



Foreword

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Since the end of the 1980s, a first wave of enthusiasm for new information and communication technologies celebrated social media's role in favouring democratic processes, for instance, by producing virtual public spheres that would enable stronger participatory models in existing and emerging democracies (Loader 1997; Tsagarousianou et al 1998; Yang 2011). In this narrative, social media were depicted as effective tools with potential to disrupt and replace traditional communication models of the press and televised media. They were believed to empower new voices and perspectives, shifting the focus from a long-standing top-down model to a bottom-up paradigm. They were also thought to allow broader access to information and to offer chances to be heard for those who are at the margins. Ultimately, they were seen as a means to encourage new participatory forms of civic and political engagement and to undermine old political gatekeeping processes.

More recently, headlines today have taken a different tone, as concerns about social media's ability to undermine democratic processes have become prominent. To name a few examples: social media have been charged with instigating the polarisation of public opinion, boosting the popularity of politicians, co-opting and neutralising sources of potential political opposition to ruling governments, favouring cyber espionage and attacks, and inciting hate crimes (Hindman and Barash 2018). Furthermore, it is more and more common to identify these problems not only in the case of authoritarian regimes, but also in young and more established democracies. As Freedom of the Net (2019) observes, 'while authoritarian powers like China and Russia have played an enormous role in dimming the prospects for technology to deliver greater human rights, the world's leading social media platforms are based in the United States, and their exploitation by antidemocratic forces is in large part a product of American neglect' (Net 2019, 2). For instance, studies demonstrate a significant rise of fake news in the

2016 election campaign in the US (Hindman and Barash 2018) as well as in the 2018 mid-term elections (Freedom of the Net 2019: 6). During the May 2019 European Parliament elections, groups associated with Russia spread fake information through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Freedom of the Net 2019: 6). Similarly, China's interference in the election campaign for the 2020 elections in Taiwan and in the 2019 democratic protests in Hong Kong has been broadly reported in the news (Kuo and Yang 2019; Kuo 2019). These occurrences have raised important concerns with regard to a crisis of social media globally, to the point that Freedom of the Net (2019) notes that 'as social media have at times served as a level playing field for civic discussion, they are now tilting dangerously toward illiberalism' (Net 2019, 1).

Reflecting these concerns, on the 9th of February 2020, a group of academics, practitioners and policy analysts gathered at the People's History Museum in Manchester to discuss the role of social media in shaping (un)democratic processes. Further to the hosted roundtable, all participants were asked to contribute a policy brief summarizing the content of their talk. This special issue collects eight multi-disciplinary contributions, addressing this timely theme based on the experiences and perspectives of various regions of the world.

A major theme in this discussion is the issue of data security and manipulation of information by government authorities, a common practice employed by authoritarian governments. In Filip Jirouš's *Chinese social media applications: privacy and data security implications*, the author provides examples of how the Chinese government has access to data collected by social media platforms not only domestically but also internationally, and how these data are used to serve specific purposes. This problem is further explored by Shih-Shiuan Kao and Min Hsuan Wu, in a paper titled *Chinese information operations in Taiwan and possible regulatory options*. The authors offer a detailed explanation of how the People's Republic of China's

government operates within Taiwanese on-line and off-line public spheres with the aim of creating disharmony as well as generating distrust and polarisation in Taiwanese civil society. Yet, this is not only occurring in the context of conflicting state-to-state relations. Omar Al-Ghazzi, in a paper titled *Taking stock of a decade of social media struggles in the Arab world*, and George Ogola, in a paper on *Social media use in Kenya: Twitter, public political participation and state control*, make a similar point with regard to governmental authorities' use of technologies in African countries. Both policy briefs show how African governmental authorities in Kenya and in Arab speaking countries in the Middle East attempted to use social media to promote uncertainty and fear amongst their own populations. Yet, to claim that data security issues and manipulation of information feature only in authoritarian governments is erroneous. In this regard, Gizem Gültekin Dr. Várkonyi's piece brings to our attention the case of Cambridge Analytica. Várkonyi, in a paper titled *Evaluating Cambridge Analytica: some suggestions* shows how governments in established democracies, such as the US and the UK, have also engaged in the manipulation of information through social media with an aim to produce desirable outcomes for votes and elections. Approaching the issue of privacy and data security from a legal perspective, the author offers some important reflections on how misappropriation of digital assets, data mining and data brokerage were made possible in the case of Cambridge Analytica.

Another theme in this special issue is related to the material, discursive and structural limitations of social media. The African region, with its widespread inequalities between and within countries, offers significant examples for discussion and comparison. Taking Kenya as a case study, George Ogola stresses that its social media platforms, which have only become a popular means of communication quite recently, are mainly dominated by a small group of users in the online community. Interestingly, these small numbers of users have become the 'primary actors' who determine and shape which stories are picked up in the mainstream press. This point is further explored by Dickens Onditi Olewe, who explains how the influence of capitalism has made social platforms more vulnerable to the number of followers

clicking on the news, rather than the significance or truth of the content, a concern that seems to be pervasive in a world dominated by neoliberal logics, rather than being limited to a specific region of the world.

The last theme addressed in this collection is that of power and negotiating with power. The discussion here sheds light on how civil society can still make use of social platforms to challenge this condition. The digital film industry plays an important role in this regard: the simplest function of documentation provided by social media, as well as its key feature of offering testimony about the abuse of power or the distortion of democratic value(s), could potentially amplify the 'noise' of civil society. For instance, Gizem Gültekin Várkonyi explores the unforeseen outcomes of a lack of control on big data ownership, using examples such as 'The Great Hack,' a documentary movie distributed by Netflix, an online movie provider platform. Also, Hadas Emma Kedar, in her policy brief *We need art interventions! Art's potential to tackle fake news on social media*, explores how digital art could be used to identify how disinformation is generated and to raise awareness in society.

The overall picture put together by these contributions is multifaceted and complex, and it is shaped by cultural, national, and regional specificities. Despite this heterogeneity, the individual contributions appear to agree with each other on some important points of action: firstly, the necessity to enhance governmental and intergovernmental regulations, with regard to both data security and the dissemination of knowledge; secondly, the essential need for citizen digital education. The emphasis here must be on the improvement of people's media and digital literacy, which can further contribute to their ability to select information when exposed to social media.

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