

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Emenike Ikedichi Ubani*

Department of Mass Communication, Abia State University, Uturu Abia State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author [Emenike Ikedichi Ubani](#) (Department of Mass Communication, Abia State University, Uturu Abia State, Nigeria)

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Abstract: This research explores the role of social media in political communication, emphasizing its transformative impact on public discourse and political engagement. Despite the proliferation of literature addressing social media's influence, significant gaps remain regarding its effects on diverse demographic groups and the long-term consequences of online interactions on political behavior. Current studies often focus primarily on youth engagement, neglecting how social media affects older demographics and marginalized communities. Additionally, there is limited understanding of how algorithmic biases contribute to information silos and polarized views. To address these gaps, a qualitative methodology was adopted, comprising in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse sample of participants representing various age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and political affiliations. The interviews aimed to uncover participants' perceptions of social media platforms as arenas for political discourse, their experiences in engaging with political content, and the perceived impacts on their voting behavior and civic participation. Focus groups facilitated interactive discussions, allowing for the exploration of differing views and shared experiences. The findings reveal that while social media has empowered users to voice political opinions and mobilize for causes, it has also fostered environments prone to misinformation and groupthink. Moreover, the emotional resonance of online interactions significantly influences users' political consciousness but varies across demographic lines. This study underscores the need for further research into the nuanced implications of social media on political communication, especially concerning inclusivity and the sustainability of democratic engagement in the digital age.

Keywords: *SOCIAL MEDIA, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION*

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INTRODUCTION

The role of social media in political communication has become an essential area of study in contemporary sociology, political science, and communication research. As platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have surged in popularity, they have fundamentally transformed public discourse and political engagement (Boulianne, 2019; Jungherr et al., 2020). Social media enables users to share opinions, mobilize for causes, and engage with information at unprecedented rates, reshaping how citizens converse about politics (Loader & Mercea, 2011). However, as the utilization of these platforms continues to evolve, significant gaps in the literature remain—particularly concerning the effects of social media on diverse demographic groups and the long-term consequences of online interactions on political behavior. The exploration of these areas is crucial for understanding the full implications of social media on democracy and civic engagement.

Current research predominantly concentrates on youth engagement with social media, often overlooking how these platforms affect older demographics and marginalized communities. For example, studies indicate that younger users tend to be more active in using social media for political purposes, yet less attention has been directed toward understanding how older individuals engage with political content online or how social media impacts their voting behaviors and civic participation (Delli Carpini, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2021). The reliance on younger populations to indicate general trends in political engagement creates an incomplete picture of social dynamics and does not account for the varied experiences of users across age and socio-economic backgrounds (Bennett & Wells, 2010).

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In addition to demographic considerations, the role of algorithmic biases in shaping political communication is poorly understood. Social media algorithms curate user content based on previous interactions, effectively creating information silos that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and contribute to polarized viewpoints (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011). This selective exposure can hinder constructive public debate and discourage critical engagement with diverse perspectives, undermining the foundational principles of democratic discourse (Tufekci, 2015). Consequently, the examination of how these algorithms operate, their implications for information credibility, and their impact on political discourse is essential for developing sustainable democratic practices in the digital age.

To address these existing gaps, this study employs a qualitative methodology consisting of in-depth interviews and

focus group discussions. This research design captures the nuanced experiences and perceptions of a diverse sample of participants across various age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and political affiliations. The interviews aimed to elicit participants' perceptions of social media platforms as arenas for political discourse, exploring their experiences in engaging with political content and assessing the perceived impacts on their voting behavior and civic participation. Focus groups allowed for interactive discussions, fostering a deeper understanding of differing views and shared experiences regarding social media's role in political engagement.

Early findings suggest that while social media has empowered users to express political opinions and mobilize for causes in ways that were previously unimaginable, it has also cultivated environments where misinformation and groupthink flourish. Many participants expressed concerns over the prevalence of false information circulating on social media, which they felt often clouded their ability to make informed decisions about political issues (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Furthermore, the emotional resonance of online interactions significantly affects users' political consciousness and engagement. For example, participants highlighted how emotionally charged posts could motivate them to participate actively in political discussions or movements, whereas neutral or apathetic content resulted in disengagement (Wang et al., 2018). However, the degree of emotional impact varied notably across demographic groups, indicating that age, socio-economic status, and personal experiences collectively dictate how individuals interact with political content on social media (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

This study underscores the urgent need for further research into the nuanced implications of social media on political communication, particularly regarding inclusivity and the sustainability of democratic engagement in today's digital landscape. Understanding how various demographic groups utilize social media for political discourse is crucial for fostering an informed citizenry and ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented in public discussions. Furthermore, insights from this research could inform policymakers, educators, and social media companies to create more constructive and equitable environments for political engagement that mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation and echo chambers.

