

**Martin A. M. Gansinger
Ayman Kole
(Eds.)**

Vortex of the Web

Potentials of the online environment

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Dedicated to Loubna, Ahmed-Nouri and Jul and Atil

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About the editors

Dr. Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger (born 1979 in Austria) studied Communication Science and Political Science at the University of Vienna and passed both with distinction. His Master's thesis discusses recursive patterns of cultural, social, and political resistance in various forms of Black American musical expression and the potential of Hip Hop as an alternative communication-structure for the compensation of dysfunctional representation through mainstream-media. He furthermore analyzed the conditions of communication and interaction in regard to the practice of collective improvisation as a musical method and its correspondence to the concept of the Ideal Speech Situation as introduced by Habermas – as well as its efficiency in the context of Intercultural Communication – to attain a Doctor's degree in Communication Science. Next to being an editor and journalist for *jazzzeit* magazine and Vienna-based radio station orange 94.0 from 2005-2009 he has been working as a PR-coordinator for the internationally awarded, independent label JazzWerkstatt Records. Martin A. M. Gansinger conducted several long-term field studies abroad, receiving financial funding through the University of Vienna's research scholarship. He spent a year in Ghana in coordination with the Vienna Institute for Development and Cooperation and Prof. John Collins from the University of Ghana/Accra, researching Intercultural Communication processes in the context of transfusional West African music styles – including an extended stay at the local compound of the Jamaica-based Bobo Shanti Mansion, one of the strictest subdivisions of the Rastafarian faith, and allowance to their communal Nyahbinghi ceremonies. Further field research aiming at extemporaneous communication techniques and its use in traditional knowledge systems has been done in Fez/Morocco and the convent of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Lefke/Cyprus where he is working and residing since 2009. He is currently holding the position of an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communication at Girne American University, teaching Undergraduate-, Master-, and PhD-classes as well as appointed Head of Department of Public Relations. In 2018, Martin A. M. Gansinger received invitations to present his work at Freiburg University and the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Dr. Ayman Kole (born 1980, Sydney, Australia) completed an experience course at the prestigious Australian, Film, TV and Radio school whilst still a student studying in

High School in 1996. He studied intensively at the University of Sydney, completing a BA in Arts with triple majors: English, Performance Studies and Studies in Religion in 2002. He also finished a scriptwriting course at the same University. He worked as a High School English Teacher before completing his MA in English at the University of Sydney in 2006. During his studies in the Masters Degree program, he wrote the short story 'The Mirror' which was selected as the Phoenix Journal finalist and published by Sydney University Press. He later was successfully accepted as a PhD student at Charles Sturt University to commence work on his thesis encompassing Literature, History and Creative Writing. His objective was to explore the historical, cultural and social landscape of Eastern Europe and the Middle East with a focus on the 17th century and he spent time in Turkey and Cyprus conducting thorough historical research. In his work, Ayman investigated how people can be manipulated and just how quickly firmly held beliefs can be either modified or replaced in light of effectively staged performances. Furthermore, his thesis aimed to alert inquisitive minds to the cons and trickery of harmful or pretentious movements and this message can be applied to the realm of religion and politics today. One of Ayman's strengths in writing is his richly detailed research and his ability to create a fascinating narrative not from only one cultural perspective, but from many competing social groups of the selected era. Indeed, his profound insightfulness of the 17th century, illustrating the differences and commonalities between the major religions of the area are just as relevant today as they were in the past. His novel 'Mark of the Crescent' was published in Australia. He currently he holds an academic position at Cyprus Science University.

Contributors

Tuba Kalçık

Tuba Kalçık is a graduate of Bilkent University's Faculty of Business Administration. She completed her Master's degree at Ankara University/Communication Faculty and finished a Doctorate at Istanbul University/Communication Faculty. Tuba Kalçık worked as producer and editor in the media sector, conducting interviews for television, newspapers, magazines, and websites. Kalçık, who works in the field of political communication and media, is a lecturer at the Department of Public Relations and Advertising at Istanbul Medipol University.

Sheila Nnabuiife Ogochukwu

PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Communication/Girne American University

Ayla Yıldırım

Head of International Admissions, Girne American University

Nana Firdausi Mohammed

MA, Girne American University

Aisosa G. Aigbovbiosa

MA Candidate at the Faculty of Communication/Girne American University

Anastasia Kamyshanskaya

MA Candidate at the Faculty of Communication/Girne American University

Anna Babitskaya

MA Candidate at the Faculty of Communication/Girne American University

Introduction

*Technology is not civilization, civilization ain't about the tools that you're making...*ⁱ

It has been a stranger than fiction type of journey, and one that continues to be so. With the initiary enthusiasm about the collective migration into the webspace during the early 2000s slowly fading, more and more people seem to realize it might as well turn out to be a proverbial Box of Pandora. Coming as a surprise to some, the content that is being placed online is not free from many other connotations attached to it. The impact of social media upon private, political and business is beyond words and the dangers are not without consequences. Manipulation of the public agenda and other likewise schemes have already become part of an industry of tools specifically designed for the internet and targeting internet-users on a daily basis. On the verge to industry 4.0 and the internet of things, this book attempts to broadly discuss the risks and chances dwelling in our ever-present virtual environment from various perspectives, such as politics, philosophy, marketing, education and media.

The first chapter discusses the question of whether or not these newly developing techniques that have become the paramount source of information for online users worldwide prove to be compatible with democratic principles. Addressing key events – such as the 2018 Facebook data-breach or the new form of message control established by political actors like Trump, Macron or Austria's Sebastian Kurz – the potential danger of an emerging industry aiming at deceiving consumers and voters is being stressed. Following is a more general discussion concerning juxtaposition effects of online communication on the social environment that mainly points out aspects of gender discrimination and political opinion. Another crucial happening, the US-recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, forms the base for considerations about how Turkish politician's efficiently instrumentalize social media channels for their purposes and agendas, explored in Chapter Three. The hijacking of non-political platforms such as Instagram by political movements like Black Lives Matter is outlined by a respective case study along the lines of racism and stereotyping in Chapter Four of this book. The

ⁱ KRS ONE (2006). I'm On The Mic. On *LIFE*. New York: Antagonist Records.

following chapter explores the impact of online pornography on the academic performance of university student's based on a research conducted at the European University of Lefke/Cyprus. Focusing on the role of online tools in the process of relaunching dormant shadow brands, a case study of Nigerian Airtel is being presented in Chapter Six. After a short account on the role of social media in the opinion formation during the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, the book closes with a comparative study on the depiction of popular political documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *American Zeitgeist* in Western and Russian media – using Van Dijk's Semantic Macroproposition and the concept of the Ideological Square.

