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SOCIAL MEDIA
IN THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Democracy relies on fair elections, free from interference or manipulation. Today, social networks are becoming increasingly influential across various spheres of life. They are now actively used to distort public opinion. In particular, the growing role of social media in politics was evident during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Their presence in the political landscape raises concerns about their potential to influence democratic principles.

This article is part of a study on the role of social media in democratic processes in the United States, with a particular focus on the 2020 presidential election campaign. It demonstrates that social media played a significant role in U.S. democracy, especially during the 2020 election. While social media contributed to greater public engagement and increased voter participation, it also exacerbated social polarization and created opportunities for foreign interference. However, before the 2020 presidential election, foreign interference remained relatively low and had minimal impact on the election outcome. J.Biden managed to achieve deeper engagement through multiple social media interactions with a well-structured strategy. As a result, he won the elections, in part due to the active involvement of social media.

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Соціальні медіа у президентській виборчій кампанії США 2020 року

Демократія базується на здатності проводити чесні вибори, вільні від будь-яких форм втручання чи маніпуляцій. Сьогодні у світі спостерігається процес активного залучення соціальних мереж у різні сфери життя. Їх стали активно використовувати для спотворення громадської думки. Зокрема, ми бачимо зростання використання соціальних мереж в політиці, наприклад під час президентських виборів у США 2020 року. Присутність у соціальних мережах дозволяє нам говорити про можливий їх потенціал зміни певних демократичних принципів.

Ця стаття є елементом дослідження використання соціальних медіа в демократичних процесах Сполучених Штатах Америки. Особливу увагу приділяється президентській виборчій кампанії 2020 року. У роботі доведено, що соціальні медіа відіграють важливу роль у демократії Сполучених Штатів, зокрема під час президентських виборів у США 2020 року. Соціальні медіа, з їх недоліками та перевагами, значною мірою вплинули на результат виборів, насамперед збільшенню залученості громадськості та активізації політичної участі виборців. З іншого боку, соціальні медіа також викликали суспільну поляризацію в США та відкрили можливості для іноземного втручання. До виборів у США 2020 року іноземне втручання було відносно низьким, тому воно не мало достатнього впливу на результати виборів.

Трамп і Байден стали двома кандидатами, які розуміли цей потенціал соціальних мереж і прагнули залучити виборців кожен у свій спосіб. Завдяки правильно структурованій стратегії Байден зміг досягти глибшої взаємодії через численні взаємодії в соціальних мережах. У результаті Байден переміг на виборах, зокрема і завдяки активному залученню соціальних мереж.

Ключові слова: *США, вибори, соціальні медіа, боти, дезінформація, президентська виборча кампанія 2020 року.*

Problem Statement. In recent years, the world has been confronted with the emergence of social media in global politics (Mechkova & Wilson, 2021). Public communication and the way the public captures and responds to information is an important part of democracy (Lee & Xenos,

2019). The importance of this direction has led to the fact that delivering messages to the public requires obtaining important positions and considerations for the political elite. These considerations include options to deliver messages to the public, other elites, and the press to impact the opinion of voters and attract volunteers and supporters to mobilize voters (Owen, 2017).

The world of information and communication technologies has experienced rapid development since 2000. The evolution of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others makes social media a potentially powerful political tool. More and more social media users in the United States are also starting to talk about politics. The influence of social media gained momentum during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Then presidential candidate Barack Obama had a strategy of using social media and organizing political support at the grassroots level (Bimber, 2014; Karami et al., 2022).

The use of social media increased in popularity with Barack Obama's 2008 campaign video on BarelyPolitical.com under the title Yes, We Can. The slogan managed to attract millions of viewers (Wallsten, 2010). Since then, social media has become increasingly popular, being actively used by governments around the world, and being involved in political campaigns and political movements. It has become a new force in the overall media system. It is worth mentioning the opinion of political commentator Bruce Bimber, who directly points out that "The development of democracy is closely related to technological development" (Bimber, 2014: 130).

In this context, social media have become a key intermediary between voters and politicians. The United States remains a leader in these processes.