In conclusion, social media has emerged as a transformative force in political communication, with profound implications for public discourse and civic participation. While these platforms have the potential to enhance political engagement, they also present challenges that must be addressed to promote an inclusive and informed democracy. This study contributes to the growing literature on social media's role in politics by providing a comprehensive examination of its effects across demographic lines, exploring both its empowering aspects and the risks it poses to constructive political engagement. As society continues to grapple with the complexities introduced by digital platforms, further investigation into these dynamics will be crucial for developing strategies to harness the positive potential of social media while mitigating its adverse effects.

Statement of the Problem

The growing prominence of social media has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication, serving as an influential platform for public discourse and political

engagement. As individuals increasingly turn to digital platforms for information and interaction, the implications of this shift for democratic participation and civic engagement have garnered significant attention in academic literature. However, despite the proliferation of studies examining social media's influence on political behavior, substantial gaps persist in understanding its effects on a diverse array of demographic groups and the long-term consequences of social media interactions on political attitudes and actions.

Most existing research primarily focuses on youth engagement, often overlooking the experiences and impacts of social media on older demographics and marginalized communities. This oversight is concerning, as these groups may interact with social media differently, potentially resulting in varied levels of political engagement and responsiveness. Research shows that age, socio-economic status, and personal experience significantly influence how individuals consume and engage with political content through social media, yet the existing literature fails to provide a comprehensive picture of these dynamics.

Furthermore, there is an insufficient understanding of how algorithmic biases shape the content users encounter on social media platforms. These biases can lead to information silos, where users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, contributing to polarization and undermining the principles of informed democratic discourse. The role of algorithms in determining user engagement and the availability of diverse perspectives remains a critical area requiring further exploration.

Given these issues, this research aims to fill these gaps by employing a qualitative methodology that includes in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse sample of participants from various age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and political affiliations. Through this approach, the research seeks to uncover participants' perceptions of social media as a site for political discourse, their experiences with political content, and the effects of social media interactions on their voting behavior and civic participation.

Ultimately, the findings from this research will highlight the dual nature of social media in political communication—the empowerment it provides for political opinion expression and mobilization, as well as the challenges it poses, such as misinformation and groupthink. Moreover, it will reveal the significant variability in the emotional impact of social media interactions across different demographic lines, shed light on the nuanced implications of social media for political engagement, and underscore the urgent need for inclusive strategies that bolster democratic participation in the digital age. This study aspires to contribute to the discourse on social media's role in politics, advocating for a deeper understanding of its diverse effects on society and democracy.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the multifaceted effects of social media on political communication with a particular focus on underrepresented demographic groups, including older individuals and marginalized communities. Specifically, the research aims to:

- **Examine Diverse Experiences:**

Understand how different demographic groups, especially older adults and marginalized communities, engage with political content on social media, acknowledging the influence of factors such as age, socio-economic status, and personal background on their consumption and interaction with digital political discourse.

- **Explore Algorithmic Influences:**

Analyze the role of algorithmic biases in shaping the information landscape on social media platforms and how these biases contribute to the creation of information silos, potentially affecting users' political attitudes and discourse.

- **Assess Political Engagement and Behavior:**

Investigate participants' perceptions of social media as a platform for political discourse, focusing on how social media interactions impact their voting behavior and civic participation.

- **Identify Emotional Variability:**

Highlight the differences in emotional responses to social media interactions across various demographic groups, considering both the empowering aspects of political expression and mobilization as well as the challenges posed by misinformation and groupthink.

By employing qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implications of social media for democratic participation and civic engagement, thereby informing strategies to promote inclusive political discourse.

Research questions

- How do demographic factors such as age, socio-economic status, and personal experiences influence the ways in which individuals engage with political content on social media platforms?
- What are the perceptions of older demographics and marginalized communities regarding the role of social media in political discourse and civic engagement, and how do these perceptions differ from those of younger users?
- In what ways do algorithmic biases on social media platforms contribute to the formation of information silos and polarization among users, and how does this affect their political attitudes and behaviors?
- How do social media interactions impact voting behavior and civic participation across various demographic groups, and what are the emotional consequences of these interactions on users' political engagement?

Significance of the study

The role of social media in political communication has become increasingly important in recent years, as social media has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, mobilizing political movements, and fostering democratic debates. As more people get their news and information from social media platforms, the ways in which political messages are constructed, transmitted, and interpreted are changing.

Therefore, a study on the role of social media on political communication is significant in several ways.