With this book we hope to present possible areas of future research that further investigate the potential of the web to improve or threaten the condition of mankind and society on its various levels. However, as with every other aspect of human inventions and technological achievements – and in slight amendment to another line of the above quoted KRS ONE – *it is the consciousness behind the screen that determines if the net is positive or negative.*

Martin A. M. Gansinger & Ayman Kole, June 2018

clicktatorship and democrazy: Social media and political campaigning

Abstract: This chapter aims to direct attention to the political dimension of the social media age. Although current events like the Cambridge Analytica data breach managed to raise awareness for the issue, the systematically organized and orchestrated mechanisms at play still remain oblivious to most. Next to dangerous monopoly-tendencies among the powerful players on the market, reliance on automated algorithms in dealing with content seems to enable large-scale manipulation that is applied for economical and political purposes alike. The successful replacement of traditional parties by movements based on personality cults around marketable young faces like Emmanuel Macron or Austria's Sebastian Kurz is strongly linked to products and services offered by an industry that simply provides likes and followers for cash. Inspired by Trump's monopolization of the Twitter-channel, these new political actors use the potential of social media for effective message control, allowing them to avoid confrontations with professional journalists. In addition, an extremely active minority of organized agitators relies on the viral potential of the web to strongly influence and dictate public discourse – suggesting a shift from the *Spiral of Silence* to the dangerous illusion of a *Nexus of Noise*.

Key Words: *Social Media, Democracy, Political Campaigning, Public Opinion, Big Data, Micro-Targeting*

Stranger than fiction?

The question of social media, secrets and targeted discreditation has featured in countless productions in the film industry, more so of late. For instance, Oliver Stone's *Snowden* (Borman & Stone, 2016) draws its story from the real-life whistleblowing activities of Edward Snowden and sets out to highlight the drama and intrigues associated with the main character's leaking of NSA surveillance procedures. In fact, as noted by Michelle Singeltary's (2013) *Washington Post* article titled *Edward Snowden – The Price of Being a 'Whistleblower'*, the real Snowden is on record for declaring 'I can't in good conscience allow the U.S. government, to destroy privacy, internet freedom and basic liberties for people around the world with this massive surveillance machine they are building' from a Hong Kong hotel where he was hiding.

Furthermore, conspiracy-laden films have always been steadily churned out by Hollywood executives, offering intriguing storylines that play on the paranoias of the media at the time. One must only recall the classic *The Manchurian Candidate* (Axelrod & Frankenheimer, 1962) starring Frank Sinatra in the role of a Korean War veteran who is brainwashed by the communists to engage in harmful activities against his own country, the United States. Years later, some producers must have felt that this controversial premise warranted an update as the film was remade (Demme, 2004) with Denzel Washington re-inventing the role as a Gulf War veteran instead. Interestingly, the communist threat was replaced by sinister Global corporations in the new version.

It appears that computers and top-secret government programs are not really a new thing in film, as even a cursory glance reveals such genre efforts like *WarGames* (Schneider & Badham, 1983). The plot concerns a young hacker who breaks into the military computer system via a telephone modem to play a video game, unaware that the game is a program containing actual missile launch codes that could trigger nuclear war between the US and the Soviets. The film plays on the Cold War paranoias, coupled with computer glitches in the defense systems and identity theft.

Moreover, *Hackers* (Peyser & Softly, 1995) made when the internet was still somewhat new and not so widespread, tried to take advantage of the cyberpunk culture that was considered hip among teens, and had its main characters using online handles such as

Acid Burn and *Crash Override*, as well as its villain using the internet alias *The Plague*. Indeed, the cyber culture was taken further with the futuristic *Johnny Mnemonic* (Carmody & Longo, 1995) which had a young Keanu Reeves playing a courier who delivers illegal or secret data directly downloaded into a microchip-implant in his brain. Furthermore, the iconic science-fiction thriller *The Matrix* (Silver & The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) also starred Keanu Reeves as a computer hacker who discovers he has a larger role as savior to mankind after he bands together with a group of techno-rebels.

The internet took another sinister turn in *The Net* (Cowan & Winkler, 1995) with Sandra Bullock's character in peril, facing identity theft. These films and similar themed productions demonstrated that society was on the brink of a major change in the way we dealt with banking, private emails, and the overall handling of our personal information. Although, it cannot be denied that the internet has changed our world and the way we interact and conduct business, it has also vastly impacted the film industry as well. Once, especially during the films of the 1990s, the internet was seen as a sinister threat that heroes and heroines had to combat to save the day, but now, the internet has evolved in such a great capacity, that the film industry itself has finally met its challenge. Indeed, the internet has affected how a film is now marketed. More films are released on streaming networks instead of cinema theatres, and in some cases, films are being made directly for the streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime.

Facebook and social media platforms are also playing a central role in creating awareness for a new film. Thus, marketing for the film is fast evolving: the traditional methods of television trailers, home-video (VHS) and cinema previews have now been replaced by YouTube trailer uploads, Facebook pages, its multiple shares and sponsored advertising. As a matter of fact, in his article titled *The Internet Totally Freaked Out Over The Star Wars Trailer* for wired.com, Jordan Crucciola relayed that the trailer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was able to reach over 1 million clicks and views in just 23 minutes via this method on social media, thus proving that the power of social network could – together with its many commenters – not only reach large numbers in a short amount of time, but could too influence perceptions on what can be deemed good, bad or interesting.

Reality strikes

In May 2017, the Austrian Green Party won a significant court case that forced Facebook to worldwide remove postings that fulfill the subject of ‘hate speech’ (APA, 2017a). A similar claim has been expressed by former German Minister of Justice, Heiko Maas, who wanted to legally oblige the social media platform to scan their network for respective content and remove it. Facebook, however, strongly rejected the foreseen practice of self-censorship and sees the responsibility for regulating the issue on the side of the state and respective governmental measurements – preferably on a European level (Etzold, 2017). The announcement of Theresa May to set up a new national security unit dedicated to the preservation of truthful news content raises a whole lot of questions in the context of democracy and freedom of speech on its own (Walker, 2018). Nevertheless, the controversial social network had to face increased criticism since being accused to provide a platform for ‘fake news’ and hate postings during the US-election campaign in 2016 (Oates & Moe, 2016; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), in a quick reaction suggesting the establishment of fact checking units for uploaded content on their own behalf back then. Former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern – in his keynote speech at the European Newspaper Congress – openly urged Facebook to disclose the algorithms that are used to match users and targeted advertising and demanded the company to be subjected to common media law in order to balance the distorted means of competition between social media content and professional communicators (APA, 2017b). It goes without saying that these algorithms are to remain the company’s best kept secret, since it can be considered the very core of their business model.

As long as internal guidelines for the removal of explicit content are not bound to the limitations of the same regulations that media professionals have to consider for their work, they gain a clear advantage against institutionalized media outlets. Although former Chancellor Christian Kern criticized the role of institutionalized media in general in forming a ‘spiral of populism’ with attention-seeking political actors deliberately delivering the punchlines that sell copies, media monopolies that enable the glorification of violence tend to be even more endangering for social and democratic co-existence. Kern further pointed out the problematic condition of a newsmaking industry

that is primarily aiming at the generation of clicks, leaving journalistic decisions overruled by a fully quantified, algorithm-oriented perspective by stating that information is subsequently reduced to a product being purchased with data – equivalent to gold in the digital era (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013).