On the other hand, there are opportunities for political players to work more and more actively to shape, even limit the influence of the digital public (the part of society that actively uses the capabilities of digital technologies) on the political sphere. Thus, on November 19, 2016, the New York Times criticized the failure of Facebook to stop spreading lies on the eve of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Garrett, 2019). Additionally, Twitter and other social media were also considered to be interested in spreading misinformation, alternative facts, and fake news (Karami et al., 2022). This threatened the ability of institutional media to investigate false facts created by social media or propaganda through computer networks (Garrett, 2019).

There is a lot of evidence of the fake news spread during the 2016 U.S. presidential election as part of Russia's propaganda efforts. This suggests that social media provide opportunities for governments in other countries to promote propaganda and frame information in ways that are potentially damaging to the democratic and political order of that country (Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017). That new American reality also created a new landscape for American democracy in the 2020 presidential election. The rapid development of the Internet may provide a new perspective on politics and democracy. The impact of social media on democracy in the United States is a very interesting issue that can be understood by analyzing social media as the mediator in establishing political interactions between the political elite and the public. The role of social media is to improve political knowledge and political participation, which directly affects democratic processes. We can observe this reflection in social media and democratic concepts through political participation.

Analysis of research results. We can speak about R. Anderson, M. Badham, K. Valentini, O. Hotsur, Yu. Danko, L. Smola, M. Haide, K. Shvets and other Ukrainian and foreign scholars as theorists and practitioners who explore digital media and social networks in election campaigns. These authors consider digital media and social networks in their works as tools for political campaigning for effective election campaigns. It should be noted that every year these tools are improved, or new ones appear that have not been used in the political arena yet, and their impact on society is unknown. Accordingly, there is an issue of understanding the capabilities of social media in the election process following new realities. Since this article discusses the place of social media in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, it is based on American sources and development results of American researchers, information analysts, and political strategists.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of social networks in the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign.

Presentation of research findings. Social media are Internet services designed for mass distribution of content, where the content is created by the users themselves, and the author can be anyone, in contrast to traditional media, where the authors are a pre-selected and limited number of people (Lomborg, 2014). The term 'social media' means the use of web and mobile technologies to transform communications into interactive dialogues (Lomborg, 2015). Social media allow people to communicate more easily with anyone around the world, and to better perceive the ideas

of the authorities. Social network users are a very diverse circle of people in their understanding, characters, professions and political preferences. That is, there is an ideological diversity of social media users who have different interests (Lee & Xenos, 2019).

Social media are, in fact, a product of communicative capitalism, the original purpose of which is not to impact political processes in any way (Gayo-Avello, 2015). However, the messages that were sent through these social networks managed to shape public opinion. Social media became an attractive political tool. The capabilities of social networks allow, first of all, to quickly reach wide audiences. Social media created political discourse and polarization in their development, which could have wide political consequences (Van Dijck, 2013).

The rise of social media and the production of information that can be shared by anyone has led to the disappearance of trusted local news from the media landscape. Unlike local media, there is no response to filtered information on social media. Misinformation is often accepted as a fact and is spread unchecked using social media (Bucay et al., 2017). Many researchers argue that misinformation spreads faster on social media than truth (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Many people are unaware that they spread fake news through their social media feeds. People are more likely to forward false stories through their networks because those stories are considered more likely to evoke emotional reactions from readers (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Millions of automated bots and fake accounts can easily flood the network with tweets and retweets. The bot quickly outpaced spam detectors installed on all social media platforms (Manjoo, 2017).

In the case of news presentation, social media can enhance online news. Social media can be perceived by a larger number of readers than print media. However, another strength of social media is that it is an alternative for users to get entertainment. In this case, social media also replaced the more traditional use of the Internet. More and more people are looking for online news using social media rather than on the Internet or the regular web (Baer, 2022). In this context, the power of social media in influencing public opinion is enormous. In Montesquieu's tripartite system, power is distributed according to the principle of separation of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial branches. However, with the strengthening of the concept of mass media, the media emerged as an influential independent force in the liberal and pluralistic democracy. In the same way, the use of the Internet, information technology, and digital communica-

tions has the potential to become another new force of democracy (Dutton, 2009).

