

How Social Media Took Us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump | MIT Technology Review

By Zeynep Tufekci

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Zeynep Tufekci traces the recent history of media and democracy, including flash points like the Obama campaign, the 2011 Arab Spring, and the 2016 election. She argues that the traditional gatekeepers of information have fundamentally changed, with significant consequences for the erosion of democratic institutions, the spread of misinformation, and the decline of privacy and security. Tufekci argues that there is no going back, and that it will be a collective undertaking to adapt society and its institutions to the new realities of technology, politics, and the economy in the digital age.

Power always learns, and powerful tools always fall into its hands. This is a hard lesson of history but a solid one. It is key to understanding how, in seven years, digital technologies have gone from being hailed as tools of freedom and change to being blamed for upheavals in Western democracies—for enabling increased polarization, rising authoritarianism, and meddling in national elections by Russia and others.

But to fully understand what has happened, we also need to examine how human social dynamics, ubiquitous digital connectivity, and the business models of tech giants combine to create an environment where misinformation thrives and even true information can confuse and paralyze rather than informing and illuminating.

[...]

If digital connectivity provided the spark, it ignited because the kindling was already everywhere. The way forward is not to cultivate nostalgia for the old-world information gatekeepers or for the idealism of the Arab Spring. It's to figure out how our institutions, our checks and balances, and our societal safeguards should function in the 21st century—not just for digital technologies but for politics and the economy in general. This responsibility isn't on Russia, or solely on Facebook or Google or Twitter. It's on us.

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