According to Hindman (2008) and Wilson (2008), the relationship between digital communication and democracy is a rather problematic one anyway. Several authors have looked into the role of internet and social media in the process of political participation and direct democracy (Aitamurto, 2012; Lim, 2012; Loader & Mercea 2012; Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2013). Being one of the first to discuss the impact of technological developments and reshaped means of capitalization on democratic societies, Dean's (2002) early critical account on the issue can be found echoing in a growing number of like-minded studies in the recent past. While Kang and McAllister (2011) had already focused on the capitalization of Google users, Marichal (2012) directly explored the issue of online exposure – and self-exposure – on social media channels as a factor for re-shaping concepts of democracy and public life. Helbing et al. (2017) even suggested a major re-organization of society due to a techno-economical Pandora's Box that has been opened by the inherent logics of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data. The case of a considerably large group of Macedonian teenagers from the sleepy village of Veles that launched a big number of websites filled with manipulated or made-up news content oriented towards Trump-supporters as an audience – cashing big money from ad revenues – is but one demonstration of the undesirable effects of such a constellation (Ladurner, 2016; Miller, 2016).

Qualman (2010) already dealt with the impact of social media on modern life and business practices, attesting the biggest success rate to those applications that would allow users either self-portrayal, competition or a chance to take on a role as an esteemed opinion leader (2010, p. 117). Socio-economist Tilman Santarius further pointed out that consumer-friendly flatrates or cost-free streaming offers are generally purchased by rather expensive exchange of sensitive private data and demanded political measurements to avoid unrestricted profitization of personal information (Laufer, 2017). However, another serious and problematic aspect of the personalized web is the creation of effectively constructed filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Nguyen, Hui,

Harper, Terveen & Konstan, 2014;) that exert a considerable effect on what and how the user might think about, in a way taking over the Framing and Agenda-Setting function of the mass media (Meraz, 2009; Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox & Shah 2010).

Therefore, next to a pre-existing human tendency for selective exposure to information according to personal beliefs and opinions (Aronson, 1969; Bandura, 2001), a pre-selection of estimated fields of interests served on the base of algorithmic calculations further narrows the scope. A lack of exposure to diversity and conflicting opinions – in a normative sense provided by public broadcast media corporations – necessarily results in a vicious circle of self-affirming informational content that only adds to and tightens existing convictions. In the sense of a reversed Spiral of Silence-model (Noelle-Neumann, 1978), the rise and public representation of Nationalist or extremist movements during the course of the last decade may partly be explained by a phenomenon that allows controversial anti-social agendas to be circulating in digital media channels around the world, hence adding a severe boost to the illusionary widespread acceptance of socially questionable thought and behavior (Yang, Kiang, Ku, Chiu, & Li, 2011; Dean, Bell, & Newman, 2012; O’Callaghan, Greene, Conway, Carthy & Cunningham, 2013; Patton, Eschmann & Butler, 2013; Awan, 2014; Farwell, 2014; Klausen, 2015).

On the other side of things, the convenient benefits of automated algorithms seem to be convincing for the news professionals as well – which does not improve the accuracy and reliability of information published by established media corporations either. Associated Press is one of the pioneers when it comes to the introduction of machine learning processes to the newsroom. Since several years the news agency is leaving the authoring of short messages on issues such as sports, wheather or finance to computer-based algorithms (Leitner, 2017). However, the *Los Angeles Times*’ ‘Quakebot’ reporting of an massive earthquake that never happened (Schmidt, 2017) should serve as but one demonstration of how misleading and potentially dangerous these automatically generated informations can turn out to be if they go unchecked by human reason. Yet another problem on the rise is the use of automated digital media campaigns performed by software robots – social bots – that imitate human behavior in networks or messaging systems, aiming at executing an influence on public opinion (Ehrenberg,

2012; Woolley, 2016; Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer & Flammini, 2016). Again, the US-election in 2016 has served to draw attention to this matter in the recent past (Kollanyi, Howard & Woolley), as well as did the Brexit referendum in the UK (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). The role of social bots as actual political actors has been empirically investigated by Hegelich and Janetzko (2016) in a case study focused on Ukraine. Hegelich (2016, p.2) reported that *1,000 fake accounts can currently be bought for between \$45 (simple Twitter accounts) and \$150 (“aged” Facebook-accounts), while (a) very high-quality piece of software that can be used to control 10,000 Twitter accounts costs around \$500.*

Follow the leader...on Twitter

While these developments might still be partly attributed to plain vanity or boost of popularity and market value, others are more specifically aiming at openly interfering with basic agreements and common practices in democratic social systems. Gu, Kropotov, Leopando and Estialbo (2017) presented alarming tendencies in terms of booming business industries trading with tools and services for explicit public opinion manipulation. Services offered on shady marketplaces – identified to be mostly located in China, Russia and the Middle East – reach from simple content promotion – consisting in the generation of clicks, likes, comments, buying of followers etc. – to discreditation campaigns as well as manipulation of online votes and petitions. Gu et al. quantify the pricing for discrediting a journalist with rather cheap \$55,000 (p. 59) while assisting to instigate a street protest sets one back for \$200,000 (p. 60) and decisive course of action in the context of election campaigns is being manufactured for a budget of \$400,000 (p. 61). However, all of the providers of these highly questionable services are operating in a combination of illegal underground area, half-legit gray zone and legitimate distribution channels, as demonstrated by Gu et al. (2017, 10). At the top of the pyramid, an operator is orchestrating and distributing false information from out of the anonymous underground while the service providers simply disseminate the messages to basic consumers at the bottom of the pyramid that willingly amplify the propaganda to the masses.

Obviously, this development signifies a crucial threat to democracy by severely interfering with the decision-making process of voters, performed by automated assimilators that enter human interaction in the shape of Trojan horses. Next to taking over popular means of contemporary expression such as Twitter (Lokot & Diakopoulos, 2016), Shirky (2011) and Michael (2017) even considered the bots to be responsible for hijacking the political debate altogether. A tendency that could be observed in the course of the so-called European refugee crisis during the last few years, where mainstream media as well as politics were consistently urged to react on populist topics generated in social media networks (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016; Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016), with the latter seemingly taking over the Agenda-Setting function generally attributed to the former, as attested earlier (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). In this context it is important to consider that the very nature of these social media channels represents a simultaneous focalization of agenda-setting capacity in its institutional character as well as covering the furthermore attested Two-Step-Flow of information as a second crucial element in the process of opinion formation (Meraz, 2009; Russell Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang & Bae, 2014).

However, the alternative would have been to leave deliberately disseminated populist claims uncommented which would have been interpreted as yet another example of the ‘Lügenpresse’, like the German nationalist movement Pegida termed it (Dostal, 2015). On the other hand, while contributions in social media networks are capable to generate a considerable momentum without a doubt, a rather essential step further in gaining significant public attention still seems to rely heavily on the issue being covered in mainstream media channels (Newman, 2009; Newman, 2011). While any other Trump-tweet hits the headlines with certainty – in a perfect synergy catering to the interests of audience, publishers and Trump alike (Oates & Moe, 2016; Borah, 2017) – the possible impact of presidential blabla limited to an actual group of subscribed followers would unarguably be less strong.

