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## **The Impact of Social Media on Society**

**Thesis:** The widespread adoption of social media platforms has measurably altered the way people consume news, form political opinions, and maintain personal relationships, producing social shifts that would have been difficult to predict two decades ago.

### **Introduction**

In 2004, fewer than 5% of American adults used any social media platform. By 2023, that figure exceeded 70%, with many users spending upwards of two hours per day on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This shift did not merely change how people pass time. It changed how they encounter information, who they trust, and how they relate to the people around them. The examples below illustrate three of the most significant and well-documented effects.

### **Body Paragraph 1: News Consumption**

The clearest illustration of social media's impact on information behavior is the collapse of traditional news gatekeeping. A 2022 Pew Research study found that 48% of U.S. adults reported getting news from social media at least sometimes, with younger adults far more likely to rely on it as a primary source. This matters because social media platforms do not apply the editorial standards of traditional newsrooms: stories are ranked by engagement, not accuracy, and misinformation travels faster than corrections. The result is an information environment where the most emotionally provocative content reaches the widest audiences,

regardless of whether it is true. This directly supports the thesis: social media has not just changed where people get news, it has changed what kind of news reaches them.

### **Body Paragraph 2: Political Opinion Formation**

A second illustration comes from research into political polarization. A 2019 study published in the *American Political Science Review* found that participants who deactivated their Facebook accounts for four weeks before the 2018 U.S. midterm elections reported lower political polarization scores than those who remained on the platform. The researchers concluded that exposure to algorithmically curated political content pushed users toward more extreme positions over time. This is a concrete demonstration of how social media shapes political opinion: not through deliberate persuasion but through the cumulative effect of what the algorithm surfaces. The thesis claim, that social media has altered how people form political opinions, is directly supported by the measurable difference in polarization between users and non-users.

### **Body Paragraph 3: Personal Relationships**

The effect on personal relationships is more complex but equally well-documented. A 2018 study from the University of Pennsylvania found a causal relationship between reduced social media use and reduced loneliness and depression in undergraduate students. Participants who limited their use to 30 minutes per day showed significant improvements in wellbeing compared to a control group. The mechanism appears to be social comparison: platforms that display curated highlights of others' lives produce a persistent sense of inadequacy in regular users. This illustrates that the social connection social media promises often produces the opposite: increased isolation and reduced satisfaction with real-world relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, these three examples show that social media's impact on society is not a single phenomenon but a cluster of related shifts, each reinforcing the others. People are getting news from unvetted sources, forming more polarized political views, and reporting lower satisfaction with their personal relationships. The technology did not cause these outcomes in isolation; it accelerated tendencies that were already present in human behavior. What makes the illustration essay form well-suited to this topic is that no single example proves the thesis. The argument depends on the accumulation: only when you see the same pattern repeating across news consumption, political behavior, and personal wellbeing does the scale of the shift become undeniable.



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