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**Online Discourse becomes Offline Discord:  
How Algorithmic Technologies on Social Media  
Facilitated the United States Capitol Attack**

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Leiðbeinandi: Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, nýdoktor  
Júní 2023

**STJÓRN MÁLAFRÆÐI DEILD**

**Online Discourse becomes Offline Discord:  
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Facilitated the United States Capitol Attack***

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Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í stjórnmálafræði  
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## **Formáli**

Þessi ritgerð er lokaverkefni mitt til BA prófs í stjórnmálafræði við Háskóla Íslands. Hún var unnin vorið 2023 og er metin til 12 eininga (ECTS) af 180 eininga námi í stjórnmálafræði. Ritgerðin var skrifuð undir frábærri leiðsögn Jóns Gunnars Ólafssonar, sem leiddi mig hnökralaust í gegnum ferlið. Að auki, vil ég þakka Jack Turner fyrir að trúa á mig og veita mér hvatningu þegar ég þurfti hana mest. Ég vil einnig þakka tvíburasystur minni, Hrafnhildi Davíðsdóttir, fyrir að læra með mér í óteljandi klukkustundir. Að lokum vil ég þakka móður minni, Þórarinnu Söebeck, fyrir uppbyggilegan yfirllestur á ritgerðinni.

## **Abstract**

Since its creation, social media has become a fundamental component of daily life and human society. But as was reflected in the violent attack on the United States Capitol building on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the expanding role of social media and the algorithmic technologies they build on today has also brought about various consequences. This dissertation aims to examine the role of social media algorithms in the facilitation of the Jan. 6 attack. It can be argued that the algorithmic technologies on social media platforms played a central role in the attack by generating an optimal environment for hateful rhetoric to blossom. As the dissertation makes clear, the attack was not perpetrated by one party but displayed the combined effort of many. The theoretical foundations provide a deeper understanding of relevant concepts such as the inner workings of algorithms and their drawbacks, the human psychological dimensions of social media algorithms, and the ever-changing role of social media. A selection of social media platforms, including Facebook, Reddit, and the website TheDonald.win, as well as the Trump campaign and its supporters will receive the spotlight, to pinpoint where the faults that facilitated the attack are located. One conclusion of the dissertation showcases the exploitable nature of algorithms, which both the Trump campaign and its supporters utilized to amplify their message on social media. Another effect of algorithms is the extent to which they determine the information diets of social media users, which can result in online radicalization, the creation of ‘echo chambers,’ and limit the ability to participate in public discussions. The most important conclusion is perhaps that social media and its algorithms were ultimately not an active perpetrator but rather a powerful facilitator of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.

## Útdráttur

Frá tilkomu þeirra, hafa samfélagsmiðlar orðið sífellt mikilvægari þáttur í daglegu lífi og mannlegu samfélagi. En líkt og kom í ljós í tengslum við ofbeldisfullu árásina á bandaríska þinghúsið þann 6. janúar 2021, hefur vaxandi umfang samfélagsmiðla og algóritmanna sem þeir byggja á einnig haft víðtæk og neikvæð áhrif. Þessi ritgerð miðar að því að kanna hlutverk algóritma samfélagsmiðla í árásinni. Margir vilja halda því fram að algóritmar á samfélagsmiðlum hafi gegnt lykilhlutverki með því að stuðla að ákjósanlegu umhverfi fyrir hatursorðræðu að blómstra. Fræðilegi kafli ritgerðarinnar veitir svo dýpri skilning á viðfangsefninu, svo sem hvernig algóritmar virka, fyrir hvað þeir hafa verið gagnrýndir, sálfræðilega vídd algóritma, auk þess síbreytilega hlutverk sem samfélagsmiðlar gegna í samfélaginu. Líkt og niðurstöður ritgerðarinnar varpa ljósi á, var árásin ekki framkvæmd af einum aðila, heldur var um að ræða sameiginlegt átak margra. Í meginmáli ritgerðarinnar verður kastljósinu beint að Donald Trump og stuðningsfólki hans, auk nokkrum mismunandi samfélagsmiðlum, svo sem Facebook, Reddit, og vefsíðunni TheDonald.win, í því skyni að rekja nákvæmlega hvað olli árásinni. Ein af niðurstöðum ritgerðarinnar varpar ljósi á hvernig hægt er að misnota algóritma, sem bæði herferð Trumps og stuðningsmenn hans nýttu sér í haginn til að magna upp skilaboð sín á samfélagsmiðlum. Önnur áhrif algóritma eru að hve miklu leyti þau geta stýrt upplýsingaflæði til notenda samfélagsmiðla, sem getur meðal annars leitt til aukinnar róttækni (e. radicalization), myndað bergmálshella, og takmarkað getu til að taka þátt í opinberri umræðu. Mikilvægasta niðurstaðan er ef til vill sú að samfélagsmiðlar og algóritmar þeirra voru ekki virkir gerendur árásarinnar þann 6. janúar, en greiddu götur hennar með áhrifaríkum hætti.

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# 1 Introduction

“I WON THE ELECTION!,” the U.S. president proclaimed on social media mere days after losing the said election.<sup>1</sup> During his incumbency, Donald Trump infamously rode the waves of controversy and discord in American society, which spiraled impressions globally.<sup>2</sup> Before, during, and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, to which Trump lost to his Democratic contender, his remarks either indicated or explicitly declared that an undemocratic process had taken place; many becoming “viral” on social media. These would later be recognized as the efforts that led to the Capitol attack on January 6th, 2021. Since then, the event has been remarked as an attack on democracy, which sounds satirical in a democracy that was once figured a role model.<sup>3</sup>

Social media is playing an ever-expanding role within modern democratic society, potentially possessing the power to shape the way individuals think, behave, and make decisions. Algorithmic technologies have become a popular way for social media to personalize a user’s timeline. Algorithms therefore play a key role in determining the information diet of individuals by creating highly customized feeds. On one hand, this optimizes time spent on the platform, making the experience more engaging and enjoyable. On the other hand, it can enclose individuals within opinion-reverberating echo chambers, which ultimately leads to growing extremes and online radicalization. Furthermore, algorithms can easily be manipulated to foster personal strategies. Therefore, social media algorithms hold major potential to disrupt the way politics and society traditionally work as was materialized on, and in the run-up, of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.

The purpose of this dissertation is to *demonstrate how social media algorithms facilitated the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021*. The analysis will therefore use the Jan. 6 attack as its case study. The attack had observable impacts, reflected by broken windows,

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<sup>1</sup> CBS news, “Trump falsely claims he won the election; Twitter flags the Tweet,” *CBS*, last updated 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-tweet-claims-he-won-election-twitter-flags/> (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wike et al., “Trump Ratings Remain Low Around Globe, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable,” *Pew Research Center*, 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/> (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Tom O’Connor, “Allies Believe U.S. ‘No Longer a Good Model of Democracy,’ Poll Shows,” *Newsweek*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/allies-believe-us-no-longer-good-model-democracy-poll-shows-1599048> (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2023).

stolen documents, and injured police personnel.<sup>4</sup> However, in the context of this dissertation, it can be argued that the less visible factors are key to understanding how and why the attack occurred. This includes algorithms, as the technology and its use has been largely concealed from the public eye but stretches far into daily life. This spans from shifting content on social media to your convenience, through guiding your automated vacuum cleaner, to predicting when and where crime will happen to optimize policing, also known as “crush” policing, which appears as a dystopian reality to most.<sup>5</sup> Despite its proficiency, the technology has recently been under fire in light of vast drawbacks. The exploration of how algorithms function will shed light on how they can be utilized and manipulated. Further looking at their potential and the complications that the technology brings about will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the case study.

Social media is also a key aspect of this research, as it plays a convoluted but important role within society. Like algorithms, social media has quickly become a significant part of daily life for many, providing easier access to news media, professional exchanges, and personal communication. However, this has not come to life without any consequences. As will be explored, social media has had unintended consequences on traditional media, which will be reflected in concepts such as gatekeeping and the fourth age of political communication which will be explored. Additionally, the specific techniques that social media algorithms use to optimize their services, such as playing into human cognition and behavioral tendencies, and their consequences, will be demonstrated. As will be brought to light, the implications of social media algorithms can be isolated to an individual or encompass an entire society.

As the analysis establishes, social media and algorithms were central to facilitating the Capitol attack. For example, Donald Trump and his campaign used social media to stir up discord among American voters, in order to gain popularity. The campaign’s most used mechanisms relied on the intrinsic functions of social media algorithms that fostered their political strategy, by amplifying and spreading the pro-Trump message. His loyal supporters assisted in the spread of his message beyond the perimeters of Trump’s social media accounts. As will be emphasized, his supporters helped create the preconditions that were a key factor in

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Attorneys - District of Columbia, “24 Months Since January 6 Attack on the Capitol,” *The United States Attorney’s Office*, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/24-months-january-6-attack-capitol> (Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Leo Hickman, “How algorithms rule the world,” *The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/jul/01/how-algorithms-rule-world-nsa> (Retrieved 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

setting the scene of Jan. 6. It can also be argued that these preconditions had been developing years before the attack took place. The discussions were moved between platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, and the website of TheDonald.win. Social platforms such as these can enable radicalization and extremism, which was a central aspect in facilitating the Jan. 6 attack. While social media platforms did react to hateful or violent discussions, their procedures were criticized by many for being ineffective. Social media platforms are still considered among the parties held responsible for the Jan. 6 attack, by enabling the online discourse that eventually developed into offline discord.

The dissertation will start by instituting the theoretical foundations in chapter two. This chapter aims to establish a more holistic view of the two concepts disclosed within the purpose of the dissertation: algorithms and social media. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the research question, by shedding light on its context and background. Firstly, algorithmic technologies will be explored, to understand how they work and how they are used. Following this, the second section of the theoretical foundations will address the growing role of social media within modern democracy, and how algorithms work on social media, as it is key to understanding the case study.

The case of Jan. 6 will be utilized as an instrumental case study to demonstrate or provide insight into a wider issue,<sup>6</sup> which is the expanding effect of social media algorithms on democracy, politics, and society. Subsequently, three pillars of democracy: the public sphere, free and healthy media, and a rational public will be discussed before probing the case study. This is done to build a structure for the following analysis which will demonstrate how Jan. 6 shows one extreme abstraction of the wider societal and democratic implications of algorithmic technologies on social media. Thereafter, the case study of Jan. 6 will be explored in detail in chapter three, both the physical impacts and the preceding events. Chapter four will then focus on discussing the drawn conclusions by linking the theoretical foundations to the case study, to establish how algorithmic technologies on social media facilitated the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (California: Sage Publications, 1995), 3.

## 2 Theoretical Foundations

This theoretical framework brings attention to *two* focal areas: the technologies of algorithms and machine learning, as well as the growing role of social media in modern democratic society. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, this theoretical framework is integral to the analysis presented in this dissertation. It will be made apparent that algorithms on social media played a fundamental role in facilitating the events on January 6<sup>th</sup>, in more ways than one.

### 2.1 Algorithms & Machine Learning

The most basic algorithms are based on a simple instruction system, through formatting an action based on previous actions which result in a specific outcome. Over time, algorithms have developed into a more complex form of technology that builds upon computers learning by themselves or from other computers. Thus, modern algorithms are not based on human knowledge and often extend beyond the capabilities of individual thought. This has been termed *machine learning* (ML), a subfield in the study of artificial intelligence (AI), which has become an increasingly prevalent topic. The main goal of ML systems is for computers to gain the power of learning without being explicitly programmed to. From the three types of machine learning: supervised, unsupervised, and reinforcement learning, the research topic in this dissertation focuses on the *unsupervised* version. Here, computers, often termed “bots,” are tasked with finding patterns within unspecified datasets. No previous training is provided for the algorithms and supervision is little to none. An example of this is to study a group of customers who are detected and differentiated based on habits and behavioral patterns.<sup>7</sup>

The main objective of algorithms and ML systems is arguably *optimization*. Some are confident in the potential of AI and ML in solving even the biggest crises humanity faces today. For example, expert Christopher Savoie is positive about the advantages these technologies will entail, including resource optimization, growing food, and crisis predictions. Scholar Philip L. Frana suggests that it could have even more dramatic effects if the exponential growth continues, including bringing issues such as climate change, poverty, and overpopulation to an end. Others are discouraged by the potential dangers of the ever-growing technology. Many fear the potential of the future, such as *technological singularity*, where technology becomes independent from its creator, going as far as presenting the possibility of a human extinction

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<sup>7</sup> Philip L. Frana, “Appendix B: What is Artificial Intelligence,” *Convergence: Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing - Social, Economic, and Policy Impacts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Editor Greg Viggiano (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 242-243.

event. Today, the popular debate over AI is focused on job loss in various fields which is a dangerous reality for many. Moreover, this future is not considered to be far away, as the profession of truck drivers in the U.S. is predicted to become fully automated before 2030, exceeding the need for human operators.<sup>8</sup>

Algorithms are used to optimize a wide array of daily life; from shopping online or watching movies to reading news or communicating with friends through social media. Instead of having to scroll through each movie a streaming service has to offer in a randomized order, an algorithm will provide personalized recommendations as soon as the application is opened, based on prior selections. Netflix even provides different thumbnails representing the same movie if the algorithm thinks one will entice a user more than another.<sup>9</sup> Other forms of algorithms will do the same.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook or TikTok, will customize your feed to your interests based on engagements that an algorithm studies and uses to replicate individual behavioral patterns. Predictions are made by these algorithms who have learned over time what an individual seeks out. Algorithms use various information to generate behavioral data, including your likes, comments, follows, relationship status, subscriptions, repeated actions, and typical duration on the platform, among countless more. Social media algorithms optimize the time spent on the service, making them more convenient and user-friendly. This reduces the annoyance of “wasting” your attention on content that wasn’t essential or interesting to you in the first place. By putting it this way, social media algorithms have saved individuals innumerable hours of unoptimized content consumption.<sup>10</sup> Academic research has demonstrated that people actually express content with the use of social media algorithms, by making online experiences more enjoyable and engaging. This can act as a justification for using the technology. At the same time, the research found contrasting feelings of uneasiness and anxiety. Accordingly, it suggests that reactions to data-collecting and targeted content are ambivalent and interchangeable. This coexistence of these beliefs is what academics have

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<sup>8</sup> Philip L. Frana, “Appendix B: What is Artificial Intelligence,” *Convergence: Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing - Social, Economic, and Policy Impacts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Editor Greg Viggiano (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Simplilearn, “Netflix Recommendations: How Netflix Uses AI, Data Science, And ML | Simplilearn,” *Simplilearn.com*, 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2022. <https://www.simplilearn.com/how-netflix-uses-ai-data-science-and-ml-article>. (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, “How do Social Media Algorithms Work?,” *iED.com*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. <https://ied.eu/blog/technology-blog/how-do-social-media-algorithms-work/> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2023).

termed “oscillatory awareness.”<sup>11</sup> The ethical debate of collecting and using personal data to sustain algorithmic technologies is highly visible today and is by no means undisputed, as will be uncovered below.