Nevertheless, considering the very nature of the medium, the content would very likely be shared by other users, who – despite their actual intention of criticizing or ridiculing the author – only contribute to creating attention for Trump as a political trademark, similar to news outlets that host extended features on the life story of the latest terrorist

attacker (Weimann & Winn, 1994; Nacos, 2016). While some countries' journalism outlets roughly agree on a reporting style that would focus more on the victims than the attacker in an effort to not grant the latter have his – potentially desired and sought after – fifteen minutes of fame and attention, a single post in a social media channel leaking the identity of the perpetrator is enough to start a wave of articles featuring interviews with relatives, schoolmates and teachers. Therefore, what might work as a convenient source of content to fit into the latest issue of a publication or broadcast might have the potential to generate and exert a considerable amount of pressure, dictating the topics that journalists somehow find themselves to be forced to deal with (Jewitt, 2009; Beckett, 2016).

The rise of Twitter-excessive Trump in 2016 can be seen as a model for French ex-banker Macron's and Austrian high school graduate/university drop-out Sebastian Kurz' successful self-stylization as messiah-like leaders of movements bearing more resemblance to social media hyped, self-promoted personality cults than to actual political players with openly recognizable political programs (Aberer, 2011; Piontek, 2012; Beck, 2013; Eberl, Zeglovits & Sickinger, 2017). Sharing similar slogans bare of any content – such as *Zeit für Neues (time for something new)* or *Penser printemps (think spring)* – during their election campaign (Zeit für Neues, 2017; Penser printemps, 2017), both politicians offered a vast space for voters to project their specific hopes and expectations. Macron demonstrated his personal commitment to manifest his signature call to rejuvenation by boasting a bill of €26,000 for make-up artists as soon as three months after his election (APA, 2017c). A wise investment, considering that the youthfulness of politicians like Macron or Kurz is one of their main assets. However, while Howard, Bradshaw, Kollanyi and Bolsolver (2017) have been demonstrating that so-called junk news were less present on Twitter as compared to its US counterpart, they recognized a considerable increase of such content for the second round that they credit to the use of social media bots. However, content on Macron still tends to dominate the traffic on Twitter between the two rounds (Howard et al., 2017, p. 5). One thing the two elections do share is that in both countries political parties have been attacked by hackers, leaking sensitive data to the media and the public (Fidler, 2016; Wirth, 2016; Reynolds, 2017) which demonstrates that the war games have just begun. A similarly martial approach to spin-doctoring has been demonstrated by former

Israeli Army Officer and globally active political campaigner Tal Silberstein, who orchestrated the performance of Austria's Social Democratic Party from out of his 'war room' termed office. Ending in a disastrous scandal that followed his arrestation in Tel Aviv on August 14, 2017 – due to charges of money laundry, among others –, Silberstein became the personification of 'dirty campaigning' techniques used during the election campaign, among them false flag Facebook accounts aiming at the discreditation of political opponents. Needless to say that individuals attached to the party/movement/personality cult of election-winning Sebastian Kurz have later on found to be responsible for vice-versa activities on the web by producing content aiming at insulting then chancellor Christian Kern. However, it gets obvious that democratic decision making is more and more vulnerable to calculated misinformation and targeted discreditation enabled by the technological possibilities and seemingly anonymous space provided by the internet.

From Spiral of Silence to Nexus of Noise

The latest – and maybe most revealing – example of the populist, social media-oriented modus operandi of Austria's new government has been provided by Karoline Edtstadler, Secretary of State at the Federal Ministry of the Interior and member of Kurz' movement/party/personality cult. In perfect coherence to Colin Crouch (2004) and his definition of the post-democratic condition, she justified a controversially discussed law reform regarding sexual delinquents as corresponding to a perceived notion of natural justice that she declared to deduce directly from respective postings on Facebook and Twitter in the course of an interview on February 5, 2018 (Mayer, 2018).

It seems that the deduction is free from consideration of the unarguably limited ability for any of the strongly emotional content generated on these social media channels to produce balanced and objective views and arguments – next to presenting distorted representations of a perceived public opinion generated by algorithms – as well as acknowledgment of considerable criticism of opposing law experts. Similar to the somehow misleading idea of direct democracy in form of a referendum or vote, the conception of Edtstadler – stressing her obligation to push the agendas of anonymously acting shot callers on selected communication platforms as a primary guideline for her

political mandate – unmistakably demonstrates the post-democratic, populist conception of the politician as a faithful servant to the dictate of an intentionally perceived – or even self-adjusted – majority. Borrowing from the Crusaders, the convenient justification *Facebook lo vult* – Mob willing – comes into mind. Interestingly enough, only a few days later, the opportunist character of Kurz and his right-wing coalition partner was further underlined by the demonstrated determination to simply ignore a petition signed by more than 500.000 citizens that opted for a continuation of a general smoking ban and their determination to push things through on a parliamentary level before a referendum on the issue could be scheduled (Richter, 2018).

Either the displayed perception of Edstadler is simply revealing her illiteracy in terms of competence to decode our contemporary media surrounding or a cold-blooded instrumentalization of the random and distorting momentum that large parts of online communication patterns can be attributed with. While the latter seems to be common practice among political actors around the world, as demonstrated earlier, Edtstadler provides evidence to assume the previous possibility by her statement. Positioning postings on social media channels as directly analogues with the perception of the population serves to present Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence* (Noelle-Neumann, 1978) with a reversed juxtapose of a presumed *Nexus of Noise*. This perspective is supported by a recent study of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD, 2017) that demonstrates that a loud minority actively orchestrated social media campaigns against refugees during the elections in Germany. The research revealed that half of the likes signaling support for hate-comments can be traced back to only five percent of the user accounts on the selected platforms. On top of it, the extremely active core of this minority – twenty-five percent of these likes seem to be generated by only one percent of the user profiles – deliberately aim at manipulating social media algorithms to magnify its impact. Coordinated activity along agreed upon timelines or the use of Hashtags are employed to boost the ranking of these contributions and therefore wrongly suggest their relevance to a broader part of the public. A “monumental deception” in the words of analyst Philip Kreißl (DPA, 2018), that is mainly generated by supporters of right-wing movements, as the study further reveals. Muslims and refugees list as the prime targets of these attacks in Austria, according to a report of the counter-initiative *#GegenHassimNetz* (eho, 2018).

Therefore, Edtstadler's statement is drastically demonstrating the urgent need for educational measurements that help to build a wide scale media literacy, hopefully providing for the progression of the mistakenly presumed or self-declared digital natives into a critical mass of digitally civilized entities. Equipped with a basic core competence for realistically evaluating and critically questioning the actual relevance of our digital surrounding, we would less likely fall into the trap of interpreting psychologically triggered digital counterparts of the Tourette syndrom as significant events. However, the rather disturbing example of Edtstadler shows that many of us are still at the stage of running for their lives in order to escape the approaching train – if we draw a parallel to the dawning of the Cinematic Age.

