Why social media rarely leads to constructive political action

June 12 2024, by Stefan Milne

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While social media platforms are rife with problems—from harassment to misinformation—many argue that the platforms also nurture political movements, such as the Arab Spring and #MeToo.

But in her new book "Log Off: Why Posting and Politics (Almost) Never Mix," Katherine Cross, a University of Washington doctoral student in the Information School, argues that social media may not have much political value. Focused on movements on the political left, Cross looks at how platforms like X and Facebook might bring attention to political causes, yet they do little to cultivate lasting change.

"The idea that tech is political," Cross writes, "sometimes obscures the ways in which social media may be anti-political."

UW News spoke with Cross about the book and why people simply logging off—spending less time on social media platforms—may be the best solution.

Your core argument is that social media platforms are fundamentally "anti-political." Can you explain what you mean by that and why that is?

Katherine Cross: A wave of techno-optimism washed over us in the mid-to-late 2000s, which coincided with the rise of Web 2.0 and contemporary social media. These new platforms no longer siloed you in forums or chat rooms. Instead, you were suddenly able to sort of tap a digital microphone and speak to the whole world at once, with no barriers. That made crowdsourcing a reality.

We started to see major, leaderless protests in Iran, in Central Asia, in Ukraine, in the nation of Georgia. We saw people going out onto the streets, organized in many ways by simply reading social media posts. It seemed almost like magic, like we had bypassed the old power networks and hierarchies of governments and big businesses and unions. This seemed to change the course of history when movements like the Arab Spring protests toppled governments.

But many of my own experiences in online activism made me begin asking what happens next. As I followed up on a lot of these protests, after the cameras went away, there seemed to be little durable change. Yes, governments fell. But the next generation of rulers that stepped in were the same sort of oligarchs as before. Does anyone really believe that Egypt's current president is substantially ideologically different from Hosni Mubarak?

That's the unfortunate story of a lot of these internet-fired movements. #MeToo is another example—the changes were considerably less durable than we had hoped. Time and again, people fixate on moments of individual justice, and they hope that those episodes stand in for collective, structural changes that are more significant and durable. The prosecution of Harvey Weinstein, for instance, was a doubtlessly an accomplishment of the #MeToo movement. Yet even that is being undone.

Crowdsourcing on social media gives the illusion of collective action and power, but it lacks the ability to direct the mass of people towards any kind of sustainable collective goal. You might be able to change one person, but you cannot actually change the world because crowdsourcing is not sustainable organization, and it cannot direct political power.

Do you see the same anti-political patterns playing out in right-wing movements?

I do. Social media compels a fixation on the symbolic, on the gestural, on points of language and aesthetics—things that are much easier to

debate on social media than matters of greater substance. The things we see catch fire are less nuanced policy debates and more like the nonsense that flared up around Dylan Mulvaney accepting that very brief sponsorship from Bud Light. The unbelievable hate directed against her was in many ways readymade for social media, because it was purely gestural and aesthetic.

"I don't like this person because she's trans. Let's debate whether she's a woman, let's debate whether she fits into Bud Light's core demographic, and then let's ruthlessly pile on to her and anyone who defends her and attack the company to demand—what?" Something nebulous, some vibe.

If you want to attack and try to destroy a person, or to be bigoted against a community by singling out a member of that community for abuse, social media is your best ally in that cause. And yet, those on the right also have their own collectivist visions. Some of them dream of a new Reich or perhaps they dream of Gilead. But they're not going to get those things through social media posting.

You argue also that the new, decentralized social media platforms like Mastodon and Bluesky aren't a solution to this broken model that Twitter made popular. What problems do you see with the new platforms and their attempts to fix the trouble with Twitter?

The problem with a platform like Mastodon is that Twitter's culture persists—the callouts, the cliquishness, the harassment campaigns, the prejudice. There are some additional speed bumps in the way of harassment, for instance, but Mastodon really just replicates a lot of the drama-mongering that Twitter became infamous for. I was on a trans-

woman-led Mastodon, and it became subject to a lot of vicious drama from outside that led to the destruction of the server.

Bluesky is even more like Twitter, because even though it can be decentralized into various servers, almost everyone is still on bluesky.social, the primary server. So the experience is very similar to the firehose of content that you got on Twitter. It does overall have less prejudice—far fewer Nazis, which is wonderful.

Certain marginalized communities have built a new home there. People are now able to create their own servers. That should lead to the full decentralization of the platform, making it less vulnerable to, say, a billionaire takeover, which is all for the good.

But I don't know that we are going to solve the bigger problems using anything that even remotely resembles a Web 2.0 platform. I've started posting less on Bluesky, because I realized I was going back to this old place where I'm angry all the time and starting arguments with people.

Instead, I've started focusing on talking to the people that I've met there off the platform or just responding to the posts that I can be pleasant to. But social media is meant to lull you into acting almost automatically, so the fact that you still have to consciously resist indicates that not too much has changed here yet.

That brings us to the title of the book—"Log Off." Can you explain why you arrived at that prescription?

Every time I've felt my perspective shifting for the better, it has come from spending less time on social media and more time reimmersing myself in my community. I also recognized that those of us who were privileged enough to be able to work from home throughout much of the

pandemic ended up spending even more time on social media—the effects of which were resolutely negative.

I saw people go down these rabbit holes of political radicalization and paranoia. I thought, "I know you in person, this isn't you." But they'd migrated much of their social life onto a platform that rewards this new, more toxic, hair-trigger self.

In preliminary research for my dissertation, several [public health experts](#) have told me that Twitter polarized their profession during the pandemic along lines drawn by social media. Historically, their discourse would have been good-faith, behind-the-scenes disagreements about things like transmission mechanisms.

But during the pandemic, some of these researchers gained huge followings, and suddenly they had to please people who were expecting them to take a side. That made it harder for those experts to tell the truth as they saw it, or to adapt what they were saying to new evidence. Public health experts hoped to use Twitter to hold a free, graduate-level seminar for the world.

But instead, suddenly, there were massive camps of fandom in the general public with signs and slogans and half-baked understandings of the minutiae of those academic disputes. So Twitter beefs began getting litigated in the physical world at conferences and universities.

All of this made me think the most effective solution that an individual can take is to spend less time on social media. Ask yourself very seriously, "If I'm trying to use the platform for some political purpose, will it help achieve my goal? And how?" If you can't answer that question, in the affirmative, with details, then you should log off and find a different approach.

Is there anything you want to add?

Social media provides a lot of momentary, individual emotional satisfaction, and it's easy to mistake that for politics. These platforms encourage that individualization. Yes, you are the product, as the cliché goes, but you're also this solitary unit being served. When that happens, you start wanting to satisfy your emotional needs over everything else.

A lot of internet discourse about politics is about venting, the desire to feel heard. It's very therapeutic. But while that may have some value, in a limited sense, it is deeply antithetical to real politics, because politics is never truly about the individual: It's about the collective, the polity. But social media's prioritizing of individual emotion is anathema to real organizing.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Why social media rarely leads to constructive political action (2024, June 12) retrieved 21 June 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-06-social-media-rarely-political-action.html