presidential elections saw “the emergence of communicative participation through cross-media fertilization that reshape[d] [. . .] participatory politics” (p. 193). However, the extent to which this happens does not appear uniformly distributed across countries. A study in Guatemala claimed that “while most of the major political campaigns and news organizations use Twitter and Facebook, these platforms do not hold the same national status and importance as vehicles for discussion and debate that they do in Argentina and Brazil” (Batista et al., 2017, p. 52).

Concerning voting behavior, studies have yielded divergent results. To Harlow (2017), during El Salvador’s 2014 presidential elections, “when failed right-wing candidate Norman Quijano at first refused to accept defeat and went so

far as to call for military action and another election, all four alternative media projects used Facebook to criticize the right-wing party” (p. 173). Such dynamics are often anchored in pre-existing conditions. Rincón (2011) claimed that while platforms were used extensively in Colombia’s 2010 presidential election, offline factors such as religious beliefs, international relations positions, and tax policies had a greater role in the elections’ results.

Chile is one of four countries in the region in which voting is not compulsory (Payne et al., 2006). Although it is difficult to establish a relationship between platform use and turnout in the region, research in Chile shows a positive association in the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections. However, “social media use does not affect the decision to vote, but only reinforces the willingness to vote across people who, in general, consume traditional media and use social media” (Navia & Ulriksen Lira, 2017, p. 82).¹

Collective Action

Scholarship about collective action has mostly focused on the connections between online and offline dynamics (Harlow, 2012; Santana & Huerta Cánepa, 2019). Santana and Silva (2013) observed that “when networked political practices coexist with fully established political institutions, the interaction between these forces is quite complex” (p. 10).² A UNESCO report concluded that “there is no clear evidence that social media’s influence can act independently of other offline factors, though online and offline dimensions are becoming increasingly porous” (Alava et al., 2017 p. 46). Yet, Masías and colleagues (2018) showed that “in Bolivia the more traditional, offline type of protest activity still predominates” (p. 15).

Some studies have focused on the uses of social media in political protest (Aguirre Sala, 2014; Halpern et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Cardoso et al. (2016) analyzed the role of platforms in the 2013 Brazilian protests, noting that “individuals not merely act in the network but think and perceive their actions as networked” (p. 3925). A project examining data from 17 Latin American countries concluded that there is “a rather robust relationship between social media use and protest behavior” (Valenzuela et al., 2016, p. 707). The authors also found that platform use moderates “the effects not only of the typical predictors of participation, such as age and gender, but also of the political psychological antecedents of engagement [. . .] and of participation in voluntary organizations” (p. 708).

Electronic Government

This scholarship has concentrated on how platforms are appropriated by governments for either information diffusion or interaction purposes (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Giraldo-Luque et al., 2017; Ricciardi et al., 2015). Following Criado and colleagues (2013), a range of objectives expected

from social media use in the public sector include “participation, collaboration, and transparency, but also openness, good governance, or cost savings” (p. 320). Riorda and Conrero (2017) analyzed platform use by local governments in Latin American cities, and concluded that a “solid and increasingly visible advancement in the institutionalization of local government communication management areas” (p. 33).³

Some studies have inquired into whether communication between governments and citizens is either unidirectional or bidirectional. Research about Mexico’s Ministry of Health “Puebla Sana” highlighted the role of bidirectional communication in that program’s success (Picazo-Vela et al., 2016). However, research about e-government initiatives has frequently uncovered underdeveloped opportunities (Ricciardi et al., 2015; Riorda & Conrero, 2017; Segado-Boj et al., 2015). To Gálvez-Rodríguez and colleagues (2018), “it seems that although social networking sites are used to consult citizens on matters that affect them [. . .] the interactions that emerge are still mainly those that require little effort” (p. 273).

Actors

Research has examined the role of four main types of actors: state and government officials, including officeholders and political candidates; social movements; media and journalists; and news consumers.

State and Government Agent

Scholarship on politicians and government agencies has concluded that their use of platforms, particularly during election campaigns, has been pervasive (Batista et al., 2017; Corrales Mejías, 2015; Filer & Fredheim, 2017; Rincón, 2011; Santana & Huerta Cánepa, 2019). A report by Transparencia Electoral about Paraguay’s 2018 elections noted that “although the law provides free [media] spaces for parties to communicate their proposals to the electorate, the majority preferred to transmit their campaign messages through social media” (Transparencia Electoral en América Latina, 2018, p. 20).⁴ These actors have typically followed unidirectional modes of communication. Welp and Ruth (2017) analyzed tweets by presidents Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández during their respective reelection campaigns and their second terms in office, and concluded that “both of them use Twitter rather in a conventional one-directional way to send information” (p. 13).