Big Data, Micro-targeting and Social Manipuledia

Unfortunately, such much needed discourse is buried under loads of Social Media Management and E-Marketing courses in the curriculum of Communication Faculties. Especially, considering the urgent need for a distant look and critical reflection of where the implementation of a never-ending flood of mediated distractions in our daily life has led us in regard to our condition as democratic citizens, political actors and conscientious human beings in full command of their critical capacities – and where we aim to draw the line between convenience and reason. However, with the dramatically changing demographic composition of Zuckerberg's social media giant, that – in its fourteenth year – suffers from a massive loss of young blood and strongly gains users from over fifty-five years of age instead (Sweney, 2018), one is curious to see the nature, impact and degree of centralization of the alternative media channels that the economically more significant group of users is migrating to and its consequences for democratic developments.

Latest disclosures by Christopher Wylie in the wave of the Cambridge Analytica scandal put even more public and political pressure on the tumbling giant. Under the umbrella of Cambridge Analytica, notorious for their involvement in the Brexit-campaign 2016 (Cadwalladr, 2017), Aleksandr Kogan, Professor of Psychology at Cambridge University, had created a Facebook-App named 'Thisismydigitallife' for his enterprise Global Science Research that had more than 270.000 downloaders doing a

personality test (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). However, by accepting the Terms of Trade, they also agreed to the use of their data for ‘scientific purposes’ as well as authorization of scanning the profiles of their added friends on base of the critically discussed ‘Third Party Consent’. The final heist consisted of personal data of about ninety million Facebook accounts and got analyzed by a program the whistleblower Wylie had developed. As Wylie put it: ‘We exploited Facebook to harvest millions of people’s profiles. And built models to exploit what we knew about them and target their inner demons’ (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018, para 3). The results had been sold to strategically support the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. SCL Group, the mother company of Cambridge Analytics, had Breitbart-mastermind and Trump-stablemate Steve Bannon as a board member from 2014 to 2016 and on top of it received \$15 million by Trump-financer Robert Mercer (Cadwalladr, 2018). Only a few days after Wylie went public, a Channel 4 video surfaced (Revealed: Trump’s election consultants filmed saying they use bribes and sex workers to entrap politicians, 2018) that has Cambridge Analytica-boss Alexander Nix boasting to potential clients in the course of an undercover report. He claimed that the data analysis provided by the organization had helped to critically influence more than two hundred elections all over the world – from India, to the Czech Republic and Argentina to Nigeria. He further claimed responsibility for the election of Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta – a campaign that was characterized by deliberate disinformation that targeted political opponents. Next to Nix being suspended from his position, British authorities, in a first reaction, issued orders to search the organization’s headquarters in London (Elgot, 2018). At the same time, the British Parliament, as well as the European Parliament and the US Senate, have issued requests for Zuckerberg to justify himself in front of their institutions (Reuters, 2018). Furthermore, investors filed lawsuits against Facebook, making the company lose about \$60 billion of market value within two days. With Zuckerberg dressed up in suit and tie, humbly admitting his mistake in front of toothless US-interrogators, some had hoped it would be up to the European Parliament to put him on the hot seat. These expectations were grounded on consistent hints towards governmental strategies to impose stronger regulations on Facebook in Europe – as suggested by EU-commissioner Margarethe Vestager since quite a while (Rice, 2018).

After repeatedly addressed invitations of President Antonio Tajani (APA, 2018), the hearing was streamed live on the internet – upon strong urge of Commission and Parliament members. Although important questions regarding missing competitors, unpaid taxes, or the ten thousand fact checkers he promised to install in 2016 happened to be incorporated in the lengthy talks of his interrogators, Zuckerberg simply ignored uncomfortable issues when it was his turn to respond (Salinas, 2018). One of these matters regarded the notorious shadow profiles – accounts of individuals not registered on Facebook that are generated by illegal screening of data stemming from internet use or access to mobile phones and monetized by being sold on the market (Blue, 2013; Garcia, 2017). Suddenly in a hurry to catch his – private – jet plane back to Los Angeles, Zuckerberg half-heartedly agreed to provide missing answers in written form and disappeared.

Despite all due criticism, Facebook is but the tip of the iceberg of a more general problem – since Zuckerberg’s money machine is only the most visible of all the actors accumulating data on the web, next to insurance companies, banks, employers, schools or the obvious intelligence services. Therefore, it would be too easy to urge private companies to act responsible while leaving the heart of the matter untouched. On the other hand, turning these regulative issues into a governmental concern is not free from danger either – as demonstrated by China, where the slight nuisance of bought followers and likes is being replaced with the blank horror of a social credit (Hatton, 2015). However, the latest case of Amazon selling its face-scan software Rekognition to the US-police – criticized as “a recipe for authoritarianism and disaster” by Malkiya Cyril of the Black Lives Matter Movement (Wong, 2018) – demonstrates that the technological means for full-scale surveillance of citizens are available elsewhere as well. In the meanwhile, despite the boastful talk of Nix in the leaked video, Cambridge Analytica as well as SCL closed down in May 2018, arguing to not be able to generate new clients anymore due to their ruined reputation. Nevertheless, a newly founded company named Emerdata lists Nix as a director – next to former SCL executives and the daughters of billionaire Robert Mercer (Solon & Laughland, 2018).

No matter who will be the operator of the next fashionable social networks – Vero started an attempt earlier this year, offering the absence of advertising and algorithms –,

as long as he is in control of the content the noble normative ideals of direct democracy will be hard to obtain. The same is true for Italy's MoVimento 5 Stelle (5 Star movement, the capitalized V stands for *vaffanculo*, Italian for 'kiss my ass'), another highly populist vehicle successfully employing the Trojan horse of direct participation. While nomination of candidates and even the content of the movement's political program are seemingly based on crowdsourcing and swarm intelligence compiled on the party's website, a closer look at the ownership structure of the homepage reveals that it is tied to Casaleggio Associati, a consulting company for internet strategies, belonging to the son of the ex-comedian and movement's founder Beppe Grillo (Siefert, 2018). Again, control over content, no matter if it appears on a seemingly public website or a social network, is hardly ever compatible with direct democracy. But it is the perfect condition for effective message control – which is also being employed by Kurz and his movement that already saw several cases in which critical statements of their own Ministers have been deleted from the Ministry's website (Oswald, 2018a; 2018b). It should not be overlooked that such a strict attempt of message control can easily give way to mind control – with an intimidated fellowship anticipating the course of action in advance and fully abstaining from healthy mechanisms of constructive criticism.

Conclusion

As clearly demonstrated, one needs to be careful about actions that are originating on social media platforms and are taking the lead in the formation of opinions that in turn are justifying the directives of political players. It is becoming commonplace to see political players making decisions based on responses posted on social media platforms, but again, the danger lurks in the way that these responses are but a limited mirror only and do not exactly represent the majority of citizens. The risk of the message being unclear is great, and the argument stands whether the social media platforms are correct in the form an argument is presented and how actions based on these postings may not be the right steps to take. However, these developments ask for a reconsideration of the value given to the aspect of media literacy in the context of school curriculums. Pushing for the implementation of technology in class in order to prepare a next generation of skilled operators that are well-versed in employing its full range of possibilities for professional purposes might be a promising perspective for the neo-liberal/authoritarian governments

that are dominating the political discourse in Europe at this time. However, the preparation for a responsible, reflective and critical attitude towards the incorporation of this technology and its unfiltered outburst of manipulative disinformation does not list on this agenda for good reasons. Hence, the need for the establishment of educational structures that are capable of providing citizens with a sufficient amount of media literacy can be considered as an essential requirement for the survival – or re-establishing – of democracy in times of *Fakebook* and *Netflix*.