### 2.1.1 Data & Ethics

As established previously, algorithms provide optimization and convenience. However, if their functions are used with other intentions, the technology can put users in harm’s way. In recent years, voices questioning the ethics of algorithms have become more apparent. According to privacy expert Sarah Pearce, the laws and regulations meant to harness the technology are “already out-of-date.” This means that algorithms have largely been developed and utilized on an unregulated playing field. According to Pearce, this has created some dangerous complications. For example, algorithms attempt to garner as much information about an individual to keep and utilize for behavior replication. This is essentially their purpose, making the gathering and sharing of personal data a prerequisite for ML & algorithms. By creating a one-way stream of information, the individual has little to no opportunity of regaining the vast personal data the algorithm has extracted itself. Pearce also questions whether individual consent is valid when private companies who ask for it are unsure of their functions themselves.<sup>12</sup> Christopher Savoie also considers the mere capability of bots to accurately predict human behavior to be a privacy concern itself. He refers to it as a *negligent outcome* caused by ML and AI. While also acknowledging its unintentional nature, he states that “governance and guidance” are necessary for the field.<sup>13</sup>

Many users are also not fully aware of the extent to which some services gather data. In her book on *surveillance capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff outlines the lengths some companies will go to in order to capitalize on unassuming users of their services. Simply put, surveillance capitalism surrounds the market of data sharing, that “claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data.” She emphasizes that data is not only gathered and shared to predict future behavior but it is also used to “herd behavior toward profitable

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<sup>11</sup> Minna Ruckenstein & Julia Granroth, “Algorithms, advertising and the intimacy of surveillance,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* (2019): 12. doi: 10.1080/17530350.2019.1574866.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Pearce, “Data Privacy, Security, and Ethical Governance Under Quantum AI,” *Convergence: Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing - Social, Economic, and Policy Impacts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Editor Greg Viggiano (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 37-40.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Savoie, “Quantum Computing’s Beautiful Accidents,” *Convergence: Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing - Social, Economic, and Policy Impacts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Editor Greg Viggiano (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 215-216.

outcomes.” This has created a hugely profitable commerce that Zuboff has termed the “behavioral future market.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Kate Kenny states that the *sale of predictability* violates the right to privacy, determination of our own behavior, and to define the future.

As social media is mostly “free” to use, advertisements are a popular way of income for social media companies. To achieve optimization, algorithms are utilized to aim certain advertisements to specific consumer groups that are likely to show interest in the product or topic.<sup>15</sup> By this logic, the attention of potential customers has become the good that is sold by platforms to private entities. Monetary gain is almost always guaranteed for both parties, while the “cost” is born by the user. Although effective, this process can have negative consequences which will be further explored in the following sections on social media and the highlighted case study.

The process of data harvesting has *not always* relied on the defenseless essence of the user whose information is being harvested. Over two decades ago, Georgia Tech engineers and computer scientists led a project named “Aware Home.” This project resembles modern “smart homes” that exist within a growing market today. The *Aware Home* implemented comprehensive information gathering from its inhabitants through all kinds of devices, such as wearable computer gadgets that monitored the residents’ location, activities, and even medical conditions. The primary goal of the project was to “improve one’s life.” Additionally, the information was only to operate within a “closed loop.” As valuable as it might be to improve other projects if applied, the information was only to be used in ways the inhabitant wished or allowed. Inhabitants were able to choose which information was rendered as behavioral data, and what was not. Through prior explorations, it is clear that this is *not* the reality of modern technology. As Zuboff states, the project of the Aware Home only represents an “archeological fragment reminding us of the road not taken” in the world of technological evolution.

The actual reality can be manifested in contrasting cases such as iRobot’s development of the Roomba, an autonomous vacuum bot. This case reflects a predicament many social media users face today and is therefore relevant for the dissertation topic. In 2017, iRobot introduced a new business strategy for its product that depended on a revenue based on data sharing. A new function of the robot vacuum would enable it to create a map by tracking its own location.

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<sup>14</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2019), 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Kenny, “Surveillance Capitalism and Instrumentarian Power: Singing in our Chains?,” *Journal of Political Power* (20<sup>th</sup> of October 2022): 138-144. Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2023. doi: 10.1080/2158379X.2022.2133821.

This information could then be sold to enterprises such as Apple, Amazon, or Google. This did not go uncriticized as privacy experts raised their concerns over its legitimacy and how user consent would be certified by the company. CEO Colin Angle assured them that individuals would opt-in for the data-sharing function of the Roomba. As Zuboff analyzes, his confidence was not without reason. Roomba’s privacy policy included that the user *can* stop sharing data by turning off Wi-Fi or Bluetooth. What it failed to mention was that if a user rejects the terms, they will lose out on most of Roomba’s functions. This includes controlling the device from your smartphone, receiving automatic updates, and scheduling cleanings.

The Roomba is one of many examples of what Zuboff calls “abusive contracts,” where the conditions of the agreement rely on the suppression of truly free choice. Either the user agrees to invasive data gathering that can be sold and shared, or their options to use the product or service are severely limited or even suspended.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned before, this is also the case with many social media services, despite claiming to be complimentary. Their user agreements go largely ignored by users, with an estimated 97% of young people aged 18-34 accepting the “terms & conditions” without reading them.<sup>17</sup> Their indifference is understandable, as these can take up to 2.5 hours to read, even for a skilled reader.<sup>18</sup> It is highlighted by the fact that social media is getting harder to abstain from without missing out on its perks, such as professional networking, nurturing friendships, or keeping up with important cultural, social, and political affairs. This is what has made social media an ingrained and embraced factor within modern society and has generated various opportunities for individuals and communities alike. But, as I will later analyze, the growth of social media has also indisputably prompted serious consequences.

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<sup>16</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2019), 222-226.

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Cakebread, “You’re Not Alone, No One Reads Terms of Service Agreements,” *Business Insider*. 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/deloitte-study-91-percent-agree-terms-of-service-without-reading-2017-11> (Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Jason Cohen, “It Would Take 17 Hours to Read the Terms & Conditions of the 13 Most Popular Apps,” *PCMag*. 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2020. <https://www.pcmag.com/news/it-would-take-17-hours-to-read-the-terms-conditions-of-the-13-most-popular> (Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2023).



## 2.2 Social Media: Friend or Foe?

In the last decades, social media has played a growing role within modern democracy. Whether this is the role of the protagonist or the antagonist is debatable. Social media has risen to become the top news source around the world, distinctly amongst the “next” generation, making it a pivotal force within future society.<sup>19</sup> To provide a perspective, well over half of the world’s population owns a social media account today. This number is steadily increasing and is estimated to jump to almost six billion users within the next five years.<sup>20</sup> On the other end, the prospects of traditional media (including television, radio, and newspapers) have been declining and it was finally surpassed by social media in the U.S. five years ago, in terms of minutes spent on both types of media.<sup>21</sup>

The power of social media itself is intensified with this growing outreach. Many have realized the power of social media and use it to elevate their activities. Whether it is to market your product more effectively by paying for targeted advertisements, become an influencer with a brand-deal-based income, promote a humanitarian cause, or increase your political reach for an upcoming election; social media can offer you tools that traditional media cannot. This is most likely due to structural differences, such as the *gatekeeping* component that isn’t as apparent on social media compared to traditional ones. For reference, gatekeepers, such as professional journalists or editors, carry out informed filtering and selection of content to publish on traditional media. This is to ensure a truthful and reliable narrative that is imperative to democracy.<sup>22</sup> Contrastingly, virtually everyone can act as their own journalist on social media, filtering their consumed and published information directly. The term “gatewatcher” has been created to describe this phenomenon. Social media has the ability to remove filters to new and alternative ideas that don’t fit the status quo. This is what makes social media as powerful for social movements as it is. Traditional media, in turn, tends to marginalize groups that protest the dominant system, through unflattering portrayals in news media or outright exclusion from

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<sup>19</sup> Nic Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2022*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Reuters & University of Oxford, 2022), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Oberlo, “How Many People Use Social Media in 2023?,” *oberlo.com*. <https://www.oberlo.com/statistics/how-many-people-use-social-media> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>21</sup> A. Guttman, “Time spent with digital vs. traditional media in the U.S. 2011-2023,” *statista.com*, 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/565628/time-spent-digital-traditional-media-usa/> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Dennis Lighare, “Gatekeeping in the Wake of New Media,” *Medium.com*, 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2019. <https://medium.com/tunapanda-institute/gate-keeping-in-the-era-of-new-media-3585251d0743> (Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

any coverage.<sup>23</sup> It can thus be argued that social media can be of benefit to democracy; a notion that can be revealed in some real-life cases that are identified below.

For example, social media famously facilitated a series of democratic movements against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, that came to be known as the *Arab Spring*. Through social media, information could be spread more easily, protests organized more efficiently, and the mobilization of citizens became more powerful; making the platforms a key factor behind the democratic shift.<sup>24</sup> This demonstrates the initial confidence in social media when it first emerged. The growing technology of social media was considered a beacon of hope for democracy; providing a way to share information between foreign areas of the world and between citizens locally.

At the same time, the democratic potential of social media has faded for many since then. Contrasting cases can be found that illustrate this discouragement. For example, social media was utilized by the undemocratic Syrian regime to violently target individuals who oppose them, by earmarking the same behavior that made the Arab Spring so powerful.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, Russian hackers infiltrated the 2016 US election process by using bots and paid advertisements on various social media platforms. The campaign was “designed to provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States,” which was arguably symbolized by the success of the Trump campaign. This case does not stand alone in a global context as many similar ones can be found, where social media is used to undermine democracy.

Due to the dimensions of social media, and its potential to cause friction, many countries have administered temporary or permanent suspensions of certain platforms. In some instances, the blocking of sites such as Facebook in some countries, e.g., China and North Korea, is considered an undemocratic practice. At the same time, the “censorship” of Facebook was thought imperative in the United States to upkeep civil rest and protect democracy before the

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<sup>23</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. “Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising” *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

<sup>24</sup> Adam Smidi & Saif Sahin, “Social Media and Social Mobilisation in the Middle East: A Survey of Research on the Arab Spring,” *Urban Studies* 52, no. 11 (August 2015): 196-198, Retrieved 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. doi: 10.2307/48505308.

<sup>25</sup> Cyberwar, season 1, episode 5, “Syria’s Cyber Battlefields,” hosted & written by Ben Makuch, aired 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 2016, on TV-14.

<sup>26</sup> Reuters, “Social Media: A double-edged sword in Syria,” *reuters.com*, 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-social-media-idUSTRE76C3DB20110713> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2023).

2020 elections.<sup>27</sup> In 2023, U.S. lawmakers have been battling to ban TikTok, as they believe the application gives political power to China by providing sensitive data from American people.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, social media has also been the place of origin and growth of movements that are generally thought progressive and democratic. This includes the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, where protests and donations were largely organized on social media.<sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> In addition, the rewriting of the Icelandic Constitution is an example of how a democratic government used social media to mobilize and engage citizens for a collaborative project.<sup>31</sup> All these cases demonstrate the debate on whether social media promotes democracy or rather pushes it towards disintegration. The latter view has become more common in light of cases such as the one explored in this dissertation. Taking note of the aforementioned discussions, many continue to view the relationship between social media and democracy as a double-edged sword.

