



ABSTRACT:

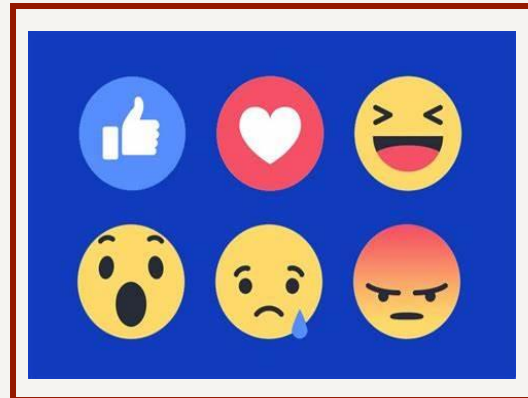
Microtargeting in politics has been understood as a grave threat to the future of democracy since Cambridge Analytica illegally interfered with electoral procedure in 2016. Most recently, political analysts are optimistic about digital platforms acting to minimise damaging impacts, however, the presence of political microtargeting is significant beyond its electoral effects. Understanding microtargeting as one symptom of a larger movement of political disenchantment illustrates how voters are perceived as preoccupied and disinterested enough to be subject to subtle nudging processes. Using Hannah Arendt's theory of 'the rise of the social' to consider the roots of this disillusionment, this essay argues that the problem reflected by the presence of microtargeting in politics is one of public, political space having been lost to the modern mentalities of voters, rather than just one of social media disrupting democratic process.

BACKGROUND:

I was originally drawn to this research question following my Extended Project Qualification at A-Level that explored whether the law was responsible for preventing voter manipulation in the UK. Over the course of that project, I had detailed insight into how electoral law was being threatened by social media algorithms. Political microtargeting delivers select campaign messages to select voters, based on what is known about that specific voter, but accounts of Cambridge Analytica's work in 2016 suggested that the information about voters that is analysed by these algorithms is no longer basic, demographic information, but instead their personality traits and psychological vulnerabilities. This led me to question why our votes are perceived as so malleable: in theory, people's votes should not be subject to social media posts, regardless of the emotions these posts are designed to trigger. Democratic theorists present voting processes as a way to ensure individuals are contributing to their political community through carefully considered evaluations, but it seems voters are not engaging with political information in enough detail to make a meaningful choice.

MY FINDINGS:

Focusing on Hannah Arendt as a democratic theorist, I questioned whether her theories of modern political engagement can explain why political microtargeting is perceived to be possible. The rise of the social, according to Arendt, is the process of the private realm becoming public, which causes mass psychological alienation. To Arendt, the private realm is where peoples' basic needs are met, making it a necessary pre-requisite for the public realm of political action. Following the ambition of early-modern capitalism, an interest in making individuals mass consumers brought private needs into public concern, distorting this divide. When our material and emotional needs are not taken care of in the household, before we enter public space, we cannot hope to bring our most authentic selves to political discussions. Arendt sees this movement as making us publicly subject to emotionally swaying information, which microtargeting relies on, suggesting the patterns of modern, political (dis)engagement that she identifies are what provides political microtargeting with a seemingly suitable environment. Arendt also writes about how public focus has moved outside of organic communities and how this has huge implications for the political connection of individuals. She sees the modern age as defined by these processes of alienation, and as starting with the discovery of the Americas and the invention of the telescope: as people learn more of the space outside that which they share with their local community, the significance of their surroundings shrinks, as they now consider themselves a citizen of the world just as much as they do a citizen of their political community. In her writing of the modern age and the rise of the social, Arendt is clearly identifying a movement of political disenchantment that the presence of microtargeting is indicative of, regardless of its chances of success.



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