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The juxtaposition effect of online communication on social environments, including gender discrimination and political opinion

Abstract: Gender equality and political democracy are important factors that concern almost every area of note in our modern era. Therefore, the notion that social media is to be considered as the mouthpiece of freedom of speech has achieved a status of powerful magnitude. It has also come to acceptance that the social media platforms have assumed the role of expressing opinions that could be barred from the established media arenas, thus making them ideal in terms of providing an outlet for the voice of the voiceless, so to speak. Yet, governments are able to block these platforms on a national scale.

Key Words: *Social Media, Gender, Political Opinion*

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the contrasting juxtaposition that social media provides, with a specific regard to gender equality and political democracy in a human world that is still in many parts subjected to discriminative values and practices – often disguised under a canopy of elements of society that we refer to as culture, social etiquette and social classing systems. To approach the concept of social media as an entity, we can consider its various platforms and outlets as the mouthpiece of a social body that enjoys freedom of expression in an open and expansive environment – providing it with the ability to reach and be heard in the context of an international scope. The developments in communication technology that have linked populations around the world in an almost virtual mind-set and relationship continue to progress and develop, yet with the changes both brought unto us already and yet to arrive, it is essential to analyse this condition from fundamentally important social and political perspectives. How are our lives and cultures changing, and what are the advantages and disadvantages that are inevitably produced by these new trends and behaviors that many of us now follow, albeit willingly or even forcibly – through the changes and new requirements of social practices (Fuchs, 2017).

Furthermore, psychological implications of clashes between the freedom provided by social media and the social structures often imposed via our cultural backgrounds are about to be considered within the realms of this study. How, for example, do the roles of social, cultural and gender expectations fit into this new aspect of our lives? With seemingly endless access to information and the ability to communicate with people around the world in an instantaneous arena, how are different generations and family structures being affected by subsequent new-found pressures and expectations?

Through the use of the vast and expanding array of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube, users have acquired speedy and extensive access to new environments that bring with them psychological influences (Antin & Churchill, 2011). How much regulation and control do social media sites offer in terms of filtering offensive material and preventing discrimination? While the social media stage accommodates equality in terms of the ability to voice one's opinion, the sincere contrasts remain in terms of being able to imagine oneself as being of equal standing

despite one's gender, when advertisements and marketing techniques often choose to project women in an offensive and derogatory light, in order to promote their sales techniques (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2017; Sheehan, 2013). Hence, psychologically, the idea that full gender equality in social groups, employment environments and society in general is no longer subjected to the distant future is challenged once again.

Likewise, for many people, social media platforms are the only stage on which they can develop and vocalise their political opinion with both freedom and ease (Effing, Van Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). In many cases, this leaves a juxtaposition effect for the individual as they may not benefit from such opportunities in their home environment or social groupings, whether because of gender, the limitations of their social 'role' in their environments or any other form of discrimination or social interference (Papacharissi, 2010). However, social media, where available, provides a possibility of democracy for many people (Chadwick & Howard, 2010). Whereby in some countries, freedom of expression – particularly political expression – is not welcome or tolerated and the idea of challenging the established system with alternative opinion, suggestion or belief is considered inappropriate, social media users have the opportunity to express their emotions and be heard by an audience of 'followers'. Psychologically, the concept of sharing expression and receiving approval in return can also lead to a sense of 'purpose' and further aspirations for the social media user, that may otherwise not have been encouraged in their home environment or social groups (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

Gender equality and political opinion

While this study will, to some extent, consider other impacts on society linked to social media access, the main purpose will be to introduce the concepts of gender equality and the freedom to voice political opinion in an international arena that remains uncontrolled to a very vast extent. What ideas and examples are being set to young generations with vulnerable and developing minds, and what implications may these have on our social practices and 'normalities'? This study will also discuss the idea of access to political democracy and opinion with very young age limitations being implemented to this type of information by the providers of social media sites.

What are the main advantages and disadvantages of this new world? Is there an extent of 'virtual reality' involved in our mind-sets when we are engrossed in social media and media advertisement? What precautions need to be taken to provide a safer environment for all users, especially younger users? How can we work towards a social media environment that diffuses discrimination in terms of gender, and that encourages democracy in a healthy manner within a monitored environment to reduce the sub-effects of excessive freedom and mind changing values? This study will therefore attempt to consider the differences in opinion and possible answers to the aforementioned discussion points, with the aim of working towards solutions to problems that may subsequently enter the homes and environments of social media users.

Although social media and interaction sites such as those that this article will explore further – Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube – offer a vast array of positive usages (including but not limited to: access to education in any known area, communication and connection, freedom of speech at an emphasized and global level and technical skill development) there are many reported and potential misuses of social media sites which can lead to physical, intellectual and emotional dangers that may easily penetrate into the lives and surroundings of persons other than just the social media user themselves (Barker, 2009; Bolton et. al, 2013). Thus more extensive monitoring of social media usage and patterns of exploitation by the establishments of these social media sites is very much a matter of social controversy. In some countries governments have taken the precaution of censoring public access to full internet freedom, including online social media sites, with consequences including the arguable limitation of human rights and democratic activity. A well-known example would be the Islamic Country of Iran that is blocking access to social media sites in an attempt to reduce public protest campaign and organisations following their much disputed presidential election in 2009 (Rhoads, Fassihi & Gonzalez, 2011; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010).

Attractive factors of popular social media sites

Today's technological environment offers a broad range of social media platforms for users to choose from, with the functions of each platform both sharing many common points, yet also having their own unique purpose. These social media platforms can be used in many ways, with the most common being communication between users on the same platform and sharing of personal information. Logging and sharing information can be displayed either publicly with no limitations or in social groups selected by the user – which in return entitles the user to get access to information being shared by others. Users of social media sites engage in following posts from other account users and developing their own number of followers, which can in turn lead to a heightened sense of addiction to the site and the feedback achieved from the sharing of information and communication (Cabral, 2011; Kuss, & Griffiths, 2011) in addition to a sense of purpose when positive responses to posts and growing numbers of followers are achieved (Song, Larose, Eastin, & Lin, 2004). This type of access to the public stage introduces the user into an arena of vast information, discussion and freedoms of behavior and speech that may not be reflective of their social groups and environments outside of the cyber world. It is this type of juxtaposition that can destabilise the everyday life of the social media account user in different ways, whether consciously or subconsciously, that cannot always be foreseen or even allocated to potential influences of the social media environment (Griths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014).

This discussion will therefore start by exploring to some extent the popular social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat – including some of their unique factors of attraction and their specific operational characteristics.