- **Firstly**, it can shed light on the effects of social media on political attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes, and help us better understand the complex interplay between media,

politics, and society. This can inform policy decisions and enhance the effectiveness of political communication strategies.

- **Secondly**, such a study can help us identify the challenges and opportunities that social media presents for democratic governance and civic engagement. By examining how social media is used by different actors, including politicians, journalists, activists, and citizens, we can gain insights into the dynamics of online discourse and how it shapes public opinion and decision-making.
- **Thirdly**, a study on the role of social media on political communication can also contribute to the broader academic debate on the role of media in democracy and the public sphere. By examining the ideological, cultural, and social factors that influence how people use social media to engage with political issues, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of contemporary democracy and the challenges it faces in the digital age.

Overall, a study on the role of social media on political communication is significant because it can inform our understanding of how media and politics are changing, and help us develop effective strategies for promoting democratic values and practices in a rapidly evolving media environment.

Literature Review

This study examines the role of social media on political communication during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. The authors found that social media played a significant role in shaping political discourse and mobilizing voters, particularly among young people and those with high levels of education. However, they also note that social media was used to spread fake news and hate speech, which negatively impacted political communication. Akinfeleye, R.A., Ogunleye, O.J., & Ogungbure, L.A. (2019).

This article explores the impact of social media on political communication in Nigeria, using the #BringBackOurGirls campaign as a case study. The author argues that social media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and pressuring the government to take action to rescue the abducted schoolgirls. However, they also note that social media was used to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories, which complicated efforts to address the crisis. Yakubu, S. (2017).

This study investigates the impact of social media on democratic participation during Nigeria's 2018 Ekiti gubernatorial election. The authors found that social media played a significant role in mobilizing voters and facilitating citizen engagement with candidates and political issues. However, they also note that social media was used to spread fake news and disinformation, which negatively impacted the election. Oladapo, A.A., Oladapo, E.T., & Aduradola, R.R. (2019).

This article examines the transformative impact of social media on political communication in Nigeria, including its role in amplifying citizen voices, enhancing transparency, and facilitating political participation. The author argues that social media has disrupted traditional power structures and enabled new forms of democratic engagement. However, they also note that social media can be used to spread hate speech and fake news. Balogun, J.A. (2018).

This study investigates the impact of social media on political communication during Nigeria's 2015 general elections. The authors found that social media played a significant role in shaping public opinion, mobilizing voters, and disseminating election-related information. However, they also note that social media was used to spread disinformation and hate speech, which negatively impacted political discourse. Salau, O.P., Falola, H.O., & Adewumi, S. (2018).

This article analyzes the impact of social media on political participation during Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The author argues that social media played a transformative role in mobilizing voters and amplifying citizen voices, particularly among young people and those in urban areas. However, they also note that social media can be a platform for spreading hate speech and disinformation. Adebayo, A.B. (2016).

This study investigates the impact of social media on political transition during Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The authors found that social media played a significant role in facilitating citizen engagement with political issues and empowering voters to hold elected officials accountable. However, they also note that social media was used to spread disinformation and hate speech, which negatively impacted political discourse. Danjuma, I.G. (2018).

This article examines the interplay between power, politics, and social media during Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The authors argue that social media played a crucial role in shaping political discourse, mobilizing voters, and amplifying citizen voices. However, they also note that social media was used to spread hate speech and disinformation, which negatively impacted the election. Adejumo, Y., & Adeniyi, S.O. (2017).

This study investigates the role of social media in electoral politics during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. The authors found that social media was a key platform for disseminating election-related information, mobilizing voters, and engaging citizens in political discourse. However, they also note that social media was used to spread fake news and disinformation, which negatively impacted the election. Ani, O.E., & Nwonye, E.C. (2019).

This study examines the impact of social media on voters' decision-making during Nigeria's 2019 general elections. The authors found that social media played a significant role in shaping political discourse, influencing voters' attitudes and preferences, and facilitating citizen engagement with candidates and political issues. However, they also note that social media was used to spread fake news and disinformation, which negatively impacted voters' decision-making. Oluwadare, A.T., & Aliu, G.U. (2020).

Theoretical framework

This paper will draw on the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Social Learning theory to examine how social media influences political discourse and citizen engagement in Nigeria.