Other government actors also pursue unidirectional communication (Giraldo-Luque et al., 2017; Giraldo-Luque et al., 2017; Riorda & Conrero, 2017; Segado-Boj et al., 2015). This is despite reports elaborating on the potential of social media for greater government accountability (Aguirre Sala, 2014; Mastrini & Becerra, 2017). An analysis by Gálvez-Rodríguez and colleagues (2018) argued that “Mercosur local governments do not appear to be taking full advantage of the possibilities offered by dialogic strategies to

promote citizens' online interaction via their Facebook pages" (p. 274). Giraldo-Luque et al. (2017) concluded that in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador, there has been "little improvement in the creation of deliberative or participative spaces within platforms" (p. 1278).⁵

Some studies have determined that government and the courts have used existing laws to monitor and censor social media messages instead of enacting new legislation. However, social media are still perceived as less subject to government intervention than other media by both journalists in Mexico (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017), and opposition parties in Venezuela (Arias, 2019).

Social Movements

Studies have often highlighted the interplay between offline and online organizing. Hoskins (2013) looked into student demonstrations in Chile, and underscored "the enduring presence of the Chilean Communist Party," and "social media," which have "also played a key role in drawing in new support, organizing media-friendly events such as flash mobs and building a sense of collective identity online" (p. 34). By contrast, Harlow (2012) argued that in Guatemala "without Facebook [. . .] such a large movement never would have mobilized" (p. 239). However, in her account on platform use by activists in El Salvador, Harlow (2017) noted that "simply providing access to technology is not enough to balance information inequalities: access must be accompanied by digital literacy and, in this age of Web 2.0, equality of social media use" (p. 183). Gray et al. (2017) find that men in Latin America are more likely than women to use the internet, use social media, and look for political information online, and conclude that "the potential for the internet to serve as an equalizing force—when it comes to gender equality—is seriously diminished" (p. 340). Harp and colleagues (2012) concluded that the main challenge for activists was "lack of access to affordable internet" (p. 313).

Regarding the relationship between political participation and social media use, findings vary by methodology. On one hand, most survey research has argued that the connection depends on the platform (Halpern et al., 2017; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2019). Valenzuela and colleagues' (2018) work suggested that "Facebook Twitter are conducive to protest behavior through two distinct mechanisms: whereas the influence of Facebook use is more effective through communication with strong-tie networks, the impact of Twitter use is more effective through communication with weak-tie networks" (p. 177). On the other hand, most qualitative studies have concluded that individuals often prefer using platforms for everyday matters than for political expression (Boczkowski et al., 2018a; Harlow, 2017; Haynes, 2016; Nemer, 2016). Based on ethnographic research in a small Brazilian town, Spyer (2017) concluded that "party politics is the very last thing that people in Balduino discuss on social media" (p. 189). It is possible that

the focus on Twitter and Facebook, to the detriment of other platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, has contributed to further overestimating the role of political issues within social media.

News Producers and Consumers

These studies have usually resorted to a combination of surveys and content analysis to often focus on social media as a source for editorial work (Mourão, 2016; Schmitz-Weiss, 2015). Saldaña et al. (2017) concluded that "journalists use social media for journalistic purposes, with Twitter being the most important reporting platform" (p. 411). While García-Perdomo (2017) found that news organizations "continue to use social media mainly to disseminate and share information published on their websites" (pp. 48–49), a content analysis of eight Argentine media outlets concluded that their Facebook Twitter accounts include a significantly higher percentage of articles about non-public affairs than their news sites (Mitchelstein et al., 2018).

Another stream of research has examined the news that social media users consume and share (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Harlow, 2017). There is a widespread concern about the distribution of disinformation (Bolgov et al., 2017; Calvo & Aruguete, 2020; Gainous et al., 2016; Kofi Annan Foundation, 2017). Machado and colleagues (2018) studied news articles shared on social media during the 2018 presidential election in Brazil, and concluded that "Brazilian Twitter users are sharing more professional political content on Twitter than junk news" (p. 6). Scholarship has also inquired into incidental news consumption on social media (Serrano-Puche et al., 2018). Boczkowski et al. (2018b) found that young people in Argentina "devote comparatively less time to news stories incidentally encountered on social media than to newspaper or television news consumption" (p. 3535).

