



NEPCAP POLICY BRIEF

2020/01

The Role of Social Media in Shaping
(Un)Democratic Processes

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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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Chinese social media applications: Privacy and data security implications

Filip Jirouš

Chinese social media and other types of applications have long dominated the Chinese internet ecosystem and also the Chinese diaspora. Now, applications and digital tools owned by entities registered in China have started to expand beyond these traditional spaces. The implications and potential risks brought by using such products, with regards to the Party-state influence over tech companies and a track record of data abuse, could be significant. Governments and private entities should increase their awareness of potential data exploitation by third parties, primarily those with links to authoritarian regimes with a history of information control and manipulation.

Privacy and data security are becoming important issues in modern societies as the world becomes more dependent on the virtual space. From government hacks to ransomware attacking hospitals and other parts of critical infrastructure until recently believed to be immune to such 'invisible' threats, cybersecurity in general should now be reviewed both at a personal and an institutional level.

Many digital and tech giants have, in the recent years, been involved in data breach and data abuse scandals. The most famous one would probably be Cambridge Analytica, but even 'smaller' players, such as the Czech anti-virus software developer Avast, have been caught exploiting user data. But nowhere is this practice as widespread as in China, where individual data protection regulation (or its enforcement) and consumer awareness are rather small-scale. It is well documented that Chinese companies are storing their user data on unsecured servers. Such servers have been accessed easily by Western hacktivists on several occasions (Udemans 2019).

Most disturbing is the scope of the Chinese government's access to data stored by supposedly private companies such as Tencent. There have already been many cases of local authorities swiftly responding to private conversations on Chinese social

media apps and persecuting the authors of what has been classified as 'illegal' content. The most famous example in recent months is possibly the repression of Dr Li Wenliang and his seven colleagues when they discussed the discovery of coronavirus on the Chinese communication app WeChat (Zidan 2020). Other abuse involves the Islamic text-reading app Zapy developed by a Beijing-based start-up in 2016. Its user data was later used to target Uyghur and other Muslims in Xinjiang who had been using the app to read and share religious texts with friends and family. Research among the Chinese diaspora in Western societies also shows that using WeChat and other Chinese social media apps by overseas Chinese can lead to personal freedoms being limited and democratic processes being threatened (Cook 2020).

The PRC government's intention to exploit user data for various purposes can be seen in the recent spike in industrial espionage cases involving Chinese citizens, some with government or military links. The Equifax hack, involving massive leaks of citizen data, is more evidence, being allegedly conducted by four Chinese military officers. Government hacks traced to the Chinese Party-state have been on the rise even in non-traditional spaces such as the CEE (justice 2020; National Cyber 2020).

PRC-related data security risks are not limited to companies with Chinese ownership. A recent incident involving the video conferencing tool Zoom showed that even companies with no Chinese ownership can put their users' data privacy at risk by outsourcing research and development and data traffic to China (Murphy 2020). This case should give us even more pause for thought, considering users were not informed about this until Canada-based digital research organization Citizen Lab released its report mapping Zoom's data traffic.

Some countries have already become aware of the risks posed by PRC-linked software and hardware. Among the Western countries sensitive to Chinese tech, Australia and the USA are most prominent. Their treatment of the Chinese short video platform TikTok and Chinese social media clearly shows concern about

the security implications of such apps' usage, especially among military members and defense officials. In stark contrast, Europe neglects these issues, as documented by European soldiers posting videos (including what seems to be on-duty) on TikTok and possibly using even other apps linked to authoritarian regimes intent on exploiting the gathered data (Facebook 2020).

Governments, international bodies and citizens should be more protective of their data security in general, but even more so when their data can be vulnerable to exploitation by authoritarian regimes. Lack of cybersecurity and data security can have serious implications for defense, company competitiveness, personal freedom and the democratic processes of free societies.

Considering the data presented above and its possible implications, I suggest the following measures:

1. European security forces should consult with their democratic allies in the US, Australia, and elsewhere with regards to social media (and other) applications and tools that are linked to authoritarian regimes. They should apply the necessary measures to restrict unsecure usage of such apps, when there is a potential for the gathered data to be exploited to compromise security and operational capacity.
2. Governments should protect the data security and privacy of its institutions and citizens by verifying companies' data policies and making sure local data is stored in a jurisdiction which has adequate privacy and data security regulations. This is especially relevant when that data can be accessed by companies and other entities linked to authoritarian regimes.
3. Governments and private entities should invest more into research and education about data privacy and the potential risks of personal or institutional data exploitation.
4. Similarly, cybersecurity should be upgraded both on personal and institutional levels in a world that is rapidly progressing towards major dependency on the virtual space. It is to be expected that this process will be significantly accelerated as a result of the current coronavirus pandemic.

