

Consider the view that social media is the greatest threat to states today.

Ong Yong En (17A14)

States of the present day are plagued by a multitude of threats from both internal and external forces. With the proliferation of 'fake news' around the world, and the corollary increase in clampdowns of such, many view social media to be a great threat to states. However, there are also a slew of other threats that can undermine the socio-political stability of nation states today. These threats range from the exponentially increasing economic and military clout of rising hegemony, to the pervasiveness of transnational terrorism. I believe that such threats are even more adverse than the threats posed by an increasing use of social media.

Social media has been leveraged by hostile state actors to negatively influence domestic state politics. These state actors engage in cyber-warfare, deploying their army of fake bots to disseminate disparaging propaganda, tarnishing the reputation of important political leaders. This is epitomized by Russia's alleged meddling of the United States' presidential election in 2016. It was claimed that in order to ensure the success of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin's preferred presidential candidate, Putin's administration created fake twitter accounts that accused Hillary Clinton of corruption and nepotism. This shows that social media can be manipulated, even by foreign powers to influence domestic political outcomes. The fact that this form of cyber-warfare has been instrumental in undermining 'sacrosanct' political ideals, in favour of a diametrically opposing one championed by hostile state actors, speaks volumes about the potency of social media. Social media can therefore serve as powerful arms of a country's soft power, threatening the political status quo of other states and even global superpowers like the US are vulnerable to such a threat.

However, I believe that we should refrain from framing social media as the most pressing threat that states face today. That social media to be used as threats are contingent on states' pre-existing socio-political vulnerabilities to threats. The potency of social media in bolstering popular demagogues like Donald Trump, should not be overstated. In fact, the reason for Trump's success is also a result of other social phenomena, such as the disenchantment felt by White Americans in the 'Rust Belt' states, that are bearing the brunt of deindustrialization and spiraling unemployment rates. Furthermore, social media can be transformed into a tool that can increase the legitimacy of political leaders, when utilized astutely. This is most evident in China, where efforts have been invested into the implementation of a 'social responsibility' credit system. Also, potential political dissidents can be sieved out through the government's micromanagement of citizens' social media activity on sites like Taobao. This, compounded by the draconian censorship of western media sites under China's 'Great Firewall' project, have effectively created a surveillance state. Internal and external threats to the state (in the form of unfavourable propaganda championed by hostile state actors) are weeded out, bolstering the power and control that the Chinese government wields. Though this 'Big Brother' approach may seem Orwellian, the successes of such an approach should not be understated. It is thus evident that, with effective regulation, the threat posed by social media can be turned into a tool helping the government to secure their powers, allowing them to more effectively, albeit unpopularity, quell incidences that can threaten social stability.

Furthermore, states are also increasingly facing the threat of transnational terrorism. Contemporary state aggressions are different from macroaggressions, given the advent of globalization, compounding the ability of certain non-state actors to proselytize their fanatical teachings, often through social media. A prime example of such would be the pervasiveness of transnational terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They have managed to lure the economically and socially disenfranchised, from Molenbeek in Brussels to Mindanao in the Philippines, towards their goal of creating a caliphate in

Iraq and Syria. Their foreign fighters have launched assaults in Paris, Germany and Jakarta, from 2015 to 2016, killing scores of civilians through gruesome means, such as driving a truck into a crowd as in the case of the German Christmas market attack by Anis Amrin in 2016.. Transnational terrorism has evidently threatened the safety, social order and social stability of many countries. This is compounded by the corollary increase in xenophobia and specifically Islamophobia in countries such as France. Many locals are conflating the acts of a radicalised minority, with a presumed evilness of the entire religion. The resultant proliferation in hate speech has dangerously divided citizens along racial and religious lines, further threatening the social harmony and stability of states. Social media has, in this case, empowered such radicals to extend their pernicious sphere of influence, allowing them to accrue funds and manpower for the successful prolonging of their operative capacities. Transnational terrorism is hence, a perennial, persistent and potent threat to a state's social stability, especially with the omnipresence of social media, which can be leveraged by individuals with insidious ideals.

Moreover, states (especially those in the developing regions) are also beset by worries of increasingly assertive global hegemonies. With the rising political and economic clout of countries such as China, geopolitical flashpoints have increased exponentially. These flashpoints can be actualized in explicit forms, such as through an increase in border incursions between a hegemon and another smaller nation. For instance, China has threatened Bhutan's sovereignty by constructing a road on the Doklam Plateau in 2017. Bhutan, a relatively pacifist country with limited economic and military leverage, had to rely on India's strident condemnation of China's aggressive behaviour to assert its sovereign rights. This shows that the political stability and sovereignty of developing nation states can be threatened by economic and political heavyweights, seeking to influence their clout. Such threats can also materialize in less explicit ways. Developing nation states can find themselves ensnared in the seductive nature of 'debt trap diplomacy' by hegemonies. Sri Lanka, a developing state, is now bogged down by high levels of debt to China, accrued through the development of the Hambantota port. Due to the government's inability to repay their debts, they may have to eventually surrender their control of the port to the Chinese. Developing states are evidently plagued by the conundrum of having to counter the political desires of global hegemony. Given that they are negotiating with such superpowers from positions of weakness and vulnerability, they can easily be economically exploited. Such an outcome may undermine the political legitimacy of governments, eliciting strident voices of dissent from citizens. When mismanaged, such dissension will potentially threaten the social stability of countries. The threats posed by rising hegemonies are therefore multi-faceted, capable of undermining social, economic and political stability in developing states.

Overall, I hold the view that social media is the exacerbating factor, fanning the flames of transnational terrorism while facilitating the rise of global hegemony. However, the underlying causes and potency of threats from transnational terrorism and rising hegemony should not be glossed over. In fact, these threats are more adverse, given the lack of national and international agendas that have successfully countered their repercussions. This is especially so, in the case of threats posed by rising hegemonies, where regional and global consensus on issues of shared interests are difficult to attain, given the invariable diversity of each country's political agenda.

Comments:

Fluently argued with many appropriate examples. There were points where I felt you could have weighed the role of social media more, and made explicit comparisons between the other factors and social media, but these did not detract from the overall quality of the essay. A thoughtful response, nevertheless.