Effects

The scholarship on the effects of social media on democracy has focused on both positive—especially social and political engagement, and information dissemination—and negative effects—mostly disinformation, and the spread of extremism and hate speech. There are two common denominators cutting across these effects: in most cases, they seem to be minimal rather than transformative, and to amplify prior patterns rather than create novel ones.

Social and Political Engagement

Studies have shown that social media have enhanced two main avenues for participation. First, in democratic societies, their use has been related to incremental effects on political engagement, expressed in actions such as voting, joining in a social movement, and taking part in offline protests (Corrales

Mejías, 2015; Long, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). Halpern and colleagues (2017) conducted a survey during the 2013 presidential election in Chile, and concluded that “political sharing on social network sites increases political participation” (p. 331). Second, scholarship has examined how platform use promotes participation and democracy in countries which are not working polyarchies, such as Cuba and Venezuela (Bolgov et al., 2017; Dye et al., 2016; Haynes, 2016; Spyer, 2017), as well as on marginalized groups. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA, 2010) claimed that “without [. . .] social media channels, it would certainly be more difficult to maintain a virtual political space” in Venezuela (p. 2).

Information Dissemination and Political Expression

Some studies have centered on how social media enable information dissemination and political expression (Halpern et al., 2017; Serrano-Puche et al., 2018; Spyer, 2017). Custódio (2017) reported on how “Mare Vive,” the Facebook page of the favelas of Complexo da Mare in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, “denounces political violence, governmental neglect” and celebrates “local culture and traditions” (p. 103). Hausmann and colleagues (2018) noted that, due to “the lack of official numbers on emigration [. . .] it has been difficult to quantify the magnitude of this crisis” (p. 2), and used Twitter accounts to measure how many had emigrated from Venezuela in the past years. These findings should be put in perspective since political expression on social media appears to be curtailed in authoritarian regimes. Dye and colleagues (2016) found that Cubans do not post about political issues on Facebook, which is mostly used for socializing and relationship maintenance.

Disinformation and Fake News

A COHA report (2010) stated, “there is much at risk for the social media movement itself, as it could lose much of its legitimacy, given the chronic problem concerning misinformation” (p. 3). Fake news has been seen as relevant for electoral campaigns, when citizens are intensely focused on using publicly available information in their decision-making processes. A Kofi Annan Foundation report (2017) detailed that a series of illegal practices were identified in electoral campaigns conducted in Latin America. Similarly, Bolgov and colleagues (2017) noted the use of “various malicious tactics such as spreading false information and pre-programmed robots” (p. 258) on social media during the course of the 2015 campaign in Argentina. Lupu et al. (2020) claimed that “misinformation campaigns are [. . .] shifting away from the more public platforms to WhatsApp, where encryption makes them harder to detect” (p. 165) but that recent elections “also saw increasing efforts by governments and civil society to combat misinformation” (p. 165).

The Spread of Extremism and Hate Speech

Research has highlighted the spread of extremism and hate speech, often amplifying pre-existent societal tendencies (Alava et al., 2017; García Santamaría, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). A report by UNESCO established that “Internet and social media can act as reinforcement because young extremists can then actively seek and find material in social media to feed their interests” (Alava et al., 2017, p. 46). This report underscored the impact that research can have on the relation between platforms and extremism: “the network metaphor, the echo chamber, the lone wolf [. . .] paradoxically feed into the communication strategies of many extremist groups, by granting them power over setting the agenda and the narratives” (Alava et al., 2017, p. 47).

Brazil offers a particularly relevant case since “polarization has been mirrored and at the same time triggered by political incivility and hate speech” (Sponholz & Christofolletti, 2019, p. 74). But existing findings have not established a causal link between social media and polarization, offline violence, or electoral behavior. To Recuero (2015), hate speech on platforms is not a new phenomenon: the author analyzed how, right after the 2014 presidential election in Brazil, “social media was flooded by racist and xenophobic messages against the poorer states where Mrs. Rousseff had won” (p. 2). In the context of Jair Bolsonaro’s election, Bursztyn and Birnbaum (2019) examined public WhatsApp partisan groups, and found that right-wing groups were “more abundant, tightly connected, geographically distributed, and shared more multimedia messages” (p. 5) than their left-wing counterparts. This is consistent with Morgans’ (2018) claim that “groups on Brazil’s radical left demonstrate a marked detachment from and skepticism toward new communication technologies” (p. 251).