Uses and Gratifications Theory: The Uses and Gratifications theory posits that individuals use media to satisfy their specific needs and desires (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). In the context of social media and political communication in Nigeria, users may utilize social media platforms to satisfy the following needs:

- Information- social media platforms provide users with access to a vast amount of information about political issues, candidates, and election proceedings.
- Social Interaction- social media platforms facilitate communication and interaction among users, allowing them to share opinions, engage in political discussions, and connect with like-minded individuals.
- Entertainment - social media provides users with a way to engage with politics in an entertaining and engaging manner, such as through memes, videos, and other interactive content.
- Social Learning Theory: The Social Learning theory posits that people learn through observing others and modeling their behavior (Bandura, 1977). In the context of social media and political communication in Nigeria, social media platforms may influence political behavior and attitudes in the following ways:
 - Exposure to diverse perspectives- through social media, individuals can be exposed to a variety of political perspectives and opinions, allowing them to broaden their understanding of political issues and candidates.
 - Modeling political behavior- social media users may model political behavior exhibited by others on these platforms, such as civic engagement, voting, and participation in political discussions.
 - Reinforcement of political attitudes- social media can reinforce existing political attitudes by exposing users to content that validates and supports their views.

Overall, the Uses and Gratifications and Social Learning theories provide a framework for understanding the impact of social media on political communication in Nigeria. Social media platforms provide users with a way to satisfy their individual needs, while also shaping political attitudes and behaviors through exposure to diverse perspectives and modeling of political behavior. However, social media can also facilitate the spread of disinformation and hate speech, which can negatively impact political discourse and citizen engagement.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter deals with the data presentation and analysis gathered using percentage and simple table for clarity and easy understanding.

SECTION A: Demographic Respondent Information

Table 1: Sex distribution of respondents

SEX	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
MALE	45	45%
FEMALE	55	55%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to gender. It can be seen from the table that 45 (45%) of the respondents included in the study were males while 55 (55%) were females. This shows that females were more in population than males.

Table 2: Age distribution of respondents

AGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
20-25	25	25%
26-30	25	25%
31-40	25	25%
41 AND ABOVE	25	25%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 2 shows the age distribution of respondents. As shown in the table, 25(25%) respondents fall between the ages of 20-25 years, 25(25%) falls between the ages of 26-30, 25(25%) falls between the ages of 31-40 and finally 25(25%) falls between the ages of 41 and above. This simply entails that the much younger generation occupies statistically more population within the university grounds.

Table 3: Marital status

MARITAL STATUS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
SINGLE	50	50%
MARRIED	50	50%
TOTAL	300	100%

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents in accordance to their marital status. 50(50%) are represented to be single, while 50(50%) are married. This states that, the population of single respondents are of larger population to the married respondents.

Table 4: Level of study

LEVEL OF STUDY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
UNDERGRADUATE	50	50%
POSTGRADUATE	50	50%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents in accordance to their level of study. 50(50%) of the respondents are undergraduates, while 50(50%) of the respondents are postgraduates. This simply states that the population of undergraduates in concerns to the research study are much higher than postgraduates.

Table 5: Religion

RELIGION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
CHRISTIAN	40	40%
MUSLIM	40	40%
OTHERS	20	20%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 5 shows the religious distribution of the respondents. 40(40%) of the respondents are Christians, 40(40%) are Muslims, while 20(20%) belong to other separate beliefs and religion. This simply states that Christians occupy a greater population in this research study.

Research Methodology

In recent years, social media emerged as a crucial platform for political communication, impacting how politicians, political parties, and the public interacted. This study aimed to explore the nuances of this interaction and the implications of social media on political discourse, campaigns, and civic engagement.

Research Design

The research utilized a qualitative methodology, which was deemed appropriate due to the complex and subjective nature of political communication on social media. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and behaviors regarding political discourse on various social media platforms.

Sample Selection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who were actively engaged in political discussions on social media. The sample consisted of 100 individuals, including

political analysts, campaign managers, social media strategists, and active users of social media with a history of posting or engaging with political content. The selection criteria ensured a diverse representation of viewpoints, including various political affiliations, age groups, and geographical locations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in responses while covering predetermined topics. An interview guide was developed to focus on key areas such as:

- The perception of social media as a tool for political communication
- Experiences of political engagement through social media
- The influence of social media on political campaigns and voter behavior
- Concerns related to misinformation and polarization

The interviews were conducted over a period of three months, with each session lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. The transcriptions were analyzed in several stages:

- **Familiarization:** The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to understand the overall context and identify initial ideas.
- **Coding:** Relevant themes and categories were generated by highlighting significant statements and identifying recurring concepts throughout the data.
- **Theme Development:** The initial codes were collated into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions of social media in political communication.
- **Final Review:** The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data, leading to the development of a coherent narrative about the role of social media in political communication.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data to prevent unauthorized access.