Many argue that social media is radically changing traditional communication of news<sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> while others boldly believe that it will eventually take over, “destroying the way society works”<sup>34</sup> or becoming a “threat to human civilization.”<sup>35</sup> Either way, social media is having an enormous impact on society as we know it. To trace this evolution, scholars such as Blumler,

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<sup>27</sup> Craig Silverman et al., “Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show,” *ProPublica and Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show> (Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Brendan Borderlon, “Biden and Congress want to ban TikTok. At this point, it may be impossible.,” *Politico*, 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/16/why-washington-wont-ban-tiktok-00091690> (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Brooke Auxier, “Social media continue to be important political outlets for Black Americans,” *Pew Research Center*, 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/11/social-media-continue-to-be-important-political-outlets-for-black-americans/> (Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>30</sup> Jamillah B. Williams et al., “#MeToo as a Catalyst: A Glimpse into 21<sup>st</sup> Century Activism,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 2019 (2019), 371. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol2019/iss1/22>

<sup>31</sup> Bjarki Valtýsson, “Democracy in disguise: the use of social media in reviewing the Icelandic Constitution,” *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (14<sup>th</sup> of November 2013), retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. doi: 10.1177/016443713507814

<sup>32</sup> Monica Anderson & Andrea Caumont, “How social media is reshaping news,” *Pew Research Center*, 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/24/how-social-media-is-reshaping-news/> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. “Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising” *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

<sup>34</sup> Trevor Haynes, “Dopamine, Smartphones & You,” *Harvard University*, 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2018. <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/> (Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Siona Singletary, “Is social media destroying humankind?,” *TEDxSydney*, n.d. <https://tedxsydney.com/idea/is-social-media-destroying-humankind/> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

Gurevitch, and Kavanagh have divided the general development of political media into different eras, characterized by different features and qualities. For reference, the *first* and *second ages* of political communication ended just before the beginning of the new millennium. The first one was characterized by the domination of press media and the latter by the introduction of television; both within a political environment that was less fragmented compared to the modern one. The following *third age* promoted media abundance, accompanied by ideological fragmentation and identity politics; only heightened by online advancements such as the Internet and multi-channel televisions.

The aforementioned scholars have since suggested that advancements in digital technologies have pushed democracies towards a looming *fourth age* of political communication. The worrying shortcomings of the third age have only been amplified within this era, representing a negative trend in society. The trend impacts everything from extreme inequality to population growth, neoliberalism, climate change, and lastly, the field of political communication. Aeron Davis argues that for most developed democracies, this age has already arrived. Furthermore, Davis poses a premise of a democratic crisis that has been led by diminished trust in experts and institutions, nationalism, identity politics, and polarization, aggravated by infodemics and information overload. Melanie Magin and colleagues describe the fourth age as a form of new communication, unlike Davis, who outlines it as a full-on democratic crisis. One thing is clear; the progression and popularization of social media and other information & communication technologies (ICTs) *has* had a large impact on communities worldwide.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 1-10.

### 2.2.1 The Human Dimension of Social Media Algorithms

The undoing of the once positive reputation of social media has only been accelerated by the introduction of new technologies such as algorithms and machine learning. As explored in the first section of this chapter, algorithmic methods have now been integrated deep into the functions of social media. Their functions play into human emotion and cognitive processes that largely contribute to their favorable performance. This helps them optimize *and* maximize the time spent on the platform. The latter is to maintain their revenue from digital advertisements, which made up more than half of all global expenditure towards advertisements in 2020.<sup>37</sup> To accomplish this goal, algorithms tend to feed into human emotions to produce an abrupt “shock” reaction filled with dopamine that our mind craves.<sup>38</sup> This keeps individuals in a constant engagement state, upkept by push notifications and personalized recommendations. Furthermore, social media exploits the psychological need for interpersonal relations, according to expert Anna Lembke. Rewarding dopamine releases that motivate repeating actions are an example of evolutionary functions in humans, that are being considered when generating algorithmic traits on social media.<sup>39 40</sup>

The consequences of this, and that are of great relevance in this dissertation, relate to the concepts of *filter bubbles* and *echo chambers*. The first idea of a filter bubble is a specified process where algorithmic engines devise “a unique universe of information for each of us,” by filtering information and news through personalized requirements. Eli Pariser highlights three apparent elements that set digital filter bubbles apart from traditional filtering (such as gatekeeping): its *solitude*, its *invisibility*, and the *absence of choice* to enter the bubble.<sup>41</sup> This can create an echo chamber, where an individual is surrounded by confirming information and other individuals who share the same views. The concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers

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<sup>37</sup> Statista Research Department, “Digital advertising spending worldwide from 2021 to 2026,” *statista.com*, 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/237974/online-advertising-spending-worldwide/> (Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. “Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising” *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

<sup>39</sup> Devika Girish, “‘The Social Dilemma’ Review: Unplug and Run,” *The New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/movies/the-social-dilemma-review.html> (Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>40</sup> Tristan Joshua Alba, “Social Media is Making Us Dumber,” *Medium.com*, 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2020. <https://medium.com/@tristan.j.alba/social-media-is-making-us-dumber-d4b4a23f096e> (Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Press, 2011), 19.

are sometimes used interchangeably, although the latter one refers to a phenomenon that has long existed before social media, while the first one directly refers to the consequences of social media and algorithms.

Filter bubbles and consequent echo chambers can limit one's point of view, banishing alternate beliefs and reverberating ideas that reflect their own.<sup>42</sup> These impacts are further enabled by *confirmation bias*. This bias refers to the preference of views and information that conform to beliefs already held by the individual *and* the disinclination of opposing ones. This can lead to selective exposure and sharing, as it impacts how individuals decide on what information to consume and share with others.<sup>43</sup> Social media algorithms have also been found to appreciate our *popularity* and *bandwagon* biases, noticing that users are more likely to share and like content with previous engagement by others. As engagement is not an attested way to measure the quality of content, algorithms based on these cognitive biases lead to an overall lowering of content quality.<sup>44</sup> Last, but not least, is the *mere exposure* bias that traces the human tendency to favor information that they have been repeatedly exposed to. This bias applies to almost any piece of information, true or false. It can make false information sound more believable with increased repetition of exposure.<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> Cognitive biases such as these have always existed, although social media and algorithms have elevated their drawbacks. This will be further exhibited in my discussions on democracy and the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

A further deep dive into psychology can prove a fruitful approach, as it lies at the core of the research topic. Online extremism and radicalization, combined with the concepts of *in-groups* and *out-groups*, can provide a beneficial insight that ties social media algorithms to general decision-making and behavior. First, we can define *online extremism* as individuals or groups with “doctrinally extremist” views that engage and execute their activism online.

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<sup>42</sup> Matteo Cinelli et al., “The echo chamber effect on social media,” *PNAS* 118, no. 9 (2021): 1. Editor Arild Underdal. doi: 10.1073/pnas.2023301118

<sup>43</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. “Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising” *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

<sup>44</sup> Filippo Menczer, “Here’s exactly how social media algorithms can manipulate you,” *BigThink*, 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2021. <https://bigthink.com/the-present/social-media-algorithms-manipulate-you/> (Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Gordon Pennycook et al., “Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 147, no. 12 (2018), retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. doi: 10.1037/xge0000465.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Stafford, “How liars create the ‘illusion of truth’,” *BBC Future*, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

Second, *radicalization* defines an inwards process of holding progressively more extreme views over time. As researcher Jeffrey Riley highlights, this is severely heightened by the use of online means. Digital groups appeal to the desire to belong and allow individuals to discover others who possess the same ideas. These often represent the in-group, where homogeneous, like-minded people are favored. Meanwhile, the out-group is mocked and ostracized by the in-group, referred to as “the others.” This also applies to ideas based on non-truth, where online groups give their followers a sense of confidence through solidarity. Expectedly, research has identified a stronger disparagement towards out-groups within more extreme political ideologies. As Riley points out, the information-seeking that occurs within digital in-groups is limited by the ideological parameters, disregarding non-conforming knowledge, which often creates a feedback loop of convincing misinformation.

A prevalent pipeline for radicalization is social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. There, people come in contact with content or individuals that can push them towards a more radicalized platform, or a “home base.” Algorithms arguably feed into online radicalization by promoting phenomena such as *rabbit holes* where an individual’s attention is cultivated as his recommendations get more extreme. Furthermore, sociologist Zeynep Tufekci states that social media algorithms are even powerful enough to target individuals with content they are predisposed to engage with; *even though* no such behavior was exhibited prior. Again, this is done in a purely capitalist pursuit, as this can inherently be purchased by anyone with around \$30 and a motive.<sup>47</sup> Further political implications of algorithms on social media will be investigated in later sections, showcasing where the digital spills over into reality.

To summarize, the preceding theoretical framework delved into algorithms, social media, and the relevant discussions that often arise when reviewing the two. Taking note of said framework, I aim to analyze the events that unfolded on January 6<sup>th</sup> in the following chapter, through the lens of the aforementioned concepts. This will trace the preconditions present for the attack to take place, as well as the democratic ideals they potentially pose a threat to.

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<sup>47</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “We’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads,” *TedGlobal*-speech, September 2017. [https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep\\_tufekci\\_we\\_re\\_building\\_a\\_dystopia\\_just\\_to\\_make\\_people\\_click\\_on\\_ads/transcript#t-707551](https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep_tufekci_we_re_building_a_dystopia_just_to_make_people_click_on_ads/transcript#t-707551) (Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2023).

## 3 An Attack on Democracy

### 3.1 A Democratic Perimeter

Before examining the case study, that has notoriously been called “*an attack on democracy*,” central democratic ideas must be clarified to define what is potentially being attacked. To establish a clear frame of analysis, I will focus on three central pillars of democracy: *the public sphere*, *free and healthy media*, and a *rational public*. As emphasis is often put on citizens being informed in democracy, which relies on shared, reliable, and accessible communication,<sup>48</sup> these three pillars are considered highly important in a modern democratic context. They will be examined through the lens of new ICTs, including algorithms and social media. The pillars will establish a lens through which the instrumental case study of Jan. 6 can be examined, to demonstrate the wider implications of social media algorithms.

The first pillar I will explore is *the public sphere*. In short, the public sphere is an imperative aspect of democracy, allowing citizens to discuss different ideas in an inclusive, participatory, and rational manner. Some have been pessimistic about the idea of public spheres being effectively implemented in mass democracies, as they find it unworkable with large populations. Others found the idea fully feasible in light of new ICTs such as social media. Social media has provided society with a largely unlimited platform for discussions and sharing opinions, much like the idea of the public sphere. Contrastingly, social media algorithms tend to rupture larger spheres into smaller, enclosed spaces, termed filter bubbles and echo chambers, making the idea of a public sphere shrink into mere “sphericules.”<sup>49</sup> As the modern information diet is largely supplied to users by algorithms that feast on gathered data by social media, it is important to explore the relationship between algorithms and the public sphere. Zeynep Tufekci suggests that by supplying different information and news to different people, algorithms are making public debate impossible,<sup>50</sup> by limiting exposure to diverse information. Eli Pariser states that in a healthy democracy, citizens need to have the ability to reposition themselves within other points of view. In his academic discussion on filter bubbles, he affirms that this

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<sup>48</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “We’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads,” *TedGlobal*-speech, September 2017. [https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep\\_tufekci\\_we\\_re\\_building\\_a\\_dystopia\\_just\\_to\\_make\\_people\\_click\\_on\\_ads/transcript#t-707551](https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep_tufekci_we_re_building_a_dystopia_just_to_make_people_click_on_ads/transcript#t-707551) (Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2023), 15:12.



ability is unattainable when citizens are placed in “parallel but separate universes.”<sup>51</sup> It is also relevant to refer to Aeron Davis’ discussions on digital democracy that conclude “... the public sphere is disintegrating and that is proving very difficult for democracies everywhere,”<sup>52</sup> which reaffirms this argument.

The second pillar of democracy I will be expanding on is the concept of free and healthy media, which is often considered a key to a healthy democracy. This pillar is important in many democratic regards, including maintaining an informed electorate to participate sensibly within democracy. When social media was initially introduced, it was complimented as a democratic instrument that would protect individual liberties and limit the government’s ability to dominate media discourse.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, it gives citizens access to a near abundance of information, making the public more exposed to knowledge than ever before. Despite great aspirations, this changed landscape has not been without various consequences. The abundance of choice and information online has now resulted in some avoiding news consumption due to *information overload*.<sup>54 55</sup> Furthermore, the disintegration of traditional gatekeeping has prompted the dwindling quality checks of published content in general. For many, this represents a “fundamental shift” that is raising democratic concerns internationally.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, this has created a *post-truth* environment, where lies are more persistent, more embraced, and less penalized than ever before, as author Ralph Keyes defines it.<sup>57</sup> Among other implications, this has allowed false information to thrive online, upkept by algorithms that favor the engagement it attracts. This demonstrates the potential of social media and algorithms to undermine the democratic pillar of healthy media.