Facebook was founded in February 2004 by Harvard College student Mark Zuckerberg and some of his colleagues. According to the Facebook Community Standards policies advertised on their webpage, the mission of Facebook is to: "...give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Facebook, 2017a). In the same section Facebook also states that: "...conversations that happen on Facebook reflect the diversity of a community of more than two billion people" (ibid.). Facebook declares that they are intent on keeping users of their services safe and that they encourage 'respectful behavior' as well as advising people about how to maintain the privacy of

their Facebook accounts and how to report abusive behaviors. However, it could be said that there appears to be a lack of concentration on gender representation and cultural sensitivities. Considering the number of its users and the fact that Facebook accounts are opened and used not just by adults but children also leads one to consider how they can possibly ensure that discrimination is eradicated from its arena and how the (potentially offensive, inappropriately influential or even potentially destructive) political opinions of so many people posting on their Facebook pages are monitored by algorithms alone.

Further questions can also be raised regarding the effects of extended usage of social media platforms (Whang, Lee & Chang, 2003). Many studies have been and will continue to be conducted on the psychological effects of sites such as Facebook on the user and how social detachments can arise as for many people the freedom found in using social media might contrast their home or social physical environments, potentially leading to a sense of 'virtual reality' and another existence of 'self' (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesen, 2012; Vishwanath, 2014). It may be that this type of juxtaposition is more apparent in social environments and cultures that are perhaps more conservative and 'restricted' than others, in terms of having freedom of expression and access to challenging the 'rules' of their traditions.

Similar considerations are valid for other social media channels, such as Twitter. The message-based communication platform, designed to share thoughts, opinions, updates and any verbal information in real time conversation was founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone and Evan Williams. The mission statement of Twitter is to "Give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Twitter, 2017a). Although the policies of Twitter refer to the legal necessities regarding code of conduct, the same questions remain in the sense that with such an instantaneous environment, how is it possible for data to be monitored effectively when data and posts of users can easily be uploaded and then erased within seconds. While the policies of Twitter do point out that hateful behaviors and statements towards others are not tolerated by the company, this doesn't prevent the more sensitive, yet equally important, subtle behaviors such as derogatory attitudes or representations from happening. Neither is it feasible for every post to be monitored for these

underlying messages – such as the negative representation of the female gender and the example that such attitudes may result in the perpetration of such derogatory influences on younger site users or persons who may already withhold negative beliefs about the role of women in society. In a world that is still striving for gender equality and fair treatment in all respects – including the professional area and legal justice systems – understanding that derogatory messages being conveyed in any social media platform must be avoided wherever possible is essential. This can be achieved with more regulation in the advertisement industry, closer monitoring of data being posted and published online and by offering site users alternative opinion and information to consider in contrast to negative portrayals.

The phenomenal growth and popularity of the video-sharing website YouTube, founded in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawad Karim, has propelled this company into becoming one of the most frequently visited websites on the internet whereby social interaction is conducted in the form of video posting by site users. In this real time arena the mission of YouTube is: “To give everyone a voice and show them the world...” (YouTube, 2017) which in itself harnesses a very large responsibility to the public and its safety. YouTube has for this reason been the subject of increasing controversy with many studies of concern into a lack of regulation, inappropriate content, and the ability to safely monitor this expansive online environment (Burgess & Green, 2013; Keen 2011; Martin, 2007). Much of this controversy has been catered towards politically oriented concerns and the notion of political democracy being misused and becoming negative and destructive within isolated groups using the facilities of YouTube to generate followings (Tushnet, 2007). Once again, this type of behavior bears the potential to be diametrical to the offline lives of many people and can be unnoticed by their home environments, heightening the importance and responsibility of these social media platforms and websites to be able to provide and cater for the scale of cyber monitoring that is simply required in today’s technological world.

Another social media platform that has also been exposed to extensive controversy over its unique attraction point of “living in the moment” (Snapchat, 2017a) – as noted in their mission statement – and hints towards its ability to be used in an elusive setting is Snapchat. The concept of the ‘Snapchat Ghost Mode’ has been determined by many as

irresponsible in terms of its ability for users to post messages and content that has the ability to 'self-destruct' and disappear within '10 seconds', as stated on the Snapchat support website (Poltash, 2012). Furthermore, another controversial function of Snapchat is the ability for users to be able to hide their location for a period of time "if you want to be on the down low for a little while" – as is also stated on the website. While many people do not appreciate or particularly want to live in a 'big-brother' environment in terms of technology, it could be said that there is a clear need for a definite take on the fine line of privacy invasion and acceptance that security should be the highest priority for any user of social media platforms and the internet at large (Young, 2014).

The dark side of the net

Discussing the internet obliges one to also mention its hidden realms that make up a space five hundred times larger than the surface net (Barker & Barker 2013). The 'deep net' and the further evasive 'dark net' are areas and sites that are not able to be accessed by regular methods and that do not appear in searches conducted by engines to which we are accustomed. Sites that may be found in the most invisible sections of the internet have the ability to hide inappropriate activity in an irrefutable fashion, leaving much scope for negative purpose and for ulterior motives. Associations between the misuse of social media in context with the deep and dark aspects of cyberspace have led to concerns being vocalised (Robert Hannigan 2014; Coughlin 2014; Chertoff & Simon, 2015). Facebook and its 'TOR' network have also come under much scrutiny in this regard, with its support of invisibility, user anonymity and lack of activity in cyberspace that is not traceable by searching the surface web. Questions therefore continue to be raised as we consider the negative impacts of social media. Although it can be stated that the positive aspects linked with the real time of the internet are much more vast, necessary and important than the downsides, the idea that cyber security needs to become much more efficient and transparent for monitoring purposes is continuing to challenge governments and the 'giants' of the internet and search engine companies. Devising systems that can cater for these loopholes in technology before they have been able to establish themselves within our systems is the ideal that must be strived for. In an increasingly populated world which is now more than ever before fuelled, controlled

and in many ways dependant on the technologies that we have created, it is a fundamental responsibility for the public (of all ages and groups) to be protected from the effects and impacts of negative advertisement, representation, distorted influences and threats to our countries, freedoms, societies and communities. For these reasons it can be stated that our discussion of social media sites and data management needs to continue and ideas to be developed into a safer environment for all users. Within this bracket we can also discuss other extremely important issues being faced by many social media users, such as account hacking and ‘cyber bullying’. The problems of bullying being faced by many social media account holders has led to excessive studies into the relation between social media and bullying and to the impacts of these threats (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Hinuja & Patchin, 2010; Gearhart & Zhang, 2010; Xu, Jun, Zhu & Bellmore, 2012). Severe mental illnesses such as clinical depression, anxiety and inferiority complexes, especially amongst younger users such as children of school or college age, let alone even more serious cases and outcomes, are becoming increasingly common in the world of online media communication, posing even more urgency for resolutions to these problems to be found and implemented (Luxton, June & Fairall, 2012).

In order for the solutions to the aforementioned areas of concern to be discussed in full, it is also important to consider the beneficial factors that social media platforms bring to our societies: successful business operations, instantaneous communication with people around the world, speedy access to news events, entertainment and easy access to education, to name just a few. With the world having become so dependent on social media and its advantages, it is not feasible to imagine our world without this aspect of daily life for so many people. Thus there are no alternative options available other than to develop upon what has already been established and to learn how to bridge the gaps between non-users of the internet and those who dedicate so much of their time and lives to using social media platforms.