Social media, and digital applications in general, linked

to authoritarian regimes, pose an increasing risk for a modern society which is heavily reliant on virtual spaces for economic, social, political, cultural and other exchanges. The increasing amount of data available online and the growing range of tools available for analyzing the data for different purposes should be considered an important issue over the next few years. Both governments and private entities should take the matter seriously and apply appropriate measures to mitigate the risk of data and privacy breaches. Weak cyber security exposes potential targets. The risk quickly spreads, however, to any entity that interacts with the target.

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Scheme of Chinese Information Operation in Taiwan and Possible Regulatory Options

Shih-Shiuan Kao and Min-Hsuan Wu

Chinese information operations in Taiwan have been observed for decades. The public became politically aware of such operations after the 2018 local elections (Kuo and Yang 2019; Shu 2020). The goal of these operations is not merely to affect the outcome of local and national elections, but also to create disharmony, distrust and polarisation inside civil society, thus delegitimising the current democratic regime and sovereignty of Taiwan. Based on our current research on information operations in Taiwan, we have created a scheme that addresses different channels and platforms of information operations and foreign influences by China, and possible categories of regulations to alleviate the effects of such operations. we will summarize it in the following paragraphs

Messages containing cognitive manipulation ('weapons') are first released from initiators who represent the interest of China. They either directly deliver content through channels to local business actors or media that are directed, commanded or financed ('directed') by the initiators (Lee and Cheng 2019), or they indirectly deliver of content or ideas through certain online platforms (e.g. Weibo, WeChat, etc.) so business actors or media can collect weapons by themselves. Business actors then deliver and circulate new or existing weapons, often modified with their own creations. They use online platforms including Facebook groups, Twitter accounts and other online forums¹. Offline channels are also used for cross-posting weapons directly to receivers. These include LINE, WeChat, WhatsApp and other similar communication services that cannot be automatically accessed and analysed by web crawlers (Corcoran, Crowley and Davies 2019). Some of the receivers later become local actors, who also share and modify weapons without being directed by initiators, according to their own will. Along with business actors, local media outlets may also collect popular circulating weapons from online platforms or offline channels as materials for their journalism. Such weapons can then appear in traditional media or online, further amplifying the effects of cognitive manipulation.

Information operations can also be assisted not through the dissemination of weapons, but through the collaboration of local political/economical elites and organisations, directed by initiators. The most common results of such collaboration can include the mobilisation of the masses and the shaping of public opinions with discourse consistent with the interests of China. It can also involve donations, or the lobbying of certain politicians on issues which enhance social polarisation.

We mapped out seven categories of possible regulatory action that may help to minimise the effects of information operations and foreign influences. These categories are not mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive, and all of them should be implemented in coordination with others to be effective:

1. **'Source control' regulation** that can limit financial exchanges and interrupt the line of command between initiators and local actors. This includes the regulation of associations and cash flows, and the regulation of disinformation (later described in the 'content-based speech regulations' category). In this way, business actors, media and other local actors are less likely to cooperate with initiators for financial motives.
2. **Regulation of platforms**, including laws specifying the obligations of platforms (e.g. content takedown under court order specified in *NetzDG* of Germany and *Bill on Countering Online Hatred* (loi Avia) of France, or display of government-provided notice in *POFMA* of Singapore), which have been brought into focus in recent discussions of disinformation preventions. Other forms of regulation, like platform community standards or EULA, should also be seriously considered and enforced.
3. **Regulation of core political processes**, such as the obligation of disclosure or the prohibition of foreigner participation in elections, referendums, political donations or lobbying.

4. **Content-based speech regulation**, such as specific legislation punishing the dissemination of disinformation that endangers public safety (e.g. disinformation that incites violent gatherings or affects the price of necessities), which could be a criminal or an administrative offence, such regulation often being challenged on the grounds of freedom of expression.
5. **Media laws**, such as the limiting of holdings by foreigners, the reviewing of broadcasting licences for cable or satellite media by the authorities (to ensure legal compliance of media corporations) and the requirement to have an ethics infrastructure which makes corrigenda of published disinformation possible.
6. **Integrated legislation focusing on transparency**, e.g. the US's *FARA*, Australia's *Foreign Transparency Scheme Act* of 2018, or Taiwan's *Foreign Influence Transparency Bill* (failed to enact), which cover broad aspects of foreign influences and focus on the registration and disclosure of relationships between foreign principal and local collaborators.
7. **Integrated legislation focusing on prohibition**, e.g. Taiwan's *Anti-Infiltration Act* (enacted), which increases criminal or administrative penalties for certain behaviours, already forbidden by existing laws (most of them include the regulation of core political processes), that are performed under the direction of hostile foreign forces.