Lastly, the third pillar explored is also considered a prerequisite of a functioning democracy; a *rational public*. Alan Touraine states that democratic societies *depend* on the

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<sup>51</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble – What the Internet is Hiding From You*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>52</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 187.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Nic Newman et al., *Digital News Report 2022*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Reuters & University of Oxford, 2022), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Maximilian Conrad & Tómas Joensen, “Post-Truth Politics,” *Post-Truth Politics, Nationalism and the (De)Legitimation of European Integration*. <https://ams.hi.is/en/projects/post-truth-politics/> (Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Janusz Grygień , *Democracy in the Post-Truth Era – Restoring Faith in Expertise*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Translated by Dominika Gajewska, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 2.

public will to behave responsibly and *rationality* within them.<sup>58</sup> In this context, the word rational simply means something such as a decision or an action that is based on logic, clear thought, and understanding.<sup>59</sup> Research has shown that the use of social media can degrade intelligence, by negatively affecting your ability to cut distractions and retain focus. Algorithms on social media play a leading role within this premise, as their key role is to grab the user's attention and hold on to it for long as possible. By doing this, algorithms promote a never-ending loop of content that leads to mindless scrolling, which can lead to social media addiction. In essence, it can be said that the consumption of endless content on social media can reduce individual intelligence. Individuals can hardly be blamed, as content is intentionally arranged by algorithms to entice your attention for as long as they can, as social media capitalizes on it. In 2017, a Reuters Institute survey revealed that more people receive their news through algorithmic means in comparison to actively seeking news information from certified sources.<sup>60</sup> This arguably shows the extent to which algorithms bear weight within our personal life and information diet, which in turn affects our decision-making and behavior. To a great degree, algorithms remove choice and agency, providing "immediate gratification and pleasurable affects with great precision." In a political context, scholar Ignas Kalpokas has suggested that algorithms and politics no longer stand as independent entities. Instead, they merge into a posthuman era of "algorithmic politics," where people are nudged into making political "choices" that were already predefined.<sup>61</sup> Referring back to Touraine's definition, "public will" seems irrelevant in this new light. By uprooting political choice and agency, alongside the stupefaction of social media users, algorithms on social media undermine the pillar of a rational public.

These three dimensions of democracy show the scope of the research topic at hand. The argued disintegration of public spheres, elimination of traditional gatekeeping, and removing agency from the political process manifest the implications of social media algorithms from a wider point of view. Together, they demonstrate the further horizon that the span of algorithms

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<sup>58</sup> Alain Touraine, *What is Democracy?*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Oxfordshire, London: Routledge, 1997), 111-125.

<sup>59</sup> The Britannica Dictionary, "Rational," *Britannica*, n.d. <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/rational> (Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>60</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 209.

<sup>61</sup> Ignas Kalpokas, "Affective Encounters of the Algorithmic Kind: Post-Truth and Posthuman Pleasure," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (2019), 11, retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023. doi: 10.1177/2056305119845678.

and social media reach, and potentially pose a threat to. This is meant to be exemplified by the case study but remains observed as a wider concern for democracies around the world.

### 3.2 The Attack

“*We fight like hell,*” the soon-to-be dethroned president cheered to his audience.<sup>62</sup> It was January 6<sup>th</sup> of 2021 when Donald Trump faced democratic defeat, which was quantified by over seven million votes in the elections in 2020. Instead of accepting the results, he preached about an illegitimate process as he egged his supporters on to march toward the Capitol building. Meanwhile, both chambers of the U.S. Congress were assembling there to verify the results of the same elections.<sup>63</sup> Despite describing his intention for the upcoming protest as “peaceful and patriotic,”<sup>64</sup> the following consequences to come revealed a cynical contradiction. The infamous Capitol attack has been dubbed an *insurrection* by many, *domestic terrorism* by some,<sup>65</sup> while others gravely deem it an *attack on democracy* itself.<sup>66</sup>

Just past noon on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, Donald Trump conducted an hour-long speech near the White House in Washington D.C. He mentioned everything from fake news media to big tech, to the “China virus” and the constitution. Simultaneously, the crowd was chanting phrases such as “Fight for Trump,” “We love you,” and “Send it back.” The latter one referred to urging Mike Pence, the Vice President, to send the votes back for recertification, as Trump had falsely insisted that the states themselves had wished for the action. During his speech, Trump spread inaccurate accounts that outline the 2020 elections as illegitimate. These ideas were not introduced in that speech but had been circling around on his social media for months. For example, he stated that absentee ballots had often been counted without registration, that voter signatures hadn’t been allowed to be verified, that Republican poll watchers had purposefully been removed from the scene due to a “fake” pipe-bursting, and that illegal ballot

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<sup>62</sup> Brian Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part Of Impeachment Trial,” *NPR*, 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>63</sup> Brian Duignan, “January 6 U.S. Capitol Attack,” *Britannica*, last updated 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/event/January-6-U-S-Capitol-attack> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>64</sup> Brian Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part Of Impeachment Trial,” *NPR*, 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>65</sup> Brian Duignan, “January 6 U.S. Capitol Attack,” *Britannica*, last updated 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/event/January-6-U-S-Capitol-attack> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2021).

<sup>66</sup> Lacy Crawford, “January 6<sup>th</sup> Was an Attack on Democracy Itself,” *Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights*, 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.lawyerscommittee.org/january-6th-was-an-attack-on-democracy-itself/> (Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

scanning had occurred after the count was supposed to end.<sup>67</sup> The last pretense had previously given birth to the infamous “Stop the Steal” catchphrase, which decorated many insurrectionist placards on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Less than two hours after Trump’s address, thousands of his supporters had made their way from ‘the heart of America’s democracy’ to the Capitol building.<sup>68</sup> It would not be long until they had caused a total lockdown of the Capitol, including the Congress certifying the election results. It is commonly believed that it was a part of Trump’s aim to schedule the rally for the same day as the assembly, as to hinder the result certification process. The Capitol’s manpower was caught off-guard by the scale of the riot, which would later reflect in their profound unpreparedness and lethal consequences. According to a report, officers protecting the Capitol, that were already lacking resources and significantly under-manned, were instructed to defer from using more powerful weapons as leadership had deemed violence “improbable” prior to the attack. This miscalculation would advance the riot’s damage that could potentially have been averted.<sup>69</sup> In addition, the D.C. mayor had called for the deployment of federal Army forces; that would not be actualized until four hours had passed from the plea when the Capitol had already been cleared and secure. This was considered another fault in the response, which didn’t lie in a lack of overall resources but rather in unhasty authorization processes that obstructed the mobilization of assisting personnel. A common thread throughout the attack response was sufficient resources implemented with insufficient means.

On the other side of the conflict, rioters had been preparing “for war,” sharing details online that would later become part of their combat strategy. This included things from the weapons they would be bringing to blueprints of the Capitol tunnel system.<sup>70</sup> Among other intentions, attackers called for violent confrontations of those they esteemed as traitors of their nation and democracy. Singled out as targets were Trump’s Vice President Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Chanting threats and even carrying

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<sup>67</sup> Brian Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part Of Impeachment Trial,” *NPR*, 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>68</sup> BBC, “Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021?,” *bbc.com*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>69</sup> Luke Broadwater, “Capitol Police Told to Hold Back on Riot Response on Jan. 6, Report Finds,” *The New York Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/capitol-police-riot-report.html> (Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>70</sup> Luke Broadwater et al., “Capitol Police Detail Failures During Pro-Trump Assault,” *The New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/politics/capitol-riot-police.html> (Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

physical specimens of said threats, such as hanging devices meant for Pence<sup>71</sup> or firearms meant for Pelosi;<sup>72</sup> it was not up for debate whether violence was on the cards. Fortunately, they remained physically secure during the attacks, being escorted out of their chambers on facing sides of the Capitol building. However, the devastation of the attack was brutal, directly taking the lives of five people and injuring hundreds more;<sup>73</sup> ultimately affecting the hundreds of millions that make up American democracy.

### 3.3 Pointing Fingers

Scholars have suggested that the preceding events had a decisive imprint on setting the scene of the attack.<sup>74</sup> Exploring this can assist in tackling the main aspect of the research question, which is tracing the links between social media algorithms and January 6<sup>th</sup>. As the opening quote of the previous section recites, it is unsurprising that some concluded that the arranged charge was encouraged by ex-president Donald Trump through his public presence, both in real and digital life. His supporters then roused discussions on social media platforms, including Facebook, Reddit, and the website TheDonald.win, that were believed to have been a central stimulant to the attack.

#### 3.3.1 The Trump Campaign

Even though other actors were appointed with blame to some degree, Donald Trump and his campaign remain the most pointed to as liable for the attack. Throughout his 4-year term, Trump's social media accounts became internationally recognized for dramatized exhibitions, far-reaching exaggerations, and outright fabrications. During his presidential campaign in 2016, Trump was on social media, popularizing hashtags that favored his campaign, including #MAGA ("Make America Great Again") and #VoteTrumpPence16, as well as unflattering his

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Pengelly, "Donald Trump said maybe mob was right to chant 'Hang Mike Pence' – Report," *The Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/25/trump-hang-mike-pence-chant-jan-6> (Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>72</sup> Holmes Lybrand, "Jan. 6 rioter who said she wanted to shoot Nancy Pelosi sentenced to 60 days behind bars," *CNN Politics*, 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2022. (Retrieved 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>73</sup> BBC, "Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021?," *bbc.com*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>74</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, "Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration," *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

opponents with nicknames such as “Crooked Hillary” and “Lying Ted.”<sup>75</sup> Trump stated in 2020: *I think I wouldn't be here if I didn't have social media*,<sup>76</sup> further demonstrating the potential of social media. The power of Trump's use of social media would be established once more in 2020, when he used it to spread and amplify his message of a fraudulent election. The following section will reveal how this would later trigger an insurrection.

After the attack, a committee was appointed by Congress. It was titled “Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol,” encompassing its main goal within the title. One resolution of the Committee states bluntly that the campaign included “spreading false information via social media regarding alleged election fraud and recruiting a crowd to Washington for the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>77</sup> This resolution clearly expresses that the conclusion is *not* up for debate. However, I wish to further dive into how the campaign did this, including by calculating their decisions based on how social media works, which would lay the groundwork for Jan. 6.

The above resolution specifically puts Trump and his campaign under the microscope. The campaign assisted Trump in his social media activities, through supervision and collaboration, which the resolution above cites as the fueling source for Jan. 6. Trump and his campaign had meetings where the election dispute was discussed. Certain members of the campaign, such as its social media manager, also had access to Trump's accounts, often monitoring them on his behalf. The campaign discussed precise language and published formulated posts on Trump's social media accounts. According to the resolution report, the campaign staff was also instructed to observe rising trends on social media, such as catchy memes or punchlines. This included monitoring the subreddit *r/The\_Donald*, a platform that will be explored later in this chapter. The staff would then use the information to advance Trump's social media strategy.<sup>78</sup> One of the aims was to appeal to social media algorithms to boost Trump's content and spread the message further.

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<sup>75</sup> Cristina Rivero, “How marketing helped Donald Trump win the 2016 election,” *The Washington Post*, 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/trump-campaign-marketing/> (Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>76</sup> Lesley Stahl. Interview with Donald Trump, “President Donald Trump: The 60 Minutes 2020 Election Interview,” CBS: 60 Minutes, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdAh2HJ98WE> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023), 14:40-14:45.

<sup>77</sup> Select Committee to Investigate the January 6<sup>th</sup> Attack on the United States Capitol, House of Representatives, Resolution Report no. 117-284. 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2022. 177<sup>th</sup> Congress (2d Session), 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

Before being elected in 2016, Trump used social media to create a supporter base of “enthusiastic loyalty,”<sup>79</sup> which has also been called a “personality cult” by some.<sup>80</sup> This was a strategy carried out throughout his presidency, which only helped to strengthen his bonds with his supporter base, as well as expand it. Cult expert Steven Hassan suggests that Trump’s behavior on social media and during public appearances was strategized to achieve this. Hassan believes that numerous traits make Donald Trump’s presidency comparable to the ruling of a cult leader, including absolute confidence, deprecating his opponents and critics, instilling fear and confusion, and the tendency to deceive and lie.<sup>81</sup> These are noteworthy traits considering the case study, as Trump arguably used this to push his audience towards more loyalty.

Throughout his presidential term, Trump spewed over 30 thousand false claims, often using his social media to escalate their outspread.<sup>82</sup> Hassan states that people become disoriented when exposed to continuous lies by an authority, particularly when people trust and support the individual. Furthermore, he states that the Trump campaign used this to alter people’s perceptions of reality to fit their agenda. For example, by deeming sources that his audience once thought to be reliable, such as traditional news media, as “fake,” a person’s ability to think critically tends to shut down making the individual more likely to believe falsehoods.<sup>83</sup> <sup>84</sup> In addition, psychology shows that when people are anxious about something, they are more willing to reconsider their preexisting views.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, promoting perspectives that invoke *fear* can be used as a tactic to crowd out *reason*, which often results in people turning to “the strongest tree they can find,” representing imagery of absolute faith.<sup>86</sup> To take

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<sup>79</sup> Philip Bump, “The polarization of Trump, in one simple poll result,” *The Washington Post*, last updated 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/03/29/polarization-trump-one-simple-poll-result/> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>80</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “Trump’s personality cult and the erosion of U.S. democracy,” *The Washington Post*, 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/19/trump-cult-of-personality-democracy-erosion-united-states/> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>81</sup> Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Donald Trump*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2019), 9 & 67.

<sup>82</sup> Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, & Meg Kelly, “Trump’s false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years,” *Washington Post*, 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>83</sup> Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Donald Trump*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2019), 79-80.