Minimal and Amplifying Effects

Although global reports tend to overemphasize the transformative potential of social media, either in terms of increased participation and dissemination or admonishing about the risks entailed by the diffusion of disinformation and the spread of extremism and fake news (Ricciardi et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2018), most findings point to modest effects, in the tradition of research on minimal effects of political communication (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Zulianello and colleagues (2018) indicated that although “Latin America has often been described as a fertile ground for populist attitudes [. . .] diffusion of elements of populist communication on Facebook is very limited and considerably lower there than in the Western leaders” (p. 453). A report from the World Bank (2017) explained that “social media can be effective in generating sudden spikes of protests and in coordinating uprising, but they alone cannot yield sustained representation of interests and promote social change” (p. 254). Santana and Huerta Cánepa (2019) studied bots during

the 2017 campaign in Chile, and concluded that “there is no evidence that the election discussion in Chile was coopted or ransomed by cyber-troops” (p. 73).⁶ Furthermore, although research suggests modest correlations between social media use and political participation, given that the majority is based on cross-sectional surveys, it is difficult to discern the causal relationship between online and offline participation.

Many of the effects point to the amplification of pre-existing political practices, rather than the occurrence of *de novo* impacts—even if not explicitly stated in some of the surveyed literature. Regarding electronic government, Segado-Boj and colleagues (2015) found that “Latin-American leaders are still anchored in the massive diffusion model inherited by big media” (p. 167).⁷ Concerning the issue of elections, a study on Mexico’s 2018 presidential contest by Pérez Argüello and Barojan (2019) indicated that “in the case of Puebla, amid a vote recount, disinformation and artificial engagement on social media reflected polarization and exacerbated existing tensions between opposing political groups” (p. 27). Regarding freedom of expression, a report produced by the Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información (2016) argued that it is mostly in countries with “weak or inexistent legal frames” that “governments use criminal figures to restrict freedom of expression” (p. 5).⁸ Concerning hate speech, Zuluaga and Martínez (2012) argued that “given (Colombia’s) political polarization, the internet became a site for verbal offensiveness between supporters of different candidates in forums, commentary spaces, and social networks” (pp. 56–57). However, Valenzuela and colleagues (2019) concluded that in Chile, a country with “critical citizens [. . .] increasingly distrustful of political and media elites” (p. 7), and “WhatsApp use is not linked to mass ideological polarization” (p. 16).

The prevalence of effect amplification is consistent with studies conducted outside of Latin America which have shown that social media affect political polarization only indirectly, through the promotion of political engagement (Lee et al., 2018, p. 252), and others providing evidence that “greater interest in politics and more media diversity reduces the likelihood of being in an echo chamber” (Dubois & Blank, 2018, p. 740). The ways in which social media might amplify the effects of pre-existing patterns partly relates to platform affordances: evidence concerning the effect of social media on either political participation or polarization “seems to be contingent on media platform and specific uses” (Valenzuela et al., 2019, p. 4).

Discussion

This article has provided a qualitative assessment of existing scholarship about the uses, actors, and effects of social media for democratic life in the Latin American region. Far from the moral panics so prevalent in news media coverage, a common denominator across findings is that platforms appear to have

minimal effects that amplify pre-existing patterns rather than create them *de novo*. We suggest this is partly tied to three main assumptions in the academic literature.

First, our analysis indicates that there is a broad range of uses of platforms, including for campaigning, collective action, and electronic government. Although their diffusion varies by country, politicians, and office holders, social movements, news producers, and citizens utilize them for political purposes. Reviewed studies tend to craft their research designs by producing analogies between social and traditional media—even though these two types of media differ in important dimensions regarding “users that employ them, technologies that drive them, economic structures that scaffold them, and institutional bodies that incorporate them” (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 2). Findings suggest that affordances and routines tied to each platform might also be connected with varying outcomes. Not all social media platforms are created equal nor should we expect them to be interpreted in the same ways by different national and political cultures. Scholarship so far has been based mostly on two platforms—Twitter and, to a lesser extent, Facebook—and frequently tended to examine the textual traces that their uses leave behind.

Second, research about actors has shown an interest in studying defined institutional actors, large groups of anonymous users, or small communities that present high levels of specificity in terms of their ways of appropriating social media. Future studies could complement this approach by asking different social groups why they do, what they do, and how they think about it, and hearing their voices rather than inferring their ideas, motivations, and affect from the textual traces mentioned above. These complementary data might transform the pessimistic and stark tonality of the interpretation of findings derived from the aggregate traces into gray and measured insights from interpretive approaches. Complementing two sources of information might lead to less strident but more descriptively fit accounts.