We have observed that information operations in different countries share similar narrative frames, content and techniques to those that have taken place previously in Taiwan. We suggest, therefore, that Taiwan is perceived by Beijing as an ideal experiment site to optimise their deployment of the 'Grand External Propaganda Campaign' (大外宣). Therefore, in response, we believe that the scheme and categories of regulatory actions that we have proposed can be generalised to different countries for countering the effect of information operations from China. However, local social and political contexts matter. It is therefore necessary to conduct further analyses of the laws and regulations of different countries, including perspectives from local civil society and human right advocacy groups, to make adequate and concrete policy recommendations.

¹The most recent example is the disinformation surge about COVID-19 outbreak in Taiwan. For more specific details, see Craig Silverman (2020) *Chinese Trolls are Spreading Coronavirus Disinformation in Taiwan*. Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/chinese-trolls-coronavirus-disinformation-taiwan> (Accessed 25 March 2020)

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Taking stock of a decade of social media struggles in the Arab world

Omar Al-Ghazzi

From 2010 to 2020, the Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have seen momentous political changes, including devastating wars. While the hopes for democratisation during the Arab Spring in 2011 have not come to fruition (Tunisia being an exception), it is remarkable that in some countries such as Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon, young people continue taking to the streets and demanding political change and economic justice. Activists across the region have taken inspiration from each other as they persist in demanding change at great risk to their lives and despite all state efforts to intimidate them. Social media have been at the heart of the developments this past decade. They are, undeniably, key to protest mobilisation efforts, as well as the circulation of information and the building of local, national and transnational networks of activists. Beyond the simplistic and outdated celebration of social media as vehicles for democratisation, the following points are some lessons that could be drawn from the relations between social media and politics in the Arab world:

- In relation to disinformation, it is not simply a binary of fake versus true. The destabilisation of truth regimes on social media platforms has manifested itself in relation to witnessing war and atrocity. As I have argued elsewhere, there emerged an ecology of competing witnessing in the Syria war coverage that recruited the most vulnerable witnesses in a media struggle over telling the country's story (Al-Ghazzi, 2019). Even social media pages that claim to raise awareness and verify fake news can disseminate false information. A quick search for verification pages about Syria or Algeria on Facebook produces many results of unverified groups claiming to combat fake news. Therefore, digital literacy campaigns

should raise awareness of online cultures and power structures in order to understand the digital media ecology, rather than approach digital media content through a simple binary of true and false.

- The impact of social media on politics has not lived up to what many imagined a few decades ago. One may wonder 'if the victims of the genocide in Rwanda or Bosnia had smart phones and were able to tell the world about their situation, would those atrocities have taken place?' Of course, it is impossible to answer such a hypothetical question. Yet one can note that, for example, in the book *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (Thompson, 2007), an underlying theme was to lament how, when journalists left the country, ordinary people were unable to call for help and voice their fears during the 1994 genocide. In 2013, social media have come to be intrinsic to warfare and the Syrian war is often described as the most digitally-documented conflict in history. However, the conflict's hyper-mediation posed a set of problems including the proliferation of doubt and mistrust. It is therefore difficult to argue that social media were enough to empower communities and save lives. User-generated digital documentation of conflict does not necessarily lead to public understanding or to empathy.
- On the political level, social media are best understood as sites of struggle between authorities and activists. While the latter are able to connect and set their agendas in the short term, authoritarian regimes have a wide array of tactics at their disposal including surveillance intimidation, dissemination of rumours and false information, and the promotion of a culture of uncertainty and mistrust over digital content. The aim of the latter is that even if someone, for example, watched a YouTube video

depicting police or army brutality, the reaction would be that of doubt and speculation.

- It is important to distinguish between what users do with social media and meta-narratives that frame the issue in largely Western-centric ideological terms. It is also crucial to consider how different social media platforms and their affordances – and the ways people use them – change over time.
- Narratives about social media's impact in the region have oscillated between utopian and dystopian narratives depending on political circumstances. During the 2011 uprisings, techno-optimist explanations dominated academic and journalistic discourse on social media's effects on politics. However, with the rise of the Islamic State group in 2013, techno-pessimist narratives highlighted social media's potential use for radicalisation and terrorism (See Al-Ghazzi, 2014).
- Social media use in the Middle East and North Africa is not an exceptional phenomenon. Rather, it is the political circumstances in the region that have made social media there important, whether in terms of its use for activist mobilisation or for witnessing and mediating war and atrocity.

Perhaps the above points focus on the shortcomings of social media. Of course, it is important also to remember social media's role in disseminating cultures of resistance and solidarity. Certainly, over the past decade in the Middle East and North Africa, there has been a plethora of creative digital content that sets a revolutionary agenda despite all setbacks. There are other considerations to ponder including how social media platforms are themselves changing in their algorithms and technological affordances, as well as issues around access. All of these aspects are playing out in the struggle over how social media relate to our politics whether in the Arab world or globally.