<sup>84</sup> Tom Stafford, “How liars create the ‘illusion of truth,’” *BBC Future*, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>85</sup> Kathryn Watson, “Trump banks on fear and anxiety to motivate voters,” *CBS News*, 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trumps-use-of-fear-and-anxiety-to-motivate-his-voters/> (Retrieved 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>86</sup> Al Gore, *The Attack on Reason*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Press, 2006), 93-94.

full advantage of this, Trump marketed himself as the best and *only* solution for the issue to be resolved. For example, Trump presented the addition of mail-in ballots for the 2020 election as a “dangerous thing for this country” - despite having mailed in his ballot himself.<sup>87</sup> This declaration made his supporters rally around him in harmonious disapproval of the change. The uproar was caused solely based on Trump’s word and became a central argument for the 2020 elections being unfair or stolen, demonstrating the blind faith his supporters have in him. The purposeful instilling of fear and anxiety among his audience was not a new tactic for Trump, as he had long-windedly applied it to topics such as immigration, LGBTQIA+ issues, non-Christian religions, crime, taxes, & terrorism, which made being a traditional, conservative, white, Christian, Republican citizen sound like a lot was at stake if Trump lost the election. The idea of potential distress if Trump lost the election was constantly reimposed by Trump with statements such as “No one will be safe in Biden’s America.”<sup>88</sup> Even prior to the elections, Trump had repeatedly reestablished the idea that the following elections would be deceptive.<sup>89</sup> By planting “seeds of doubt” beforehand, it would make Trump’s narrative of a stolen election more believable later on, posing it as a “self-fulfilling” prophecy.<sup>90</sup> By exploiting the aforementioned methods, that are notably also used by cult leaders, Trump was able to weld together a vast group of supporters that some say has become an inexorable part of U.S. politics.<sup>91</sup> This ultimately created a foundation that would allow him to lie about and protest the election to come; *and* get millions of his supporters on board.

The Trump campaign heavily relied on social media algorithms to uplift its content and spread it to more users. For example, by creating “the illusion of popularity” Trump was able to set a bandwagon in motion for his ideas to catch on in American society; ideas that many do

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<sup>87</sup> Steve Inskeep, “Timeline: What Trump Told Supporters For Months Before They Attacked,” *npr*, 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked> (Retrieved 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>88</sup> Kathryn Watson, “Trump banks on fear and anxiety to motivate voters,” *CBS News*, 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trumps-use-of-fear-and-anxiety-to-motivate-his-voters/> (Retrieved 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>89</sup> Nick Niedzwiadek, “The 9 most notable comments Trump has made about accepting the election results,” *Politico*, 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/24/trump-casts-doubt-2020-election-integrity-421280> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>90</sup> Alan Feur, et al., “Jan. 6: The Story So Far,” *The New York Times*, n.d. [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/politics/jan-6-timeline.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=stylncapitol-mob&variant=show&region=MAIN\\_CONTENT\\_1&block=storyline\\_top\\_links\\_recirc](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/politics/jan-6-timeline.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=stylncapitol-mob&variant=show&region=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc) (Retrieved 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>91</sup> David Smith, “Trump’s “cult-like control” of Republican party grows stronger since insurrection,” *The Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/05/donald-trump-republican-party-capitol-attack-insurrection> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).



not have a basis in the real world. In addition, these were claims often based on *disinformation*, according to Sam Woolley. The term disinformation is used as this was usually falsehoods spread *with* the purpose to deceive people.<sup>92</sup> The type of content Trump would often share, which creates engagement and buzz, is frequently favored by social media algorithms and causes the content to spread more rapidly and can make it go “viral.” With Trump’s election lies, this was apparent as his online claims became viral on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.<sup>93</sup> The method of manipulating social media algorithms to amplify content has been used by the Trump campaign from his candidacy in 2016 to the present. This goes to show that the algorithmic functions on social media can be deliberately exploited to facilitate the spread of disinformation. Woolley also firmly states that social media has been utilized by Trump to “spread propaganda and manipulate public opinion,” which has had various consequences as has been shown in both underlying and tangible ways. Trump’s social media posts often disregarded and attacked democratic institutions, including science, health care, media, education, and the government. It is therefore not surprising that Trump has been quantified by surveys as the most *polarizing* president ever.<sup>94</sup> In light of Jan. 6, Woolley further declared that it is no longer possible to overlook the fact that “what Trump does and says *online* has serious *offline* consequences.”<sup>95</sup>

By the elapse of the 2020 election, Donald Trump was yet to score many of his most popular Twitter posts (also known as “tweets”). “I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!,” “...A big WIN!,” and “WE WILL WIN!,” were among the ones he posted *after* the election results established him defeated by his opponent. These tweets generated millions of impressions and became top-ranked among Trump’s tweets.<sup>96</sup> The narratives painted on social media about election denial were strongly believed by the Select Committee to have played a major role in motivating the Capitol attack. Due to his persistent assertions, his most loyal

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<sup>92</sup> Teresa Weikmann & Sophie Lecheler, “Visual disinformation in digital age: A literature synthesis and research agenda,” *New Media + Society* (2022), 3. doi: 10.1177/14614448221141648

<sup>93</sup> Alex Hern, “Trump’s voter fraud claims go viral on social media despite curbs,” *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/10/trumps-vote-claims-go-viral-on-social-media-despite-curbs> (Retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>94</sup> Gregory Eady, Justin Vaughn, & Brandon Rottinghaus, “Comparing Trump to the greatest- and the most polarizing-presidents in US history,” *Brookings*, 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/03/20/comparing-trump-to-the-greatest-and-the-most-polarizing-presidents-in-u-s-history/> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>95</sup> Nate Rattner, “Trump’s election lies were among his most popular tweets,” *CNBC*, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

supporters felt encouraged to decipher Trump’s messages that spread on social media. As seen within recorded quotes of rioters, his followers were entirely convinced that Trump wanted them to take action on his behalf. One of Trump’s tweets reads: “Big protest in D.C. on January 6<sup>th</sup>...Be there, will be *wild!*.” In response to this, the soon-to-be rioters took it on to social media, announcing that “Trump is *literally* calling people to DC in a show of force,” and “He called us all to the Capitol and wants us to make it *wild!!!*” To clarify, these are statements from real participants that were later indicted with crimes associated with Jan. 6. They had reassured each other online that this tweet was essentially authorization for the law-breaking that they were about to commit. Because Trump “can’t exactly openly tell you to revolt,” as one user writes on the extremist pro-Trump website *TheDonald.win*, this was “the closest he’ll ever get.” Therefore, this was his way of reinforcing the fight and should be interpreted as such. In addition, Trump also reposted content that debuted on *TheDonald.win* on his Twitter account, which users took as an indirect sign of support. According to the Committee report, this shows “overwhelming evidence” that Trump’s ventures on social media have almost a linear correspondence with real-life outcomes.<sup>97</sup>

The section above makes it clear that the Trump campaign intentionally used social media platforms and their algorithms to expand the campaign’s supporting foundation. This strategy was not solely used around the 2020 elections and Jan. 6 but began well in advance. The strategized output of false and divisive content allowed for his message to go viral on social platforms, optimizing their reach. In accordance with the plan, the reverberations of Trump’s message began to spread beyond the margins of his accounts, being shared by his expanding base of loyal advocates on platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and the independent website *TheDonald.win*.

### **3.3.2 Facebook**

Outroars on social media over fraudulent elections and an illegitimate presidency were very loud around the 2020 elections. Many of them appeared within groups on Facebook, where individuals united in their devotion to Trump. The number of posts in these groups surpassed 650,000 between election day and Jan. 6, though most were equated to “baseless claims“ by a ProPublica/Washington Post analysis. The same analysis states that one of Trump’s key platforms to spread election lies was Facebook. His supporters also took part in deluded

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<sup>97</sup> Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, House of Representatives, Resolution Report no. 117-284. 29th of March 2022. 177th Congress (2d Session), 23-25.

discussions on the platform, using public and private groups to spread Trump's message. The analysis also mentions that groups on Facebook have been a focal strategy of the platform since 2017. This was due to their ability to increase and retain the engagement of the American public, contributing to Facebook's revenue of billions of dollars. Former employees faulted Facebook for not combatting the spread of hateful rhetoric, solely due to the valuable engagement they brought to the platform.<sup>98</sup>

Before the elections, Facebook had created a *civic integrity* task force to deal with the spread of hateful or violent content. Among other functions, the task force's assignments included suspending groups publishing false information or instigating violent behaviors. One aim of this was to mitigate the effects of Trump's disinformation campaign that had been spotlighted by his constant social media presence. Although Facebook had tried to address the issue, it was criticized for being reactive, by suspending activity that was already evident instead of preventing future activities. Over the span of seven months, from August 2020 to March 2021, about 2,000 groups were detected and deleted by the task force. These measures were described as unreliable by ex-employees, as the enforcement mainly relied on algorithms searching for specific terms that would suggest an unlawful record. According to the ex-employees, this could be easily evaded by mistyping terms that would likely be shot down by the computer. This approach was famously utilized by online anti-vaxxers looking to evade moderation efforts by misspelling the word vaccine as "vachscene" or "wax seen."<sup>99</sup> During the height of election tensions, Facebook had inhibited all groups and posts promoting the "Stop the steal" phrase, as it had identified the fastest-growing groups that promoted dangerous behavior. The same groups had promoted wording claims carefully so as to not aggravate Facebook's takedown algorithm.<sup>100</sup> The etiquette of mistyping terms was often encouraged by group administrators of "Stop the Steal" groups, who were ironically also responsible for eliminating harmful objects from their group. In addition, these groups often consisted of

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<sup>98</sup> Craig Silverman et al., "Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show," *ProPublica and Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show> (Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>99</sup> Kayla Steinberg, "People are using coded language to avoid social media moderation. Is it working?," *PolitiFact*, 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2021. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/nov/04/people-are-using-coded-language-avoid-social-media/> (Retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>100</sup> Shannon Bond, & Bobby Allyn, "How the 'Stop the Steal' movement outwitted Facebook ahead of the Jan. 6 insurrection," *npr*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/22/1048543513/facebook-groups-jan-6-insurrection> (Retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

thousands or even millions of people, making it next to impossible to monitor circulating posts.<sup>101</sup>

There were many other groups that contained harmful discourse but as they didn't *directly* violate Facebook's code, they avoided takedown. Many were also private, shifting the narratives away from the public eye. An internal report by Politico deems these narratives to still be contributing to "reducing collective civic engagement and social cohesion in the years to come," which demonstrates the gravity of social media that has arguably pulled democracy downwards. To make matters worse, the aforementioned task force, that had already been scrutinized for inconsistency and delinquency towards solving the problem, was dissolved on December 3<sup>rd</sup> after the election. This made the suspension of Facebook groups drop dramatically after the election and up to Joe Biden's inauguration. After it was disbanded, there was a surge in posts attacking the election's legitimacy. Facebook's heavy reliance on groups and unwillingness to surrender them, even for the greater good, was found to have given Trump's election lies an "unequaled reach." Moreover, Facebook's reactive algorithms have been found ineffective, as the takedown of hate speech on the platform has only equaled about 3-5% of what they detect.<sup>102</sup> While Facebook's front denies being at fault, ex-employees have refuted this, saying that Facebook played an active part in facilitating the attack due to their deliberate inadvertence towards defensive measures.<sup>103</sup>

The Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed that the platform's algorithms raise the most divisive and extreme content. Similar to other social media platforms, the Facebook algorithm decides the selection and layout of content based on individual preferences and behavioral tendencies. The platform's main goal is to elevate posts that motivate interactions, whether it is likes, comments, reactions, or shares. The Facebook algorithm has now developed into the potential of digesting over 10 thousand signals, based on personal data, to determine the likeliness of the user engaging with a post. Haugen further stated: "It's easier

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<sup>101</sup> Craig Silverman et al., "Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show," *ProPublica and Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show> (Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

<sup>102</sup> Noah Giansiracusa, "Facebook uses Deceptive Math To Hide Its Hate Speech Problem," *Wired*, 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2021. <https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-deceptive-math-when-it-comes-to-hate-speech/> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>103</sup> Craig Silverman et al., "Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show," *ProPublica and Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show> (Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023).

to inspire people to anger than it is to other emotions,” which reflects in Facebook’s addition of an “angry emoji” reaction, that has *five times* more algorithmic weight in comparison to the classic like button. This has constructed an environment where “click-baits,” unreliable, and divisive content is favored over trustworthy and informative (but unstimulating) content.<sup>104</sup> As the software chooses what information almost three billion users consume,<sup>105</sup> the way it functions is bound to have evident outcomes.

The Facebook algorithm has resulted in devastating consequences, not only in the U.S. but internationally as well. The ramifications of the platform’s algorithm have expanded into fragile environments, playing a role in destabilizing Ethiopia and uplifting content that fueled the genocide in Myanmar. According to Haugen, this happened due to deficient algorithm regulations that allow them to, i.e., recommend violent content to a person who simply followed the Myanmar military page, which does not violate policy in itself.<sup>106</sup> <sup>107</sup> Haugen further states that Facebook’s approach has invested increasingly less in overall mitigation efforts towards responsible algorithm use, even a year after her initial effort to expose the platform’s wrongdoings.<sup>108</sup>

Although a prominent figure, Facebook certainly did not stand alone as a foundation for the narratives that fueled the attack on Jan. 6. Other websites and social media platforms were also utilized to spread skewed dialogues and deceiving information, including the one discussed below.

