Can Social Media Promote Equality in the Public Sphere?

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Internet technology has revolutionized the way information spreads within communities. But increased accessibility does not always mean that citizens are taking advantage of information networks equally or uniformly. Knowing the pitfalls allows leaders pursuing social justice goals to engage broad audiences.

According to Southwell's research, important information – such as public health recommendations or facts about state policy changes – does not always flow evenly to all stakeholders in a democracy. Some social network users simply have more clout or farther reach than others, enabling them to act as gatekeepers for certain kinds of messages. What is more, sensational narratives attract more attention and travel further than “less exciting” stories, no matter how important. But none of this means that social media cannot make information-sharing more equal. In his new Key Findings brief, Southwell urges those pursuing social justice goals to learn about the pitfalls of social media and tailor messages to resonate with their audiences. Investments in new communications infrastructures can also make a difference down the line.

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