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Social media use in Kenya: Twitter, public political participation and state control

George Ogola

Social media platforms have increasingly become important spaces and texts, enabling and encouraging public participation in national conversations on democratic processes across Africa. In Kenya, a platform such as Twitter has been instrumentalised as a political tool to help construct new participatory forms of civic/political engagement. Conversely, however, these platforms are also undermined by limitations of technological affordances and, more recently, by the incursion into the online space by governments, both formally and informally.

The ubiquity of the mobile phone in Kenya, as is the case in many parts of the continent, and the widespread use of various social media has meant that new forms of communication practices and political engagement are emerging. These new spaces and tools are gradually assuming significant cultural and political agency. While access to the internet remains comparatively low in the continent, internet penetration in Kenya has been growing year on year, enabled in large part by the decreasing costs of smart phones. According to recent statistics from the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA 2019), 43 million Kenyans now have access to the internet, mainly through mobile phones. Indeed, as at 2019, Kenya had an estimated internet penetration rate of 89.7%. The world average is 57.3%, with Africa at 39.8% (internetworldstats, 2020).

It is also notable that Kenya has a largely youthful population, with nearly 75% aged below 35 years. That is approximately 35.7 million Kenyans according to the 2019 census by the Kenya National Statistics Bureau. A significant number of this group are active social media users (CA 2019). Although Twitter is not as widely used as WhatsApp (88.6%) and Facebook (88.5%) (SIMELab, 2018), it remains significant precisely because of its effective political instrumentalisation and therefore its ability to shape political discourse in the country. Users of Twitter in Kenya tend to be relatively well educated and urban.

Importantly, these are the segments of the population that have traditionally been the principal producers and shapers of the political narrative in the country. In addition, Kenya's political elite, who populate nearly 80 per cent of Kenya's daily news stories, have a notable presence on the platform, as are the country's journalists and media. One would argue then that the significance of Twitter does not derive from its relative enablement of mass participation in the conduct of politics in Kenya. Instead, its importance rests on its capacity to generate key news narratives. These narratives then find validation in mass communication platforms such as mainstream media, and the much more popular social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

The political significance of Twitter in Kenya can be seen in the infra-institutional uses to which it is put politically by a self-constituting public online, and the institutional appropriation of the platform by the state for purposes of both surveillance and control. Although this discussion focuses primarily on the realm of the political, it is important to recognise that the political in Africa is not limited to the formal realm of institutional political practices. It is in fact impossible to separate the formal from the informal in the continent. To use the words of Chabal (1999: 30), politics in Africa 'is not functionally differentiated, or separated from the socio-cultural considerations which govern everyday life'. The relevance of this interpretation of the political lies in the fact that while the apparently mundane dominate conversations on Twitter and on social media more generally in Kenya, these conversations are often invariably 'political'.

'Kenyans on Twitter', commonly referred to as (KOT), a self-constituting public to whom Kenya is the primary reference in their conversations, has become a powerful player in political agenda-setting in the country. Their conversations undermine old political gatekeeping

processes, redefining mainstream media's agenda-setting structures and framing stories in a manner that is increasingly difficult to police. Mainstream media organisations now regularly monitor trending topics on KOT timelines, effectively making it a news beat.

Online hierarchies and discursive brokers

The material and structural realities that both enable and constrain the use of digital media is such that in practice, particular exclusions can occur even in the use of apparently 'open and inclusive' platforms such as Twitter. Access, digital literacies and other such economies of use structurally privilege certain voices online as they do offline. Accordingly, a number of conversations on social media and Twitter in particular are increasingly scaled up or popularised by well-known bloggers, activists, politicians, celebrities, journalists and mainstream news organisations (Ogola, 2019). This small group of actors are slowly becoming the online community's 'primary definers' and seem to have significant impact on which stories trend and therefore which are picked up, for example, by mainstream press. They also enable much broader participation in the deliberation of specific issues by tweeting, retweeting or sharing stories. This re-ordering of the online space into hierarchies does of course have implications for its claims of inclusivity. Well-resourced media organisations now have Twitter handles and create hashtags to popularise their programmes.

The state has also become a powerful player online not only in the sense of determining the policy and legal framework within which social media operates but also in using it informally as a political tool. The Kenya government has an official communications unit tasked with popularising government policy online as well as neutering dissenting voices. It has also enacted a series of problematic legislation such as criminalising hate speech but leaving its definition deliberately ambiguous for possible exploitation to control conversations online. In 2019, it also attempted to introduce an amendment of an Act of Parliament to compel bloggers and online content creators to register with the state. These actions have had a deleterious effect on the extent to which social media platforms such as Twitter can act as alternative

spaces for political participation.

Conclusion

It would be wrong of course not to acknowledge the structural and performative limitations of Twitter and other social media. Twitter demands particular levels of digital literacy for it to be effectively used. In addition, its patronage by a predominantly well educated, middle class and political elite does hinder its capacity to give space to narratives from below without discursive brokers, often in the form of influencers, well known activists, politicians, journalists and the already dominant media organisations. Lastly, the incursion into this space by the state is a worrying development. Previously limited to focusing on its regulatory role, it is now an active player eminently involved in introducing and shaping narratives. This is likely to diminish the potential of this space to be an alternative tool and platform within which the public may exercise some form of executive accountability.