Third, our assessment identifies two main positive effects of social media platforms: enabling social engagement and information diffusion, sometimes bypassing powerful actors who would otherwise seek to curtail them. It also highlights two main negative effects that are in a sense the mirror image of the positive ones: the presence of disinformation, and the spread of extremism and hate speech. The general pattern is that these effects are minimal, and mostly amplify pre-existing tendencies. How could this type of effects trigger a moral panic? Although research has documented the existence of disinformation in Mexico (Pérez Argüello & Barojan, 2019), Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela (Bolgov et al., 2017), scholarship has neither demonstrated the prevalence of false information over factual reports nor has it established a clear causal relationship between the presence of false information on social media and the political extremism. Widespread discourse about negative effects of social media without solid empirical support is not unique to Latin America. Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga (2019) examined

research about disinformation in the Global North, and concluded that “it may seem like common sense that false information can have an array of negative consequences on democracy, but the field has not yet consistently, systematically, and empirically outlined the conditions under which this information has major social effects” (p. 4).

In contrast with warnings of radical transformation in democratic politics, the surveyed scholarship points to stability instead of change. Social media use appears not to increase turnout, and complements rather than replaces traditional demographic and political factors explaining social participation (Masias et al., 2018; Navia & Ulriksen Lira, 2017). Within collective action, social media can change the ways in which strategies for mobilization are conceived (Cardoso et al., 2016), but nonetheless continue to coexist with offline modes of participation (Harlow & Harp, 2012). In a similar vein, politicians, government officials, and journalists who make use of social media continue to engage in rather unidirectional modes of communication predating these platforms (García-Perdomo, 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). As Criado et al. (2013) explain while claiming attention to organizational inertia, “the attention to institutional change and how it is produced through public organizations will be critical for future studies of social media and government” (p. 323).

Moreover, research also indicates that there are some small, positive effects of platform use, which often go unnoticed by mainstream reports. For instance, social media appear to serve a crucial role in enabling political engagement in non-democratic regimes, such as Venezuela and Cuba. On a related note, some studies analyze how social media enable the engagement of marginalized social groups within democratic societies, in particular female, queer, poor, and aboriginal populations (Custódio, 2017; Friedman, 2017; Harlow, 2017). For instance, Matos (2017) traces how cyber-feminism movements in Brazil actively use Facebook to spread their message. These uses depend on the people obtaining access to the platforms in the first place. As Harp and colleagues (2012) demonstrate for the case of activists, there are not only infrastructural barriers to social media, such as internet access, but also gender divides, as examined by Gray et al. (2017).

The lack of consistency between the attention paid to negative effects of social media, compared to positive consequences, and the overblown claims about their overall implications, suggests that future research should examine under which conditions platforms have either positive, negative, or null consequences. Social media use may have larger political effects during presidential campaigns, when the entire country is attuned to public affairs, than during routine periods (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). Even during campaigns, the consequences might be different according to the political climate of the country, as the comparison between the 2017 campaign in Chile (Santana & Huerta Cánepa, 2019) and the 2018 election in Brazil (Machado et al., 2018) suggests, and could also vary in relation to the

journalistic roles in each country, examined by Schmitz-Weiss (2015).

Research on social media platforms in Latin America could be particularly fruitful due to the features that differentiate this region from other countries: relatively recent democratization, pre-existing polarization, and a long history of distrust toward mainstream media and politicians. In this context, platforms might operate as the ideal scapegoat for institutions that were under duress well before the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Although we would not presume there is a unique path toward either democratization or polarization and extremism, social media practices of powerful leaders in Latin America might be useful to explain how presidents and prime ministers from other continents use digital platforms to bypass mainstream media.

Instead of assuming that social media and their algorithms have either uniform, deleterious effects on democratic practices, or that citizens always act as fully informed agents decoding every message, we should seek to understand the complex interplay between political institutions, platforms, and users’ practices and interpretations. Mainstream media and policymakers have resorted before to a dated paradigm of powerful effects to make sense of innovation in the midst of unsettling times. As scholars, we should counter the doom and gloom narratives with data and analysis that show how, when, and under which conditions, which platforms are used for either democratic, undemocratic, or unrelated goals. Latin Americans have widely embraced digital artifacts and infrastructures. Their uses are integrated into their everyday lives, both producing and reproducing their political practices of information acquisition and expression, and formal and informal participation. Making sense of their accounts should help scholars and practitioners navigate between the unbridled optimism of digital culture at the closing of the 20th century and the somber mood that seem to mark the second decade of the 21st century.

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Notes

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