All of the above can be used to analyze the influence of social media on the course of the 2020 presidential campaign in the United States. Earlier, the American political community began to actively apply the principles of using social media (primarily Twitter due to its popularity there). Therefore, their active involvement in the 2020 election campaign was not a surprise for experts and analysts. The most popular method was using political advertising on social networks as a way to campaign for candidates. Political campaigns with content on social networks allowed candidates to communicate with potential voters and directly build political discourses following their desires. The advertising campaigns were even able to attract voters who had not previously participated in the elections. The wide range of social media also allowed candidates to increase publicity, confirm criticism, and even highlight the weaknesses of their competitors (Knoester & Gichiru, 2021).

The phenomenon of using social networks as a tool for political campaigns still causes a lot of controversy. Social media have the potential to be a bridge in political communication. On the other hand, social media also contribute to the emergence of populists in politics, who try to appeal to voters using their resources and proclaim populist slogans that are not supported by anything. The U.S. Federal Election Commission stated that social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. were very harmful to democracy (Costa-Font & Ljunge, 2022). Additionally, the number of social media users in the United States was steadily growing every year. By 2020, the number of social media users reached 80% of the population, which was 1% more than the previous year (Tankovska, 2021). This became a potential for political candidates to campaign using social media: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter to Snapchat. Social media became an important tool for candidates to reach a wide audience. Social media can spread information to millions of people in seconds. This made social media very efficient for election campaigns.

In 2020, social media also played an important role in the presidential election between presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Social media became the tool for disseminating information among supporters of both candidates. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to physical restrictions on political campaigns. That is, social media did play an important role in the process before the presidential election. On

the other hand, social media also raised certain issues. First of all, the dissemination of information from two candidates led to the fact that voters were divided into two camps – one camp supported the Democrats, and the other – the Republicans (Karami et al., 2022). We can preliminarily state that social media had a great impact on the American political system, both positive and negative. In the United States, social media became an effective tool for reaching voters during the 2020 presidential campaign, especially as a means of communication with them during the pandemic. However, as the negative moment, the social media seemed to have divided the country into two opposing camps.

The integrity of the U.S. presidential election, which took place on November 3, 2020, raised concerns among both the U.S. leadership and the public. Official investigations and independent researchers released numerous documents on foreign interference in the presidential election, including manipulation of social media (Bessi and Ferrara, 2016; Guess, et al., 2020; Galdieri, et al., 2018; Ferrara, 2015). According to information analysts, the number of political tweets on social media increased significantly on the eve of the presidential election. According to various estimates, more than 240 million election-related tweets were recorded in the United States between June 20 and September 9, 2020. According to many experts in the digital media market, this became a catalyst for manipulation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. This was mainly done through automation (primarily due to the prevalence of bots) and distortion (e.g., narrative manipulation, conspiracy, or rumor spreading). In addition, analysts noted the coordination of efforts by Russia, China, and several other countries in manipulations using social media during the presidential campaign (Ferrara et al., 2020). Researchers managed to make clear connections between bots, hyperpartisan media and conspiracy groups, suggesting systematic efforts to distort political narratives and spread misinformation. The Russian Internet Research Agency's efforts to sow division and distort the social media debate in 2016 led to numerous indictments (Federal Bureau, 2018) and documented strategies and tactics used by trolls and bots (Strudwicke and Grant, 2020; Kriel and Pavliuc, 2019; Baie et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020).

The automation of social media manipulation in politics is often referred to as computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard, 2018). In recent years, it has been actively used both in the United States during electoral processes and in other countries, such as Poland, Germany,

Taiwan, Brazil and Ukraine. Manipulation of social media was also observed in areas outside of politics (Ferrara, 2015), such as health care (Jiang et al., 2020) and finance (Nizzoli et al., 2020). Of course, manipulation can occur in different media channels, such as news portals and traditional media (Quandt, 2018).