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Evaluating Cambridge Analytica: some suggestions

Gizem Gültekin Várkonyi

In 2016, during the course of the American presidential elections and the UK's Brexit referendum, the company called Cambridge Analytica (CA) helped the public relations and marketing teams of the two events. The main strategy that CA followed was based on a simple key phrase: personality prediction. Thanks to the big data coming from a variety of sources on the internet-based connected world, along with ever-advancing programming knowledge and hardware capability for working with such big data, CA could implement technology, called artificial intelligence, to accurately predict voters' personalities. It has been said that both Trump's and Brexit's success was based on those predictions, which were produced by processing the content created in some of the millions of voters' personal Facebook accounts. Later on, after several careful investigations of CA, conducted by journalists, academics, NGOs and even the EU institutions, it was revealed that the data voters had made available on Facebook was collected and processed without their knowledge. The so-called 'CA scandal' pushed the issue of use of AI-based technologies in political spheres to the fore. This policy brief will focus on the concerns arising from the following areas when implementing AI technologies in the political sphere: technical, legal, and practical factors.

Technical factors are due to the nature of AI technologies, for example, due to the existence of big data and the unforeseen outcomes of processing such data. People do not fear of sharing their personal issues on internet-based services, particularly on social media. Some zettabytes of data are expected to be collected on the internet due to people spending so much time on social media (Reinsel, Gantz, and Rydning 2018).¹ Although big data is one of the inputs needed for developing an AI system (as we stated above), neither the owner of the data nor the businesses benefitting from such data, may always fully be aware of the consequences of combining big data with AI systems.

Basically, some outcomes of data processing activities generated by AI systems may bring unexpected discoveries. For example, an algorithm designed to detect skin cancer may discover other diseases in a patient even though it was not the original aim of the system's development. In the CA case, in order to design marketing content for the American voters, each individual's unpredictable emotional status was turned into a 'predictable' one with the help of the algorithm trained with some of the millions of Facebook users' data.

Suggestion 1

Establish mechanisms which ensure the transparent use of AI technologies during election campaigns. This could help to reduce the risks posed by unpredictable AI systems, particularly if such systems are impossible to prohibit.

The second factor is related to the responsibilities of the AI system developer (or providers) regarding use of personal data published by users on their personal Facebook accounts. In the CA case, the data collected from Facebook users was firstly used to predict personal emotional statuses, then processed further to create marketing content compatible with those statuses. On the one hand, Facebook users do not create this content for CA to use, but rather to connect with their friends. CA obviously created other purposes for processing people's data, and once again, did this without their knowledge. Both CA and Facebook failed to obtain the users' consent which obviously made their data processing activities illegal. The two companies should have indicated such new purposes in their privacy statements. On the other hand, current EU legislation does not oblige companies to verify whether users read and understand privacy statements. In this case, it might be expected that the companies will continue to generate standard, general, and complex privacy statements.

Suggestion 2

The current EU legislation on data protection should require companies operating AI systems to provide clear and understandable information on the purpose of their data processing, as well as the capabilities and the limits of their systems. Legislation also should require companies to prove that users have read and understood their privacy statements, not only by ticking a box or confirming a tricky 'I understood' button, but with practical evidence. Such evidence might be, for example, a short quiz to test the user's level of understanding the privacy statement before start using a certain service.

Finally, there are practical factors affecting the efficient and correct use of AI technologies in the political sphere. It has been said that, in practice, some people are just not interested in the technology at all, while others live their lives only with technology. At the same time, the right to privacy and right to data protection (both being fundamental rights recognized by the EU) may not be a concern for some people when they interact with technology. A survey conducted by the EU's official statistical service, the Eurobarometer, concludes that 47% of the survey's respondents partially read privacy statements, while 40% of the respondents never read privacy statements (Misek 2014). The reasons for their behaviour are that they find those statements too long to read, unclear or difficult to understand (European Commission 2019). This is evidence that, in our current technologically immature society, people show tendencies to give up some of their fundamental rights in order to reach technology. For example, another study (Manikonda, Deotale and Kambhampati 2017) shows that people may not always be aware of the fact that a personal AI home assistant is actually always listening to their private conversations at home. Conscious use of technology should be triggered in cooperation with the governments, NGOs, and educators.

Suggestion 3

Train the public to understand and use AI technologies in order to raise awareness of such issues. Training should not only focus on explaining

of the technology itself, but should also present the possible consequences of such technology using engaging, scenario-based methods. Training should be planned in a way that responds to different groups' (children, youngsters, the elderly, people with disabilities, etc.) information needs.