Bridging the gap of knowledge

Understanding where the above mentioned gaps in knowledge and education are being formed is very important. Although technology is becoming increasingly accessible and affordable for people in most countries around the world, some societies and communities – perhaps more apparent within some older generations (Nervik, Dahl & Kofod-Petersen, 2011; Chu, Lai & Liu, 2013) – clearly consider social media and the information stored by these data companies as an intrusion into the family home environment, with the ability to cause displacement of tradition and cultural beliefs. As mentioned in the beginning of this discussion, the potential juxtaposition effect that social media, its freedoms of information and its subsequent ability to transform viewpoints in any regard – in addition to the sense of self-consciousness that is encouraged through its usage – can bring unto a person the sense of a second existence and purpose outside of their home environment (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). This can then develop into emotional and physical distances between relationships being incurred in home and social environments (Chambers, 2013). The significance of the changes that are introduced by developments in our technological surrounding in psychological and sociological terms differs from case to case, of course. However, it can be said that studies into the healthy usage of social media and the internet as an entity are essential for our further understanding of how to offer safer online environments (Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein, 2010). Another urgent suggestion would be that our education curriculums are quickly updated in order to sufficiently feature this type of information and knowledge. Social media platforms are becoming increasingly popular around the world, and the most popular sites are now being challenged to varying extents by newer and fast expanding competitors providing a vast array of choice to users. In addition it can be argued that social media is both much more widely used and much more popular around the world in persons aged between 16 to 35 years of age than in other age groups (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). If we consider this age range, it could also be stated that in terms of psychological development, people are perhaps more easily influenced in regard to lifestyle and opinion during this period of their life than later on. Reaching out to such a large audience within an international area and discussing with them the need for safety and

precaution when using social media and websites is not just extremely important, but an essential part of our ability to trigger a chain effect in each generation to maintain awareness for these principles.

With so many people logged into our cyberspace at any given moment and our increasing need as a society to live in real time and experience communication and updates around the world as they are happening (Van Dijck, 2013), a sense of social pressure to keep up-to-the-minute and abreast of this constant flow of knowledge and information that exists in both our physical and cyber worlds has developed as well (Abel, Buff, & Burr, 2016). With this relatively new social arena also comes social (peer) pressure (Livingstone, 2008; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009) to live with a decreasing amount of privacy as we are becoming more and more accustomed to sharing our lives in a public arena that is not always just limited to those closest to us but often a source of information that through the chain reactive style of social media is accelerated onto a much broader and far reaching stage, with many people in our audience unknown to us (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Sánchez Abril, Levin & Del Riego, 2012; Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, Smith, & Beaton, 2013).

Peer pressure can have destabilising effects on individuals and the consideration of this aspect in regard to social media is not as apparent as perhaps it needs to be, given the rise in reports of psychological disturbances (McKenna, & Bargh, 2000; Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006). It can also be said that with the pressure to be constantly involved with social media and how the cyber world portrays our images to others, we can be just as influenced by the adverts and posts that are shared throughout social media sites, many of which are carefully constructed marketing tools aimed at portraying 'ideals' in terms of image, lifestyle and opinion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Labrecque, 2014). For example, it can be stated that the attention paid to images of women within the media often concentrate on physical appearances only, encouraging excellent rating results for media companies, yet leaving audiences – especially younger and more vulnerable members of society – with messages that educate us in little ways more than that the portrayal of physical beauty as a key feature for subsequent acceptance within society (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Such portrayals and

representations of women offer no improvements to many attitudes held within our societies, whereby reports of inequality in the workplace, home environment and legal justice system continue to be severe cause for concern.

While discrimination via social media is against the laws that relate to these sites, as previously stated, there is a very fine line between outspoken and evident discrimination and the underlying tones of discrimination that still meander throughout much of our media today. The discussion of discrimination can be reduced to a matter of opinion, in accordance with different people, expectations and perspectives or experiences, yet this discussion is based on the importance of encouraging open conversation to enhance a more positive environment for all members of our communities. With the usage of social media sites, the political stage in virtually every country around the world has been completely adjusted to suit a new type of democratic opinion that is not always supported by authorities. Yet it can be argued that the role of social media in this frame has been and continues to encourage healthy benefits such as: freedom of speech, raising awareness about politically related matters and points of protest or disagreement to an international audience, and a move forward towards a world whereby human rights are not only demanded but more equally shared and established (Auger, 2011; Joseph, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). ‘People power’ has most certainly been catapulted into even larger scales through the introduction of social media sites and the communication functions offered within them (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

However, there is another side to the debate of social media in the world of politics, and one very well documented example of this is US President Donald Trump’s inclination to use Twitter as his media mouthpiece (in what could be described as an attempt to address the public directly and avoid ‘fake news’). Enveloped in this example is the opinion that social media sites are concerned in the most part about user ratings of their sites and the subsequent income and growth that is achieved, as opposed to the accuracy of the news that they broadcast (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Of course, this is a matter of extreme controversy and is difficult to verify, yet it does open the question of how much trust we can place in social media sites in terms of transparency and truthfulness within their reporting of news (Marchi, 2012). The issue of ‘fake’ or modified news is a very precarious matter, as it is feasible to say that most people take news reports at face

value, and do not expect filtered or distorted information (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Furthermore, the possible repercussions of warped information (voting, changes in social behaviors, the chances of demonstration or protest and destructive opinion) have the potential to be very severe, so once again, the responsibilities of social media sites are not only legally obligatory but essential to maintain safety and justice for the public.

In regard to the need for social media sites to take further responsibility for the changes that have been imposed on our societies by recent developments in our technology-oriented lifestyle and manifold options of choice, it is interesting to consider the many studies that attest mental health issues as a result of social media, including social isolation and the loss of development in social skills (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013; Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Sidani et. al, 2016; Woods & Scott, 2016). Considering the potential of social media to negatively impact social groups and structures, – not just in terms of portrayed message and a sometimes slow response unit to inappropriate data and content –governments are being called upon to introduce and expand upon digital literacy lessons within education curriculums.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears very necessary that more extensive research is conducted in regard to the positive and negative impacts of social media use – especially in relation to the variable factors that our societies and communities consist of: persons of different religious and ethical backgrounds, employment statuses, level of education, social structures. However, if broad research can be conducted with these variable factors in mind it will enhance our chances of a more accurate and specific understanding of the impact that social media usage (in different levels) is having on our society and how we can provide extra protection and convey more positive and appropriate messages regarding advertisement content and the type of data that is displayed. Furthermore, developments in technology do need to continue to fill in the gaps of our knowledge and ability regarding our management of these social media channels and their unique points of operation, in addition to reducing the hidden dark aspects of the internet and those who take advantage of the curtains and disguise that these functions provide. The core

responsibility stays with our own societies as the need for us to monitor, challenge and override discrimination and ensure that more positive messages are being conveyed in our public arenas is ever increasing. Taking a more united and active role together as families, social groups and communities is an option that can be enforced in addition to the work of governments. Such efforts may well contribute to a safer environment whereby negative impacts of social media usage amongst all users and audiences are decreased and instead replaced with healthy alternatives.

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