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<sup>104</sup> Will Oremus et al., “How Facebook shapes your feed,” *The Washington Post*, 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2021/how-facebook-algorithm-works/> (Retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>105</sup> World Population Review, “Facebook Users by Country 2023,” *worldpopulationreview.com*, 2023. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/facebook-users-by-country> (Retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>106</sup> Emmanuel Akinwotu, “Facebook’s role in Myanmar and Ethiopia under new scrutiny,” *The Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/07/facebooks-role-in-myanmar-and-ethiopia-under-new-scrutiny> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>107</sup> Billy Perrigo, “Facebook Says It’s Removing More Hate Speech Than Ever Before. But There’s a Catch,” *TIME*, 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2019. <https://time.com/5739688/facebook-hate-speech-languages/> (Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>108</sup> Sara Morrison & Shirin Ghaffary, “Meta hasn’t “really learned the right lesson,” whistleblower Frances Haugen says,” *Vox*, 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2022. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2022/9/6/23333517/frances-haugen-code-meta-facebook-whistleblower> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

### 3.3.3 R/The\_Donald

*R/The\_Donald* was a Trump-dedicated “subreddit,” referring to a forum on the social media website *Reddit*. It was introduced eight years ago, not long after Trump’s announcement of his candidacy in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. At its peak, there were nearly 800 thousand users who shared content based on racist, homophobic, misogynistic, xenophobic, and white supremacist ideals, often built on disinformation.<sup>109</sup> Initially, the platform’s intended use was to share news and discussions on Donald Trump. However, an overview of the website would show otherwise, as the platform became used to share conspiracy theories about Trump’s opponents (most notably Hillary Clinton in “Pizzagate”),<sup>110</sup> neo-Nazi content (including swastikas),<sup>111</sup> and encourage other members to attend alt-right rallies (e.g., “Unite the Right” rally),<sup>112</sup> among other things.

It is useful to introduce the basic organization and algorithmic arrangement of *Reddit* that sets it apart from other social media platforms, as it was inductively used for spreading damaging messages, *years* before they were violently actualized. On other platforms, recommendation algorithms are often used to propose content to a user who might be interested in it, even though the user doesn’t follow the account that published it. Ryan Shepherd identifies that *Reddit*’s platform differs in a way where a user’s timeline is solely comprised of content from sites, or subreddits, that the user *already* follows, and no outlying content is suggested. A common site visited by *Reddit* users is *r/all*, also nicknamed “the frontpage of the internet,”<sup>113</sup> where the most popular content across all subreddits form the timeline. This is controlled by a system where accounts can either “upvote” or “downvote” a post, where the highest scores are boosted upwards by the algorithm.

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<sup>109</sup> Bobby Allyn, “Reddit Bans The\_Donald, Forum Of Nearly 800,000 Trump Fans, Over Abusive Posts” *npr.org*, 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. [https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884819923/reddit-bans-the\\_donald-forum-of-nearly-800-000-trump-fans-over-abusive-posts](https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884819923/reddit-bans-the_donald-forum-of-nearly-800-000-trump-fans-over-abusive-posts) (Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>110</sup> Ben Schreckinger, “World War Meme,” *Politico Magazine*, March/April 2017. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856/> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>111</sup> Jason Koebler, “One of *Reddit*’s Top Posts Is a Bunch of Swastikas, Again,” *Vice*, 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2016. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ack7vz/one-of-reddits-top-posts-is-a-bunch-of-swastikas-again> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>112</sup> Aja Romano, “Reddit just banned one of its most toxic forums. But it won’t touch The\_Donald,” *Vox*, 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/13/16624688/reddit-bans-incels-the-donald-controversy> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>113</sup> Justin Ward, “Day of the Trope: White Nationalist Memes Thrive on *Reddit*’s *R/The\_Donald*,” *SPLcenter*, 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/19/day-trope-white-nationalist-memes-thrive-reddits-rthedonald> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

As Ryan P. Shepherd analyses, Reddit algorithms don't amplify based on content *quality*, but rather on *popularity*; a function that is highly exploitable. Shepherd suggests that the users of the *r/The\_Donald* subreddit figured this out and manipulated the Reddit algorithm, which allowed their posts to overtake the site-wide *r/all* timeline in anticipation of the 2016 elections. The moderators of the subreddit would "pin" posts to the top of its feed, for users to spot and upvote. By gaining enough upvotes within a certain timeframe, the post was almost guaranteed a top spot for the *r/all* feed, as the algorithm classified the post as "important." Repeating this method persistently, the moderators painted the general feed of Reddit with the pro-Trump agenda.<sup>114</sup> This facilitated the message to spread wider than the parameters of the subreddit, possibly reeling in supporters that never followed Trump-related content before. The *r/The\_Donald* forum received over 52 million pageviews in March 2016, even surpassing forums with more followers, which demonstrates the success of their strategy.<sup>115</sup> Other users even posted on Reddit complaining about their *r/all* feed being covered in *r/The\_Donald* posts, calling it a "bug."<sup>116</sup> The implications of the strategy include giving those users unaware of the algorithmic tendencies a misrepresented view of Reddit's user base as overwhelmingly right-wing, which actually skews more liberal in comparison to the general population.<sup>117</sup> Even though this example refers to the 2016 elections, a similar methodology was adopted for the election in 2020.

The continued and deliberate proliferation of hateful rhetoric would lead to the suspension of *r/The\_Donald* in the summer of 2020, after numerous prior warnings from Reddit. Subsequently, the subreddit's user base accused the platform of undemocratic ceasing of free speech. However, this is ironic as the moderators of the forum were known to ban users with opposing views, including anti-Trump conservatives, Bernie Sanders fans, and social justice warriors (essentially people who fight for socially progressive views).<sup>118</sup> Despite this

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<sup>114</sup> Ryan P. Shepherd, "Gaming Reddit's Algorithms: *r/the\_donald*, Amplification, and the Rhetoric of Sorting," *Computers and Composition* 56 (2020), 1-4, 12. doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2020.102572

<sup>115</sup> John Herrman, "Donald Trump Finds Support in Reddit's Unruly Corners," *The New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/09/business/media/in-reddits-unruly-corners-trump-finds-support.html> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>116</sup> U/Zack, "All of */r/all* is just */r/the\_donald* for me..." *Reddit*, 2016. [https://www.reddit.com/r/bugs/comments/59rws2/all\\_of\\_rall\\_is\\_just\\_rthe\\_donald\\_for\\_me/](https://www.reddit.com/r/bugs/comments/59rws2/all_of_rall_is_just_rthe_donald_for_me/) (Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>117</sup> Ryan P. Shepherd, "Gaming Reddit's Algorithms: *r/the\_donald*, Amplification, and the Rhetoric of Sorting," *Computers and Composition* 56 (2020), 1-4, 12. doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2020.102572

<sup>118</sup> Aja Romano, "Reddit just banned one of its most toxic forums. But it won't touch *The\_Donald*," *Vox*, 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/13/16624688/reddit-bans-incels-the-donald-controversy> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

dramatic debate, r/The\_Donald users did not fret. This was because they already had a backup website to fall back on, which indeed prided itself on “free speech.” The website *TheDonald.win* is considered a much more extremist platform in comparison to the subreddit and groups on other platforms. However, platforms such as Facebook and Reddit arguably acted as a pipeline for users to be introduced to the website.

### **3.3.4 TheDonald.win**

As soon as r/The\_Donald became barred from Reddit’s platform, the website TheDonald.win experienced a huge inpouring of new users. As the site had remained nearly dormant since its establishment in 2019, June 2020 symbolized an awakening of TheDonald.win. Although the website had clearly imitated the aesthetics and feel of a Reddit forum, structural variations differentiated this website from other platforms, which Jeffrey K. Riley distinguishes into *two* factors. Firstly, operating their own website would free them from site-wide rules, such as the ones Facebook and Reddit enforce on their platform. Instead, its administrators claimed the site was intended for free speech and insisted that bigoted content was not allowed. However, as Riley affirms, the prioritization of free speech often serves as a cape to camouflage *hate speech*. The second factor refers to the confinement of the website. Unlike Facebook groups or Reddit forums, no other page operating on the same platform would be opposed to Donald Trump. Representing this trait, Riley fittingly refers to TheDonald.win as an “ideological island.”

Compared to r/The\_Donald, the website sets foot in the story much later, recording most of its engagement after November 3<sup>rd</sup> when the elections had already taken place. By then, it had become a rendezvous for individuals who refused the election results. As the user travels down the pipeline from regulated sites such as Reddit or Facebook to the largely unregulated TheDonald.win, content language tends to get more extreme and violent. This is why websites such as TheDonald.win are often regarded as the “home base” of extremist ideologies. As long as it fit within the site’s ideological framework, virtually all content on the TheDonald.win was able to roam freely. Arguably, the organic role of TheDonald.win is to grant a sense of membership to those with similar views. Its users united in anger and gained confidence in their opinions through the digital connections on the site, where they could converse with other people who also thought the 2020 election was stolen from Trump. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the main danger of radical space online is the normalization of violent rhetoric that can develop into violent outcomes. According to research, TheDonald.win is not



only thought to have played a significant role in the events that unfolded on January 6<sup>th</sup> but has also been shown to have escalated right-wing extremism online in general.<sup>119</sup>

During the investigation, the Select Committee encountered a multitude of specific testimonials of combat approaches on the website throughout their investigation. This included the use of flagpoles as weapons, accurate sizes of guillotines, and illegally bringing firearms into the U.S. capital city.<sup>120</sup> Instead of the physical, Riley rather emphasizes the more intangible elements of TheDonald.win such as providing a platform where attitudes of anger, fear, and alienation could thrive. According to him, the anarchy of the website was enough for its users to push each other into more violent and hateful forms of their beliefs. Interestingly, Riley mentions that posts on violence were more often members expressing fear over their own safety, assuming they would be rounded up, kidnapped, or even killed if anyone other than Trump assumed office. They saw themselves as *victims* instead of perpetrators, which made real-life violence, such as the brutal charge of Jan. 6, sound like a form of self-defense.<sup>121</sup> As the Select Committee's investigative report examines, personal accounts demonstrate that rioters believed they were averting a civil war, that was to become inescapable if Trump lost the presidency. Therefore, they saw it as their "civic responsibility" as patriots, as one rioter would later express.<sup>122</sup> On top of that, the evolution of rhetoric on TheDonald.win, precisely shifted with the temper of Trump's claims. The discussions shifted with how far his supporters were willing to go to stick up for his case. The common thread was that the in-group became progressively smaller while the out-group increased in size and animosity. For example, when Fox News announced Biden as the victor of the 2020 elections, the conservative outlet became an adversary. Even Trump's VP became a challenger of the movement when he wouldn't deny the election results, which resulted in him being an overt target of the Jan. 6 rioters. Democracy itself was even ironically expelled into the out-group by a couple of posts on TheDonald.win.

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<sup>119</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, "Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration," *Social Media + Society* (2022), 3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>120</sup> Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, House of Representatives, Resolution Report no. 117-284. 29th of March 2022. 177th Congress (2d Session), 23.

<sup>121</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, "Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration," *Social Media + Society* (2022), 10. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>122</sup> Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Introductory Material to the Final Report of the Select Committee*, 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, 2.

As this section has made clear, the user base of TheDonald.win was comprised of his most loyal and extreme supporters, where discussions were strictly altered in line with Trump’s fluctuating rhetoric. It could even be described as a *fool’s paradise*, with the state of delusion and denial that led his supporters to become blindly devoted to him. Essentially, TheDonald.win became the home to perspectives that were enough for users to convince each other to storm the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, *and* that this would be the right thing to do. This exemplifies how digital platforms can expedite radicalization and can facilitate *online* discourses to spill into *offline* environments.<sup>123</sup>

### 3.3.5 Responses

Social media platforms, and the algorithmic technologies that have become a part of their inner workings, had an undeniable role in fostering the discourse that eventually triggered the Capitol attack. Some even favored the engagement these discourses brought to their platform. But it cannot be said that social media platforms did not act in response.

As explored earlier, Facebook imposed a special task force to deal with the distribution of concerning content within its groups. This force did present promising results; *until* it was disbanded and deprioritized. Almost immediately following Jan. 6, Facebook suspended Donald Trump’s accounts for his involvement, by “condoning rather than condemning” insurrectionist behavior, as CEO Mark Zuckerberg puts it.<sup>124</sup> Since his two-year sentence passed, Trump has returned to Facebook, marking his comeback with an “I’M BACK!” post. The decision of his return was based on the fact that he is running for president again in 2024, and the platform administrators expressed the need for voters to make informed decisions.

