

Social media and politics: Towards electoral resilience | New America

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Television was pivotal in bringing John Fitzgerald Kennedy to the American presidency in 1961. The candidate was charismatic, and his campaign was intelligent in how it exploited the nascent medium. But television did not merely amplify his existing characteristics, it markedly changed the tactics necessary to prevail in an election; that change in tactics entailed a change in the qualities necessary to be a credible candidate. These changes imposed by the technology on the American electorate in turn quickly reformed the nature of government itself. The nation's politics were so fundamentally shaped by television that it is now impossible to realistically imagine modern political life without it.¹

We now have a new technological medium that joins television as a potent and central mechanism for the construction of social reality: the online communication and networking platforms we have come to call "social media." The leading social media platforms exert influence both directly and in conjunction with television. "Television," in the 1960s, comprised a small number of powerful companies: NBC, CBS, and ABC. So too "social media" today is both a technological schema and, at least with relevance to national politics, a particular and small set of services offered by an even smaller group of powerful corporations: Facebook, Google, and Twitter.²

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