Let us attempt to characterize social media manipulation in the context of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. According to the study by a group of American scientists led by Emily Chen (Chen, et al., 2020), during the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign, suspicious activity was observed on social networks, which, according to the authors, directly indicated the spread of disinformation and voter manipulation in favor of one of the candidates. More than 240 million tweets related to upcoming events were analyzed for the period from June 20 to September 9, 2020. This observation period included several important political events in the U.S. electoral process, namely the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) conventions. Using the combination of state-of-the-art machine learning and human verification technologies, the researchers point to two signs of voter manipulation: automation of the process, that is, evidence of the introduction of automated accounts that are managed primarily by software rather than humans; and distortion of information, in particular, characteristic narratives of political discussions, such as introducing inaccurate information, conspiracies, or rumors. The researchers concluded that such actions were a sign of the intentional dissemination of false information with a specific purpose to provide preferences for one of the candidates (Chen, et al., 2020). One more conclusion made by the authors was the assumption that the structures most interested in such actions were those associated mainly with Russia and China.

Countries around the world have begun to pay attention to the increasing influence of social media on the outcome of general elections since 2010. In the United States, the influence of social media on election results was also the subject of increased debate (McKinney, 2021). The increase in politicians' social media activity to boost their popularity had become the confirming evidence of their active involvement in the presidential campaign in the United States. After the 2016 elections, the American civil society was greatly influenced by the development of digital technologies. The first evidence of possible interference by foreign countries in the U.S. campaign through social and other digital media emerged. Numerous 'fake news' and programmed propaganda using technology became a se-

rious threat in the U.S. elections in 2016 and especially in 2020 (Persily & Stewart III, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic environment limited offline campaign activities at that time. This led to the need for election campaigning, voter mobilization, and other election activities to be carried out using digital technologies. It means that social and digital became more important in the 2020 presidential race.

After 2016, or more precisely after the election campaign, social media became an important tool for the Trump team to communicate with voters. However, various studies indicated that in the 2020 elections, the response to the Republican party's Twitter decreased compared to the 2016 elections (Fujiwara et al., 2020). The public responded less to Trump's tweets and did not like his tweets (Fujiwara et al., 2020). In the same study, researchers analyzed data on the political preferences of voters on Twitter concerning various cross-sections, such as demographics. And it turned out that on the eve of the 2020 elections, there were 25% more users who considered themselves Democrats than Republicans. In addition, Democratic politicians were also more popular on Twitter than Republican politicians (Fujiwara et al., 2020).

McKinney assessed in his study changes in the Republican party campaign rhetoric in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. He noted that there had been a certain adjustment regarding Trump's populist messages. This was primarily because most voters did not believe the promises of the Republicans led by Trump. The public expressed distrust in the organization of voting during the previous elections by the Republicans, which could affect the level of support for the party candidate. This process led to a loss of popularity and trust in Trump on the eve of the 2020 elections, including on social networks (McKinney, 2021).

The election results confirmed Donald Trump's low popularity on social media compared to support for Joe Biden. The poll conducted after the elections on November 3, 2020, found that 60% of voters who supported Joe Biden on social media legitimized him as president. On the other hand, in the same poll, 70% of Republican participants said the Democratic candidate was not legitimately elected (Persily & Stewart III, 2021). Those findings highlighted the polarization of public opinion and the distrust emerging among voters, politicians, and institutions.

In addition to disinformation, social media can be used in ways that have the potential to increase popularity and public support. This, in particular, was implemented by Joseph Biden's team. A few days before the

2020 presidential election, Biden's team reported that he had surpassed Donald Trump on social media using certain modern methodologies. But on Twitter, Trump's fan count was higher than those of Biden. The Biden team then developed a system to engage more closely with followers, which helped them communicate better, responding to new issues of concern as the campaign progressed. Following a similar pattern, Biden got a head start on other social media outlets like YouTube and even Twitch. Analysts discussed Biden's high-profile social media campaign (Davis, 2021).