However, Trump’s return was not without additional measures taken and his reach has now been purposefully restricted by algorithms, his access to advertising devices made more limited, and the option of resharing offending posts eliminated.<sup>125</sup> One of Trump’s latest posts on Facebook is a statement once again declaring the 2020 election a hoax, comparing his two impeachment trials to a witch hunt, and claiming that American democracy is being destroyed

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<sup>123</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, “Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration,” *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>124</sup> Makena Kelly, “Facebook bans Trump ‘indefinitely,’” *The Verge*, 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/2021/1/7/22218725/facebook-trump-ban-extended-capitol-riot-insurrection-block> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>125</sup> Shirin Ghaffary, “It’s official. Trump is back on Facebook and Instagram.” *Vox*, 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2023. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2023/1/25/23570224/trump-return-facebook-account-ban-suspension-lifted-mark-zuckerberg-nick-clegg> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

by the radical left, among other disinformed claims. The recorded public response to this post demonstrates the conserved devotion to Trump. Thousands of shares, tens of thousands of comments, and hundreds of thousands of likes show the hold that Trump has on his supporters. In the comments, thousands of accounts honor his candidacy for the 2024 elections, calling him “the best president ever” and proclaiming their dedication to voting for him next year.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps this goes to show that Facebook stood up against an unrelenting group of supporters; a mentality that was arguably set in motion by Trump’s strategic presence on social media.

Reddit also took action by revoking r/The\_Donald’s stay on their platform, months before the attack took place. When asked why the platform didn’t remove it sooner, the CEO of Reddit stated he was hesitant as the forum represented a group that feels unheard, and they didn’t want to “take their voice away.”<sup>127</sup> They expelled it as a response to repeatedly broken rules that had been implemented site-wide to restrict disinformation and hate speech. Instead of the suspension terminating their discussions, it resulted in them simply being transferred to another platform.

TheDonald.win allowed for even more disinformation and hateful content, dressed in a disguise of free speech. Again, this goes to show the limited nature of response procedures. It can be argued that because this transpiration made radical discussions even more extreme, Reddit’s suspension made matters worse to an extent. Within the subreddit, users were at least exposed to a small degree of adversity from differing beliefs and were pressured to behave within Reddit’s guidelines. Although timely, the platform’s measures led to an unfavorable outcome, once more stressing the ceiling to the power of social media platforms to implement truly effective measures.

The Trump campaign reacted to these restraints with the creation of a brand-new social media platform: *Truth Social*. According to Trump, this was to “stand up to the tyranny of big tech,” referring to the platforms that had banned his accounts.<sup>128</sup> Like TheDonald.win, Truth Social is less restrictive in comparison to conventional platforms. He has taken advantage of

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<sup>126</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Statement by Donald J. Trump, 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America,” Post on Facebook, 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=772683610884128&set=pcb.772683847550771> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>127</sup> Aja Romano, “Reddit just banned one of its most toxic forums. But it won’t touch The\_Donald,” *Vox*, 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/13/16624688/reddit-bans-incels-the-donald-controversy> (Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>128</sup> James Clayton, “Trump to launch a new social media platform TRUTH Social,” *BBC News*, 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58990330> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

this and has published more than 350 posts that would have infringed upon Facebook’s policy which included his tireless protestation of the legitimacy of the 2020 election.<sup>129</sup> This further shows that restricting certain discussions does not necessarily silence them, but often causes them to relocate instead. It can therefore be argued that social media platforms faced serious obstacles to administering effective measures when it came to eliminating harmful rhetoric prior to Jan. 6.

Many agree that some social media platforms could have done more in reaction to the worrying confabulations put forward by pro-Trump groups.<sup>130</sup> An alternative conclusion that can be drawn is that the potential of platforms’ measures to deliver results was limited to begin with, and thus *cannot* be blamed as an active participator in causing the Capitol attack. As some scholars have noted, suspending individual posts or groups is not an effective way to suspend the actual conversation. Platforms often find themselves playing a game of “whack-a-mole,” where the main agent cannot be squashed. Furthermore, studies have found that tweets blocked by Twitter staff are likely to receive even more attention in their distribution on other platforms such as Facebook and Reddit. This makes *hard* intervention (e.g., removal of posts or groups) almost hopeless as the visibility of a post is likely to broaden if deleted, even compared to posts that receive *soft* (e.g., a label suggesting that the viewed content includes disputed information) or no intervention.<sup>131</sup> Therefore, reactive measures of social platforms have reduced potential. Despite this deduction, many still found large faults within the response of social media, saying that they “did little to stop it.” One thing is clear: it is impossible to deny the role of social media in the facilitation of Jan. 6.

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<sup>129</sup> Sheila Dang, “Trump returns to Facebook,” *Reuters*, 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-returns-facebook-2023-03-17/> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>130</sup> Cat Zakrzewski et al., “What the Jan. 6 probe found out about social media, but didn’t report,” *The Washington Post*, 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/01/17/jan6-committee-report-social-media/> (Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>131</sup> Zeve Sanderson et al., “Twitter flagged Donald Trump’s tweets with election misinformation: They continued to spread both on and off the platform,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 2, no. 4 (August 2021), 1. doi: 10.37016/mr-2020-77.

## 4 Discussion

To establish a comprehensive analysis, I will link the theoretical foundations to the case study. I will explore five key factors that played a role in the Jan. 6 Capitol attack in the context of the theoretical foundations, in order to appraise the factors that facilitated it. Before doing so, I briefly recall three elements from the theoretical foundations that had a fundamental impact on why and how Jan. 6 occurred. This will organize the analysis to clear the way for a precise and comprehensive conclusion. In continuation, the further democratic implications of this case study are discussed, using the democratic perimeter established earlier. This is because Jan. 6 is being used as an instrumental case study within this dissertation, as it doesn't solely represent the physical implications manifested in the Capitol attack, but rather the wider issue of the societal and democratic implications of social media algorithms.<sup>132</sup>

The first element is how algorithms work and what motivates them. As I defined in the theoretical chapter, algorithmic technologies are used to *optimize* services. The introduction of the technology on social media has resulted in it being more user-friendly, easy to use, and more enjoyable to consume and engage with.<sup>133</sup> To social media's advantage, the use of the technology has been left unsupervised and unregulated to a large extent,<sup>134</sup> allowing them to pursue their own capitalist goals through the algorithmic inducement of user engagement. The goal of most social platforms is to keep the user engaged for as long as possible, to drive up their monetary revenue through ad exposure.

The second element is how social media algorithms utilize how the human brain works. As is the case, humans have certain psychological needs and tendencies that social media can foster but also has the ability to take advantage of. This has made platforms put their services together to feed into the human pursuit for interpersonal relations and dopamine-producing activities.<sup>135</sup> Because algorithms play so well into indicators of human tendencies and are in fact built off of the same indicators, the technology essentially works to amplify them. For

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<sup>132</sup> Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (California: Sage Publications, 1995), 3.

<sup>133</sup> Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, "How do Social Media Algorithms Work?," *iED.com*, 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. <https://ied.eu/blog/technology-blog/how-do-social-media-algorithms-work/> (Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2023).

<sup>134</sup> Sarah Pearce, "Data Privacy, Security, and Ethical Governance Under Quantum AI," *Convergence: Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing - Social, Economic, and Policy Impacts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Editor Greg Viggiano (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2023), 37-40.

<sup>135</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. "Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising" *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

example, an algorithm can send an individual down a rabbit hole through increasingly more extreme content with every click. In this way, the algorithm is doing its job by enticing the user's attention for as long as possible. On the other hand, this mechanism also has the dangerous potential to cause an individual's views to shift toward the extreme. And as Jeffrey Riley warned, online groups only escalate this process, by appealing to the desire to belong while "othering" people who possess different ideas to them.<sup>136</sup> This process is essentially what happened to Trump supporters that later instigated the attack on the Capitol.

The third and last element is the growing role of social media within daily life. Social media arguably has the upper hand over users, as individuals have limited actual choice of whether to participate in social media. First, social media has encompassed large chunks of personal life, making them nearly impossible to abstain from. Additionally, the utilization of algorithmic services is often based on so-called "abusive contracts," where refusal to accept the terms often leads to decreased access to certain services, or even full exclusion from them. Therefore, social media users are essentially coerced into surrendering their personal data to platforms to feed their algorithms.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, users are not fully aware of the way algorithms work and how far the technology extends into their daily affairs, such as buying products or reading news. By concluding with the fact that individuals are not in the driver's seat when it comes to social media use, due to abusive contracts, little chance to abstain, and limited awareness of their functions, social media's role becomes increasingly more important to examine.

The notion that any of the actors, e.g., social media platforms, algorithms, the Trump campaign, or the rioters themselves, were alone at play in the attack is largely misguided. It is rather an interplay of various factors, players, and motives. Together, these created an optimal environment for Jan. 6 to unfold. The five key factors within this analysis are to ultimately demonstrate how algorithmic technologies on social media facilitated the Capitol attack on Jan. 6.

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<sup>136</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, "Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration," *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>137</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2019), 222-226.

The first factor is the Trump Campaign's strategic utilization of social media and the deliberate means they used to manipulate their algorithms. Their main goals can be distinguished into two; to expand Trump's supporter base and to strengthen the loyalty and ties between Trump and his supporters. They achieved this through various ways, such as publishing content that used specific language, contained extreme or absurd proclaims, followed perceived trends, or simply publishing a paramount quantity of it. By making his content seem popular, Trump fed into the human biases of bandwagoning and popularity. Furthermore, because social media algorithms are built on the same indicators, they amplified this type of content due to its ability to attract engagement.<sup>138</sup> This methodology made Trump become an inescapable character on social media. Trump also used psychological maneuvers, such as spreading fear on social media, to get through to his supporters and develop a powerful bond with them.<sup>139</sup> During the period from before the 2016 presidential election, and up to the one in 2020, the bond developed stronger with time, and became what has been described as a "personality cult."<sup>140</sup> This allowed Trump to purposefully spread disinformation and absurd claims with little-to-no impact on his resilient supporter group, who supported him through unconditional certitude and blind faith. In reality, Trump's supporters were active promoters of his campaign and proved to be diligent contributors to it. As explored earlier, Trump supporters on Reddit mastered its algorithmic technologies in order to spread pro-Trump content as far as it could reach. By doing this, they periodically dominated the general timeline of the platform, which had the potential to amplify the pro-Trump message and bring others on board.<sup>141</sup> Even though this was directly and deliberately executed by the Trump campaign, it was the intrinsic technology of social media that allowed his message to grow, proliferate, spread, and be amplified. It makes Donald Trump and his campaign an active perpetrator of Jan. 6, but social media a powerful facilitator.

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<sup>138</sup> Nate Rattner, "Trump's election lies were among his most popular tweets," *CNBC*, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>139</sup> Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Donald Trump*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2019), 79-80.

<sup>140</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump's personality cult and the erosion of U.S. democracy," *The Washington Post*, 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/19/trump-cult-of-personality-democracy-erosion-united-states/> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>141</sup> Ryan P. Shepherd, "Gaming Reddit's Algorithms: r/the\_donald, Amplification, and the Rhetoric of Sorting," *Computers and Composition* 56 (2020), 1-4, 12. doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2020.102572

The second factor of the analysis is how algorithms can facilitate a shift in individual views and attitudes. This occurs when social media algorithms target certain identities when allocating content to a user's timeline. This is based on a vast database of how users have behaved in the past and predicts how they will behave in the future, noticing how users react, like, comment, and observe certain posts, what their friends are doing on the platform, what kind of groups they belong within, etc. The suggestion of posts will most often skew to one side, as the algorithm recognizes that users will be more enticed to spend time looking at content they agree with, due to confirmation bias.<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, as Zeynep Tufekci stated, algorithms can target *foreseen* tendencies of a user that are *not* based on prior behavioral exhibitions, to determine what content to supply to the individual.<sup>143</sup> In the context of the case study, this had the potential to expand Trump's supporter base and make the existing one more extreme. By hyper-personalizing one's timeline, algorithms feed users widely different information diets. Users who tend to agree on things see similar content to each other and are more motivated to engage with it. This tends to push these individuals into a group where like-minded people converse on their ideas, which aren't dissimilar to begin with. This is how social media algorithms cause filter bubbles and echo chambers.<sup>144</sup>

The third factor addresses how social media algorithms tend to form a filter bubble around an individual, shielding them from unappealing content which is often that they don't agree with. This tends to enclose the user within an echo chamber, where his opinions are reverberated back to him by other users with the same outlook. In this way, algorithms can alter one's view of the world around them. In the context of the case study, the echo chambers (or the in-groups), were located in "Stop the Steal" groups on Facebook, r/The\_Donald on Reddit, and the website TheDonald.win; which stand nearly perfectly parallel to the theoretical definition of an echo-chamber. These are listed with increasing extremism, where the in-group gets increasingly more compact and impenetrable while the attitudes toward the out-group grow more hostile and violent. Online groups gave users more confidence in their views through solidarity, as one Reddit-user encapsulated in a post on r/The\_Donald: "Can't believe I've

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<sup>142</sup> Juan Pablo Luna et al. "Amplifying Counter-Public Spheres on Social Media: News Sharing of Alternative Versus Traditional Media After the 2019 Chilean Uprising" *Social Media + Society* (January – March 2022): 1-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221077308.

