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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 acteurs 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*

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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 activites 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 fullfill 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 Chancelor 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 competiton 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 Chancelor 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 monopolys 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 undesireable 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, competiton 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 messenging 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 alltogether. 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 propretrator 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 rejuvination 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 youthfullness 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

Israelian 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 desastrous 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 chancelor 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 – unmistakenly 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 signalizing 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 word – from India, to the Czech Republic and Argentinia to Nigeria. He further claimed responsibility for the election of Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta – a campaign that was characterized by deliberate desinformation 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 teethless 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 lenghty 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 Troyan 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 Beppo 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 *Netfix*.

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