

Do Social Media Threaten Democracy? – Scandal, Outrage and Politics | The Economist

By The Economist

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IN 1962 a British political scientist, Bernard Crick, published “In Defence of Politics”. He argued that the art of political horse-trading, far from being shabby, lets people of different beliefs live together in a peaceful, thriving society. In a liberal democracy, nobody gets exactly what he wants, but everyone broadly has the freedom to lead the life he chooses. However, without decent information, civility and conciliation, societies resolve their differences by resorting to coercion.

How Crick would have been dismayed by the falsehood and partisanship on display in this week’s Senate committee hearings in Washington. Not long ago social media held out the promise of a more enlightened politics, as accurate information and effortless communication helped good people drive out corruption, bigotry and lies. Yet Facebook acknowledged that before and after last year’s American election, between January 2015 and August this year, 146m users may have seen Russian misinformation on its platform. Google’s YouTube admitted to 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter to 36,746 accounts. Far from bringing enlightenment, social media have been spreading poison.

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