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¹ Since 2012, people do use social media in an increasing amount of time, from 90 minutes average in 2012 to 144 minutes average in 2019 per day.

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/>. Philippines users spend some 4 hours in a day on social media where Japanese users spend only 45 minutes online in a day. Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/18983/time-spent-on-social-media/>

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How social media stole the public's voice

Dikens Olewe

Mainstream media in Kenya - still widely consumed, relatively trusted and somewhat 'captured' - is increasingly using social media to source its content instead of using traditional interactions with the 'random man on the street'. Twitter, for example, has become the preferred measure of public opinion.

While trending topics are an indicator of what the public thinks, they only tell a (small) part of often multifaceted stories. Social media platforms, especially Twitter, still remain a playground of the vocal minority, dominated by influencers, and woefully unrepresentative of the general public.

Social platforms were meant to disrupt and replace the old news model and to diversify news content by empowering people to directly and collectively hold power to account. In most cases they have helped to do just that, but the platforms have also become a nefarious tool used to reinforce harmful structures and practices of legacy media that ultimately are detrimental to democracy.

The people formerly known as the audience

The absence of gatekeepers has also made social platforms safe spaces for misinformation and disinformation, allowing politicians to manipulate public opinion using influencers, trolls and bots. These views, often unvetted, get amplified in mainstream media.

The convergence of politically-driven media ownership in Kenya and the media's business interests - which is heavily dependent on state advertising - makes the media susceptible to political influence. The media therefore produces journalism that is carefully curated to avoid harming its business interests, which means that self-censorship is increasingly common and glaring. However, media segmentation - mostly brought about by the internet and accelerated by social media platforms - has

provided alternative sources of news.

The people formerly known as the audience, as media scholar Jay Rosen calls them, have also become content producers. They publish unfiltered content, as they see it, in an effort to uncover truth hidden by legacy media. This new digital information ecosystem means that audiences increasingly believe that legacy media only publish or broadcast filtered versions of a story, and therefore feel that it's their role to sleuth and parse these clues, and determine the full story.

Vulnerable

Interactions on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have also helped to create accidental communities and complex networks. They are often tenuous yet they are nimble and effective in helping people rally to causes that shape and influence governance in a country like Kenya.

Discussions in these digital town halls have often led to offline action. A recent example is an online campaign that forced the Kenyan government to publish detailed plans on its strategy to fight the Covid-19 outbreak.

However, social media networks pushing to improve governance have often crumbled because of a lack of structures to support the movement. There is also an absence of leaders to provide vision, and day-to-day strategic guidance.

Influencers, frequently the accidental leaders of these movements, are often not driven by altruistic motives but by a selfish goal to acquire followers and monetise their contribution. There are many examples of causes that have lost steam because an influencer has been compromised. Aware of the vulnerabilities of social platforms, politicians increasingly prefer using social media to shape public opinion of them instead of giving interviews to journalists. They feel that they

don't have to explain themselves to the media if they have tweeted or posted on Facebook. This means that they cannot be held to account, a situation that is detrimental to democracy.

The way forward

'A lot of the metrics that we [the media] are trying to chase are the same metrics that trolls use and look for: Attention, audience, and likes. We are modelling an identical behaviour,' says Andrew Losowsky from the Coral Project, an initiative that helps journalists to work better with the communities they serve.

In an article last year, Jennifer Brandel, from the community engagement consultancy Hearken, argued that fundamental changes are needed in order for the media to become more relevant to today's audiences. Her consultancy advocates the concept of People Powered Journalism, which encourages partnership with the public throughout the reporting process, resulting in stories that better meet the audience's needs.

This type of pivot could ensure that the media and audiences partner in the reporting process. Together they could build a bulwark that protects, defends and repulses threats to democratic systems. The media should do this not only because it's the right thing to do, but because their businesses depend on it.

Trust is built on good relationships after all.

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Truth, knowledge, and democracy: Reflections on the role of social media in shaping (un)democratic processes

Brian Ball

The nature of democracy

What is democracy? I like Abraham Lincoln's characterization: it is government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Some will no doubt view this as naïve: in the 1940s, for instance, Joseph Schumpeter influentially argued that this kind of definition is too vague (e.g. for the purposes of political science); and he held instead that 'the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 1943, 269). In short, free and fair competitive elections are the essence of democracy.

I think this is wrong-headed. First, it ignores the existence (e.g. in Ancient Greece) of (sortative) democracies in which representatives are selected by lottery. Equally, it ignores direct (rather than representative) democracy (e.g. in certain small-scale democratic organizations). Schumpeter's definition misclassifies these examples and is therefore quite simply mistaken.

