A scholar asks, 'Can democracy survive the Internet?'

By **Dan Balz** April 22

In more innocent times, the rise of the Internet was seen by many people as a boon to democracy. Disruptive, yes, but the Web broadened the flow of information, introduced new voices into the political debates, empowered citizens and even provided a powerful fundraising tool for some lesser-known candidates such as Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders.

Now, in what are clearly less innocent times, the Internet is viewed as a far less benign force. It can be a haven for spreading fake news and rewarding the harshest and most divisive of political rhetoric. It is a medium, for all its benefits, that has dark corners populated by anonymous actors (some not even real people) whose influence appears to be growing but not easily measured.

Nathaniel Persily, a law professor at Stanford University, is among the many — academics, political practitioners, journalists, law enforcement officials and others — who are attempting to understand better the consequences of conducting campaigns and governance here and around the world in the Internet age. He has written about this in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Democracy in an article with a title that sums up his concerns: "Can Democracy Survive the Internet?"

The provocative title isn't simply the result of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, though that is obviously a front-and-center issue. "I think it's the shiny object that everyone understandably pays attention to right now, but the problem is bigger than that," Persily said during an interview a few days ago.

The FBI and congressional committees are investigating if anyone associated with President Trump's campaign was in collusion with the Russians, and how future campaigns can be protected from such meddling. But as Persily rightly notes, foreign attempts to interfere with what should be a sovereign enterprise, such as a presidential election, are only one factor to be examined.

Even without the Russians, the campaign of 2016 highlighted the degree to which elections are carried out on terrain far different from when television and traditional print organizations were the dominant media. Persily argues that the 2016 campaign broke down previously established rules and distinctions "between insiders and outsiders, earned media and

advertising, media and non-media, legacy media and new media, news and entertainment and even foreign and domestic sources of campaign communication."

Candidate Trump understood the new landscape far better than did Hillary Clinton, and that might be one reason he sits in the Oval Office today. Clinton played by old rules; Trump did not. He recognized the potential rewards of exploiting what the Internet offered, and he conducted his campaign through unconventional means.

"That's what Donald Trump realized that a lot of us didn't," Persily said. "That it was more important to swamp the communication environment than it was to advocate for a particular belief or fight for the truth of a particular story," Persily said.

In his article, Persily notes that the Internet reacted to the Trump campaign "like an ecosystem welcoming a new and foreign species. His candidacy triggered new strategies and promoted established Internet forces. Some of these (such as the 'alt-right') were moved by ideological affinity, while others sought to profit financially or to further a geopolitical agenda. Those who worry about the implications of the 2016 campaign are left to wonder whether it illustrates the vulnerabilities of democracy in the Internet age, especially when it comes to the integrity of the information voters will access as they choose between candidates."

The rise and power of the Internet has accelerated the decline of institutions that once provided a mediating force in campaigns. Neither the legacy media nor the established political parties exercise the power they once had as referees, particularly in helping to sort out the integrity of information.

Beyond that, legacy media that once helped set the agenda for political conversation now often take their cues from new media. Twitter traffic often determines what cable television pundits will spend their day talking about, yet what makes something a trending topic can sometimes be determined by unknown but not disinterested forces.

Trump, as a tweeting president, continues to demonstrate Twitter's power to shape the day on a regular basis. Persily quotes a study by a group of scholars that said, "Retweets of Trump's posts are a significant predictor of news stories and blog posts." Meanwhile, the volume of Trump's tweets was "a negative predictor of concurrent news coverage . . . which may imply that he unleashes 'tweetstorms' when his coverage is low."

Some of the problems identified are not necessarily new. There were false or misleading stories in the media before the Internet existed, as the era of "yellow journalism" reminds us. Anonymous political communication existed long before the Internet.

The Internet, however, involves characteristics that heighten the disruptive and damaging influences on political campaigns. One, Persily said, is the velocity of information, the speed with which news, including fake news, moves and expands and is absorbed. Viral communication can create dysfunction in campaigns and within democracies.

Another factor is the pervasiveness of anonymous communication, clearly greater and more odious today. Anonymity facilitates a coarsening of speech on the Internet. It has become more and more difficult to determine the sources of such information, including whether these communications are produced by real people or by automated programs known as "bots."

"During the 2016 campaign," Persily writes, "the prevalence of bots in spreading propaganda and fake news appears to have reached new heights. One study found that between 16 September and 21 October 2016, bots produced about a fifth of all tweets related to the upcoming election. Across all three presidential debates, pro-Trump twitter bots generated about four times as many tweets as pro-Clinton bots. During the final debate in particular, that figure rose to seven times as many."

Persily also notes that the fear of dark money and "shady outsiders" running television commercials "seems quaint when compared to networks of thousands of bots of uncertain geographic origin creating automated messages designed to malign candidates and misinform voters."

Yet there is still much that isn't known about all this. It isn't clear the degree to which online hate speech increased during or after the campaign. Nor is it clear whether fake news had a significant impact on the campaign and voters' behavior, though the fog created by such stories can add to the general distrust of the media among many voters. Still, Persily cautioned, "Because we can't prove it yet doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned about it."

When asked how worrisome all this is, Persily said, "I'm extremely concerned." He was quick to say he did not believe government should or even could regulate this new environment. But, he said, "We need to come to grips with how the new communication environment affects people's political beliefs, the information they receive and then the choices that they make."

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