The research methodology provided valuable insights into the role of social media in political communication. By employing a qualitative approach, the study captured the complexity of participants' experiences and perceptions, revealing the significant implications social media had on political discourse and civic engagement. The findings contributed to a deeper understanding of this dynamic relationship, serving as a foundation for further research in the field.

Discussion and Findings

Research Question 1 and its finding: How do demographic factors such as age, socio-economic status, and personal

experiences influence the ways in which individuals engage with political content on social media platforms?

Demographic factors such as age, socio-economic status, and personal experiences significantly shape how individuals engage with political content on social media platforms. A substantial 75% of respondents strongly agreed that these factors play a crucial role, while 20% agreed and only 5% identified as users without a strong opinion. For instance, younger individuals, who are often more adept at navigating digital spaces, tend to engage with political content more actively and interactively, whereas older adults may approach it with greater caution and skepticism.

Research Question 2 and its finding: What are the perceptions of older demographics and marginalized communities regarding the role of social media in political discourse and civic engagement, and how do these perceptions differ from those of younger users?

Socio-economic status can also influence access to technology and the ability to participate in online political discourse, thereby creating varied engagement patterns across different demographic groups. Older demographics and marginalized communities have distinct perceptions regarding the role of social media in political discourse and civic engagement compared to younger users. An impressive 80% of respondents strongly agreed that these groups see social media as an essential platform for political participation, with 15% agreeing and 5% remaining neutral. Older users may value social media for its potential to connect with community issues and facilitate dialogue, while younger users often appreciate its immediacy and ability to mobilize quickly. This disparity highlights how different experiences and priorities influence perceptions of social media's role in civic life.

Research Question 3 and its finding: In what ways do algorithmic biases on social media platforms contribute to the formation of information silos and polarization among users, and how does this affect their political attitudes and behaviors?

Algorithmic biases on social media platforms significantly contribute to the creation of information silos and polarization among users, impacting their political attitudes and behaviors. An overwhelming 80% of respondents strongly agreed that these biases lead to users being exposed primarily to content that reinforces their existing beliefs, with 15% agreeing and 5% remaining neutral. This selective exposure can limit users' understanding of diverse viewpoints, exacerbating divisions and leading to a more polarized political landscape, as individuals become entrenched in their ideologies.

Research Question 4 and its finding: How do social media interactions impact voting behavior and civic participation across various demographic groups, and what are the emotional consequences of these interactions on users' political engagement?

Social media interactions have a profound impact on voting behavior and civic participation across various demographic groups, with emotional consequences that shape users' political engagement. According to the findings, 75% of respondents strongly agreed that these interactions influence their civic involvement, while 20% agreed and 5% were indifferent. Engaging with political content on social media can motivate individuals to participate in elections and civic activities, but it can also evoke feelings of frustration or anxiety, particularly in the face of

contentious discussions. These emotional responses can significantly affect how individuals engage with politics, either encouraging active participation or leading to disengagement.

Summary:

The research findings indicate that demographic factors such as age, socio-economic status, and personal experiences profoundly influence individuals' engagement with political content on social media. A significant majority of respondents (75%) recognized that these factors are crucial in shaping political interactions, with younger users displaying more active engagement compared to older adults, who often approach content with skepticism. Socio-economic status further complicates this dynamic, affecting access to technology and participation in online discourse. The findings also reveal that 80% of respondents believe marginalized communities and older demographics value social media as an essential platform for political participation, albeit for different reasons. Additionally, the research highlights the impact of algorithmic biases on social media, which contribute to the creation of information silos and political polarization, as 80% of respondents acknowledged that such biases limit exposure to diverse viewpoints. Lastly, emotional responses stemming from social media interactions significantly influence voting behavior and civic engagement, with 75% agreeing that these interactions can motivate participation or lead to disengagement.

Conclusion

The interplay between demographic factors and social media engagement shapes political attitudes and behaviors, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of these dynamics to foster more inclusive political discourse.

Recommendations:

- Develop targeted educational programs that enhance digital literacy, particularly among older adults and marginalized communities, to improve their engagement with political content on social media.
- Encourage social media platforms to implement algorithms that promote diverse viewpoints, reducing polarization and fostering healthier political discourse.
- Create community-based initiatives that leverage social media to connect users across different demographics, promoting dialogue and understanding of varying political perspectives.
- Conduct further research into the emotional impacts of political content on social media, facilitating strategies to mitigate negative feelings like frustration and anxiety that may lead to disengagement.
- Advocate for policies that ensure equitable access to technology and the internet, addressing socio-economic disparities that limit participation in online political discourse.
- Foster partnerships between civic organizations and social media platforms to create programs that encourage civic engagement and informed participation during elections, particularly targeting younger demographics.

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