But it is also misguided. The objection that a Lincoln-style definition is too vague depends, in my view, on the outdated philosophy of science of the 1930s that confounds truth and knowledge. The objection is that Lincoln's definition gives no method for determining whether, or verifying that, a given state is a democracy. But the idea that a definition should do this has long since been abandoned: it is now widely thought that a definition should tell us when it is true that it applies. It need not tell us whether it does.

In recent work, Philip Kitcher (2019) has suggested that there are three levels of democracy. At the first level there is Schumpeter's kind of electoral system. Kitcher calls this 'Bush league' (i.e. low-level) democracy. We can see why. Authoritarians are

increasingly able to exploit state infrastructure that is democratic in this weak sense. It is possible to have Schumpeterian democracy without even approximating government by the people.

Nevertheless, there is an ideal that is presupposed by, and even embodied in, Schumpeter's institutional structure: equality. Citizens in democratic states in this sense have an equal vote. Of course, this ideal can be perverted in practice, but it is important that 'Bush league' democracy aspires to equality.

At a second (and 'deeper') level, there is what Kitcher (2019) calls 'Millian' democracy. In this liberal conception of democracy, the kind of free and open discussion of issues allows citizens to achieve knowledge of how best to pursue their individual good through the electoral system – which in turn is expressed in citizens' votes.

Although Kitcher (2019) doesn't argue this, I think a case can be made that there is a second ideal embodied in the liberal conception of democracy: liberty. In particular, it might be thought that without the open discussion of issues, votes will not be cast freely.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for concern about liberal democracy. Kitcher (2019) worries that it institutes the epistemic but not 'the affective conditions democracy requires' (forthcoming, p.5); and he suggests that democracy at a third, still deeper level – Deweyan democracy – remedies this defect. This kind of democracy emphasizes collective decision-making through inclusive, informed deliberation, requiring not just liberty and equality, but also fraternity.

Arguably, then, the characterization of democracy with which I began – Abraham Lincoln's government of the people, by the people, and for the people – involves a commitment to the three ideals of the French revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. And while

Kitcher (2019) does not stress this, the epistemic requirement on democracy (which underpins it as an autonomous form of self-government) is that of a citizenry able to pursue the collective good rather than their individual self-interest (cf. Ball, 2020).

The roles of truth and knowledge in action

Philosophers (following Williamson, 2000) are increasingly recognizing the importance of knowledge, rather than belief, as the proper basis for deliberation and action. For instance, we ought to take our knowledge into account when estimating likelihoods and we ought to take such likelihoods into account when deciding what to do. The trouble with relying on belief is that it may be mistaken. Only knowledge (not mere belief) guarantees truth; and so only knowledge is a proper basis for action.

This applies to both individual and collective action. We need to know whether climate change is caused by our carbon emissions - or at least take account of the likelihood that it is - if we are to make an appropriate decision regarding carbon taxes.

The undermining of democracy by social media

Social media can prevent the formation of group knowledge within a democratic electorate in (at least) two ways (cf. Ball, 2020). It can facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation and it can increase hyper-partisanship (e.g. in online discussion). In each of these ways, trust can be eroded. If erroneous information is rampant, individuals may become more sceptical of the information they encounter. Such factors can lead to increases in false individual beliefs. Hyper-partisanship may prevent people from obtaining evidence that would allow them to revise their mistaken opinions. Of course, if individual opinions are highly polarized, or agnosticism is widespread, then effective, rational, collective democratic decision-making, action, and self-governance in that group will be impossible.

What can be done?

There are (roughly) two strategies that could tackle the kinds of concern raised (cf. Cairncross, 2019). We

(via our governments) could encourage increased critical media literacy or we could regulate social media companies and other online platforms. While implementation of the first would no doubt be welcome, it is my view that the second alternative should not be neglected. By way of analogy: to avoid the consumption of contaminated water, we do not teach citizens the chemistry required to test water; rather, we regulate to ensure that the water is not contaminated. And it seems to me that something similar can be said about the case at hand.

Of course, pursuing the second option will require great care - regulation must not be pursued which would preclude satisfaction of the epistemic conditions on democracy stressed under the liberal conception. Showing that this can be done is a task for another occasion: here, I simply note that there are regulations in place in the UK that do not violate these conditions, namely those governing the broadcast media. I see no reason of principle why these cannot be adapted to the case of the new social media. We don't need to re-invent the wheel - we just need to use it as and when appropriate.

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We Need Art Interventions! Art's potential to tackle fake news on social media

Hadas Emma Kedar

Since the early 2000s, social media have become central communication platforms worldwide. They opened up numerous possibilities for wider interactions, communities and movement building and gave voice to many otherwise unheard individuals. One example is the #MeToo movement which has rapidly grown on social media, with numerous women exposing sexual harassment stories and demanding meaningful consequences for perpetrators. Thus, social media have arguably extended democratic processes.