The social media campaign for the 2020 U.S. election was quite dynamic. The candidates offered different approaches. Both candidates' supporters also actively campaigned for them on social media. Both teams involved celebrities who supported their candidate in running their social media pages. There was a lot of information coming from both camps, and it even contradicted previous information sometimes. However, such an active process still had one big advantage, namely, both teams were able to increase voter engagement because of the power of social media. The voters had an opportunity to get involved in the political processes in the country through the capabilities of social media.

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Looking at the Biden team's system of social media use, it can be argued that social media played a significant role in it. Realizing the advantage of social media, the entire campaign was carefully designed relying on social media. The campaign of Biden was discussed and prepared in a structured way based on sociological analytical data. It was the conclusion of Sarah Galvez, director of social media development. She emphasized that Biden's team managed to catch the voters' preferences, they realized that the public was not very interested in political issues, but rather wanted answers to basic questions. Therefore, they built the campaign by answering simple questions from the public, especially first-time voters, by carrying new concepts, ideas, and innovative and creative thinking (Davis, 2021).

A variety of information disseminated on social media prior to the 2020 presidential election was also able to influence the decisions of young people, especially those who had never voted before. These aspiring voters actively monitored social media to gather information relevant to the things both presidential candidates were talking about. The PBS study found that young people had a good grasp of political issues and presidential election phenomena thanks to social media. The PBS poll called News Hour Student Reporting Labs in January 2020 found that first-time voters expected major changes after the 2020 election. They wanted a new government that

could change the political climate and the country as a whole. The views of young people during the 2020 presidential election had a greater impact on the overall outcome because the number of young voters in that election was higher compared to the 2016 election (McKinney, 2021).

Social media are particularly useful as a place to find information for someone and as a place to demonstrate political participation. This means that social media emerged as a new platform to communicate one's political thoughts. One may or may not agree with this consideration, but debates and exchanges on social media have become the new standard today. The supporters of both candidates tried to post everything on social media to draw public attention to their chosen one. On the other hand, they actively debated their opponents on social media if they didn't like the other candidate's rhetoric and arguments. But later, during the election campaign, information about interference in social media discussions from abroad appeared.

During the 2016 presidential election, foreign state interference in the U.S. presidential election via social media was proven. However, during the search conducted by the National Intelligence Council, the United States stated in its post-election report that it believed that the threat from states outside the United States regarding the U.S. elections did not sufficiently affect the results of the 2016 elections. A similar decision was made after the 2020 elections. Nevertheless, the National Intelligence Council recognized attempts to interfere in the election process by several countries, such as Russia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Iran. The increasing use of the Internet and social media created opportunities for foreign countries to influence voters by interfering with the U.S. election process. However, the United States believes that public awareness of media in the United States is growing, so the country can counter foreign threats over social media (NIC, 2021).

Most voters in the USA recognized that they received more misinformation from social media and cable news. They also recognized that this plethora of disparate misinformation could influence voters' views. A Knight Foundation poll found that 81% of United States citizens were convinced that the misinformation they received had an impact on the outcome of the 2020 election. About 62% of the public believed that misinformation spread through social media had influenced the outcome of the election (Brenan, 2020). Also, the majority of U.S. citizens argue that misinformation influenced the election results, believing that the spread of

the misinformation mainly came from individual publications by the U.S. public (Jones, 2020).

Conclusions. Social media play an important role in American democracy, particularly during the 2020 presidential election. On the one hand, social media increased public engagement and political participation. On the other hand, they polarized society in the United States and also opened up opportunities for foreign countries to interfere with the electoral process. However, foreign interference was minimal before the 2020 presidential elections, so it did not have a sufficient impact on the election results. The primary drivers of social media manipulation in the context of the 2020 U.S. presidential election were bot usage and misinformation.

The potential of social media to unite the masses regardless of their political beliefs became a monumental experience for all involved, including the candidates, their teams, and the electorate. Both Donald Trump and Joe Biden were two candidates who realized the potential of social media. They both utilized social media in their way to engage potential voters. Donald Trump was confident that he would have more followers on social media. However, using thoughtful and timely measures and highlighting the benefits of social media, Joe Biden managed to achieve a deeper engagement with voters through social media. As a result, Biden won the election because he actively engaged social media.

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