<sup>143</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, "We're building a dystopia just to make people click on ads," *TedGlobal*-speech, September 2017. [https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep\\_tufekci\\_we\\_re\\_building\\_a\\_dystopia\\_just\\_to\\_make\\_people\\_click\\_on\\_ads/transcript#t-707551](https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep_tufekci_we_re_building_a_dystopia_just_to_make_people_click_on_ads/transcript#t-707551) (Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>144</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Press, 2011), 19.



found like-minded people.”<sup>145</sup> Riley’s research shows that these characteristics of online groups facilitated users to encourage and convince other members that attacking the Capitol was an appropriate response. Instead of a violent assault, they thought of it as a form of self-defense to protect themselves and their fantasy of a democracy.<sup>146</sup>

The fourth factor turns to the power of algorithms to amplify a message by marking popular and engaging content as “important.” For example, the virality of “election lie” content, caused by algorithms, gave it the power of being repeated innumerable times, because it received high engagement and was reshared by his loyal supporters. As Steven Hassan explored, this makes an audience more psychologically prone to accepting a lie as truth.<sup>147</sup> On aforementioned platforms, users convinced other users that storming the Capitol building on Jan. 6 was essential in order to succor Trump in saving American democracy, avert a civil war, and protect the physical safety of themselves and others.<sup>148</sup> As is clear, these are not conclusions reached by someone that is exposed to a healthy variety of ideas and viewpoints but rather by someone that has been enclosed by algorithms within a filter bubble, that echoes the same ideas back to the individual. This goes to show that social media algorithms played a central role in molding the preconditions that would trigger thousands of “patriotic” Trump supporters to riot on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

The fifth factor further explores social media’s role, but as has been previously established, social media played a central role in the facilitation of Jan. 6. This can be attributed to how they function and the limited attempt by the platforms’ administrations at putting an end to it although it can be argued that their ability to do so was vastly limited in the first place. As was seen through the case study, many platforms *did* act in response to the assumed risk of “big lie” discussions. Despite this, the rhetoric did not come to rest but was merely transferred onto other platforms. Moreover, their actions made the extremeness of the conversations only increase by pushing them towards more radical and unregulated platforms, further

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<sup>145</sup> u/TRUMP2016-MAGA, “Can’t believe I’ve found like-minded people,” Reddit post on *WaybackMachine*, 2020. [https://web.archive.org/web/20190227074709/https://www.reddit.com/r/The\\_Donald/comments/451dlt/cant\\_believe\\_ive\\_found\\_like minded\\_people/](https://web.archive.org/web/20190227074709/https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/451dlt/cant_believe_ive_found_like minded_people/) (Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>146</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, “Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration,” *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>147</sup> Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Donald Trump*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2019), 79-80.

<sup>148</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, “Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration,” *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

demonstrating their powerlessness in fighting against it. This is not to say that they shouldn't have acted at all, but that their actions were reactive when they should have been proactive. They tried to intervene when the harm had already been inflicted; *the damage was done*. It is necessary to realize this when analyzing social media's role in Jan. 6 as a facilitator, not an active perpetrator. In other words, it was not the direct strategy of social media platforms to incite an insurrection, but their indolent approaches did not cease the violent rhetoric that provoked it.

As stated earlier, I will finalize this analysis by referring to the democratic perimeter in the context of the case study. To recollect, it was distinguished into three main pillars: the *public sphere*, *free & healthy* media, and a *rational public*. These will unfold the deeper significance of the case study within a wider democratic context, as the attack was not considered purely physical, but was also regarded as an "attack on democracy" itself. This represents the fact that Jan. 6 is an instrumental case study within this dissertation, as it does not only explore the links between algorithmic technologies and the attack, but the wider democratic implications of algorithms. Reframing the case study in this way can additionally enable the analysis to be applied to other similar case studies.

As mentioned within the theoretical foundations, new ICTs enabled individuals from all around the world to communicate about wide-ranging matters. This made it a shining new hope for the implementation of the *public sphere* in mass democracies, and even across borders. Although, this hope became quite short-lived due to their consequences, such as the ones that came to fruition on Jan. 6. The groups that developed on platforms such as Facebook and Reddit almost perfectly manifested the idea of an echo chamber. They were directly affected by the algorithms that create filter bubbles, within which individuals get stuck.<sup>149</sup> The ideal of the public sphere, which facilitates rational, inclusive, and participatory discussions, has been impacted by the use of algorithms. It limits people's exposure to diverse information, which is a disadvantage when the aim is to discuss with other people whose information diet is also largely defined by algorithms. Due to this, the public sphere is dividing up and shrinking into *sphericules*, as Davis describes them,<sup>150</sup> where people from different viewpoints have a hard time debating each other in a rational, inclusive, and participatory manner. TheDonald.win

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<sup>149</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>150</sup> Aeron Davis, *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, June 2019), 184.

manifests this notion greatly, as the platform was virtually sealed against outside views, which only assisted in amplifying the extremities that arose on the website.<sup>151</sup> The algorithms did little to skew their views when they arrived on the actual website, as they had already “done the damage” on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Reddit, that acted as a pipeline to the TheDonald.win website.

New ICTs were also perceived with optimism when they first emerged, as they limited control of governments on the information diets of their citizens, promoting free media. This also largely eliminated the demands of gatekeeping, making it easier for individuals to publish their thoughts and opinions, and for social movements to mobilize people. These two factors made social media appear as an aid to democracy. Since, this has ultimately led to diminished content quality, information reliability, information overload, and the creation of a post-truth environment. As has been mentioned, algorithms on social media often favor engaging content that invokes emotions, which unfortunately often contains extreme views and false information. Donald Trump utilized this reality to spread disinformation on social media, become popular, and make people believe his lies. In the context of the case study, the Trump campaign used this strategically to lie repeatedly about the 2020 presidential elections being fraudulent,<sup>152</sup> which eventually gave rise to “an attack on democracy.” This goes to show that the emergence of algorithms and social media has fundamentally led to a defect in democracy, where media is perhaps free but *not healthy*. This demonstrates the wider democratic implications of new ICTs, that are exemplified by this case study.

As stated earlier, democracy depends on the public will of citizens to act rationally within society.<sup>153</sup> This is demonstrated in three ways within the case study. One, with Trump’s intentional instilling of fear amongst his audience, that was spread and amplified on social media, he deliberately played with people’s ability to think rationally and reasonably. By tapping into powerful emotions, Trump was able to shift cognition and make his supporters more vulnerable to believing falsehoods. It can therefore be argued that Trump deliberately conditioned his supporters to believe his claims.<sup>154</sup> This included his election lies that had been

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<sup>151</sup> Jeffrey K. Riley, “Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win Between Election Day and Inauguration,” *Social Media + Society* (2022), 2-3. doi: 10.1177/20563051221109189.

<sup>152</sup> Nate Rattner, “Trump’s election lies were among his most popular tweets,” *CNBC*, 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html> (Retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2023).

<sup>153</sup> Alain Touraine, *What is Democracy?*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Oxfordshire, London: Routledge, 1997), 111-125.

<sup>154</sup> Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Donald Trump*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2019), 79-80.

widely disproved by reputable sources. This was because when Trump announced the “big lie,” it fell straight in line with his supporters’ expectations, as Trump had “warned” them about a rigged system for months. Despite being a lie, it led to thousands of Americans showing up to the Capitol to back him up. This can hardly be considered *rational* behavior, as rationality signifies an act based on *logic, clear thought, and understanding*. This shows that Trump’s approach, largely elevated by social media and algorithms, led to diminished rationality among his supporters.

Second, algorithms’ main goal is often to entice a user to stay on a social media platform for as long as possible to consume as much content as possible. Research has shown that this infinite exposure to a never-ending timeline is leading to the stupefaction of social media users, by reducing attention spans and the ability to tune out distractions. Third, Ignas Kalpokas framed algorithmic technologies on social media as the removal of free choice. Instead, he asserts that the political “choices“ individuals make are predefined decisions that users are *nudged* into making.<sup>155</sup> In this sense, people who use social media, which amounts to more than half of the world’s population,<sup>156</sup> no longer possess a truly free choice regarding their behaviors, actions, and decisions, and the will to act rationally is thus confined to algorithms and social media. Considering this, it can be stated that Trump supporters did not choose to act irrationally, from believing election lies and deciphering Trump’s allusive messages into direct orders, to literally storming the Capitol building. These three implications show that the democratic prerequisite of rational citizens is being diminished by social media and algorithms.

The democratic perimeter allows the scope to widen, by looking at the implications of algorithmic technology on modern society and its impact on how democracy works. Jan. 6 shows one extreme aspect of these implications, which made it an ideal case study to demonstrate them.

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<sup>155</sup> Ignas Kalpokas, “Affective Encounters of the Algorithmic Kind: Post-Truth and Posthuman Pleasure,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (2019), 11, retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023. doi: 10.1177/2056305119845678.

<sup>156</sup> Statista, “Number of social media users worldwide from 2023 to 2027,” *Statista*, n.d. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> (Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to examine how social media algorithms facilitated the Jan. 6 Capitol attack. As explored, this role was found to be quite significant, impacting the event in more ways than one. However, it is essential to note that the dissertation also concludes that social media algorithms ultimately played the role of facilitators, *not* as active perpetrators of the attack. Additionally, as was made clear within the discussion, the attack was not perpetrated by one party but displayed the combined effort of many.

The Trump campaign played an active part in precipitating the optimal conditions for the attack, by building a loyal supporter base that was willing to believe in his claims, true or false, *and* act on those claims. Trump and his supporters relied heavily on social media and algorithms for the amplification of their message, which demonstrated one of its roles in facilitating it. This included manipulating the intrinsic functions of algorithms in order to amplify pro-Trump content on social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit.

Another effect of social media algorithms that proved to be significant in light of Jan. 6 is their power to determine the information diets of users. The algorithmic determination of what individuals consume can leave individuals enclosed within echo chambers, sinking into rabbit holes and unprepared for public discussions, especially with people they don't agree with. This has limited the potential of social media to act as an aid to democracy, as the initial hopes intended. Instead, as the case study displayed, social media has in some respect *caused* the undermining of democracy.

I began this dissertation by exploring the theoretical and scientific background of algorithmic technologies. There, it was established that the main goal of this technology is *optimization* that makes services enjoyable, user-friendly, and effortless; its forte being the ability to provide *certainty* in times of *uncertainty*. However, the simplicity of this description does not encompass the complexities that affect our daily life. Due to the largely unregulated field that algorithms and data-gathering have been playing on, they have been allowed to roam freely, influencing us in inconspicuous ways. But as was revealed in the case study, this can have various, unintended, and often extremely serious consequences.

As a moment that challenged the foundation of its democracy, Jan. 6 will likely forever be etched in the history of the United States. The insurrection shocked many, due to its violent nature and unpredictability. The devastating breach of the Capitol building led to physical harm such as violence, vandalism, and loss of lives, which became an alarming sight for citizens all over the world. Although it was arguably the incorporeal effects that were regarded as the

biggest threat when it came to the attack. This caused the insurrection to receive the figurative tag of “an attack on democracy,” exhibiting the size of its footprint.

The democratic perimeter widens the scope, looking at the consequences that new technology can have on modern society and impact how democracy works in general. The analysis established that social media and algorithms had various democratic consequences, which are exemplified by the case study of Jan. 6. For example, echo chambers and filter bubbles, induced by social media algorithms, led to the limited information diet of Trump supporters. This left them enclosed within smaller “spheres” and significantly unprepared to partake in public sphere discussions. Another implication demonstrated by the case study is the wider effects of social media, that has caused the global media environment to become more free but less healthy. This was demonstrated through things such as information reliability, information overload, and a post-truth environment. The last aspect of this analysis demonstrated how Jan. 6 showcased irrational behavior due to psychological manipulation, the negative effects of social media on cognitive abilities, and the removal of free choice by algorithms. The case of Jan. 6 presents an *instrumental* case study within this dissertation, as it shows an illustrative example of the extensive implications of social media algorithms for modern democratic society. It is important to mention that while Jan. 6 is an efficacious instance to study, it does not fully encompass the extent of the issue.

One important note on the case study of Jan. 6 is that it does not stand alone in an international context. For example, the insurrection in Brazil on January 8<sup>th</sup> of 2023 shares some frighteningly similar characteristics with Jan. 6; from the patriotic flag capes and the horn-wearing rioter captain,<sup>157</sup> to the intricate planning on social media.<sup>158</sup> Perhaps this signifies that Jan. 6 represents or even led a modern trend that portrays the effect of newly commenced concepts such as fake news and social media, or the recent re-popularization of right-wing populism, on democratic society as we know it. This trend could be a very fascinating research topic, recognizing the factors essential for an insurrection to unfold. It could also be interesting to track the same indicators that characterized the preconditions of Jan. 6 in other countries. This could potentially aid in the prediction or even the *prevention* of resembling attacks from

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<sup>157</sup> @Kaceytron, “Who wore it better? #brazil #insurrection,” *Twitter*, 8<sup>th</sup> of Jan 2023. <https://twitter.com/kaceytron/status/1612178017182162945> (Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

<sup>158</sup> Katie Polglase, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Tara John, & Rodrigo Pedroso, “‘Command your troops, damn it!’ How a series of security failures opened a path to insurrection in Brazil,” *CNN*, 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/14/americas/brazil-congress-riots-timeline-intl-latam/index.html> (Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2023).

arising in the future. It is therefore necessary to look beyond and analyze other case studies, to draw a more comprehensive conclusion from this analysis.

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