Yet in parallel, social media offer easy-to-use tools which allow anyone to receive and spread information – as well as disinformation. In the last two decades, studies have found that disinformation and fake news are spread mostly via social media, namely on Facebook and Twitter (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). As a consequence, society is facing dangerous undemocratic tendencies because false information undermines a basic factor of democratic deliberation: facts. Public deliberation in the US and in other countries seems to have been shifting from presenting objective facts and discussing opinions to presenting ‘alternative facts’ and discussing feelings. This shift can arguably challenge policymaking when crucial debates deteriorate, not due to difference in ideology or opinions but due to false information brought to the table.

One advocating approach regards social media as providing ‘merely a platform’, claiming it is the users who should be accountable for their interaction with misinformation and its spread. I challenge this naïve approach, because users are led by the platform – it is designed to make the user interact in certain ways. Facebook, for example, is a money-maker – one of the biggest advertisement platforms on Earth. As such, its motivations are based on how to profit, how to grow and how to become and remain ubiquitous. With these ubiquitous information-spreading machines, fake news and misinformation become particularly challenging.

Since the mid-20th century more and more artists have been using media technologies as creative means to tackle socio-political issues. Combining technology, art and activism to produce art interventions in public, these works have been raising social awareness and promoting moral debates. As an early example, in the 1970s and 1980s artists like David Hall, Chris Burden or Stan Douglas bought airtime on broadcast television and intervened mostly during commercial spots with peculiar video works. Looking often like commercials, they aimed to criticize television as a popular medium delivering superficial or biased content and manipulating viewers toward consumerism and ignorance.

Later, in the 1990s, as technologies became more complicated, artists’ actions became more sophisticated. Operating outside the museum and offering an alternative even to the art institution itself, artists became increasingly interested in using media technologies as they are used by corporations and power institutions. Mostly termed Tactical Media or Cultural Jamming, these art forms aimed to deconstruct systems of power. In that spirit, in his spoken word album *Become the Media* (2000), musician Jello Biafra declared: ‘Don’t hate the media, become the media!’ I claim that many artists have the skills to deal with dangerous and complex technologies, and instead of ‘hating’ them they should use them. I claim that the complex problems which society faces due to the spread of fake news and misinformation can be effectively tackled by art interventions. As an example, in 2000 the Austrian-Swiss art duo *Übermorgen* programmed a website named ‘Vote Auction’ on which users could allegedly buy and sell votes during the US election. Fearing the vote trade to be real, CNN broadcast a special program with a line of experts to discuss the act and its damage to democracy. In this way, the artists aimed to raise awareness to the issue of lobbying and its damage to the democratic voting process. In 2011 a different intervention named ‘Newstweek’ was created by artists Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev in cafés around Europe. They hacked the

café's WiFi and altered the content of news websites. The café customers who surfed those websites on their personal computers found peculiar headlines. The artists' aim was to raise awareness and materialize the problems of fake news and media bias.

'Don't hate the media, become the media!' (Jello Biafra 2000)

A more direct 'fake news' action took place in 2008, during the US-Iraq war. The art group Yes Men produced and distributed thousands of copies of a cloned New York Times newspaper filled with 'good news', while its front page stated 'Iraq War Ends'. The aim of the prank was not merely to criticise the US-Iraq war and GW Bush's former administration (e.g. potential US war crimes), but to simulate a reality of positive news where the government is being held accountable for its actions (Kedar 2019). An earlier 'fake news' intervention by the Yes Men started by fabricating a website of Dow Chemicals, a corporation which acquired Union Carbide, which was responsible for one of the worst industrial disasters in Bhopal, India, 1984. Mistaking the website to be the actual Dow website, a BBC researcher contacted Dow for a response to the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. The Yes Men agreed and prepared to appear disguised as Dow's spokesperson. And so, 'Dow spokesperson' Jude Finisterra, acted by Jacques Servin, said on live television that 'Dow is now accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster.' The announcement became headline news. It took about two hours to realize that this was a hoax, during which time Dow stocks fell by 4.24%. The action raised meaningful moral questions regarding corporate responsibility.

These art actions all aim to mislead the audience temporarily, so that the viewer believes it and then realizes that it is a hoax. When the deception is revealed, the viewer is led to think morally about the issue at stake, opening up a meaningful debate. Following Ian Reilly (2013), it is arguable that critique alone cannot be as effective as actions can. In other words, these courageous art interventions focus on doing instead of talking (Kedar 2019).

Summary

These examples demonstrate art as an activist technology-oriented form which can potentially or actually raise awareness of the problem of fake news. I claim that art can help repair the damaged status of facts and truth, and thus reconstruct the wounded democratic deliberation. These collaborative group artists use their creativity, intelligence, critical thinking, social responsibility and respect for facts and truth to create meaningful and bold interventions. Yet, these projects oftentimes lack financial and legal support. In addition to these needs, in the face of the growing danger to democracy, I call for artists to create further projects to tackle the spread of fake news.

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