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CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

An Investigation of Political Manipulation in the Digital
Age

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ABSTRACT

Justine Kenzler: Cambridge Analytica and the Public Sphere:
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The Cambridge Analytica scandal, which unfolded in 2018, was a wake-up call for many and is a good illustration of political and civic consequences of big data in the digital age. In this thesis, I used theory-driven qualitative content analysis to explore political manipulation in the digital age, illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and focus on how the democratic challenges, impugn the role of democratic citizens in the public sphere. For this matter I have used Habermas concepts of deliberative democracy, the public sphere, and citizen sovereignty extensively as a lens through which I analyse the events of 2018 and its aftermath. I was able to identify five challenges to the concept of the public sphere as it stands, and I relate my findings to how they may be consequential to the democratic system in general under a neoliberal capitalist order.

Keywords: Cambridge Analytica, Habermas, public sphere, democracy, political manipulation

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1. Introduction

Our society is changing immensely. So much, that many argue we are undergoing the fourth industrial revolution. This new industrial paradigm, *Industry 4.0*, is at the core of many contemporary debates. Technological and cultural elements are the driving force of this paradigm shift to an industry, as well as society, 4.0, characterized mainly by digitalization; a digitalization that brings about a digital society, digital culture, and a heavy digital industry (Mazali, 2018).

The various socio-technological problems that come with such a profound societal change are already at the heart of many academic debates and studies. In this master's thesis I contribute to the endeavour to disentangle and understand one aspect of this change, which is altering life as we know it so strongly.

A very pertinent case which illustrates the new challenges we are confronted with in the digital age of industry 4.0, is the Cambridge Analytica scandal. This scandal, which unfolded in March 2018, was a wake-up call for many, and revealed the hidden reality of digital networks, the business model of big data firms, and the importance of a new discussion on issues around privacy and civil sovereignty. Christopher Wylie, the Canadian whistleblower who worked with Cambridge Analytica, revealed how the British data analytics firm, that worked with Donald Trump's election team and the winning Brexit campaign, harvested millions of Facebook profiles of US voters, in one of the tech giant's biggest ever data breaches. The firm exploited Facebook and, through an external app, collected thousands of data points from millions of people. With the help of a psychologist at Cambridge University, test results from a personality test, derived from the app, were coupled with the illegally harvested Facebook data and was then used to build an algorithm that could analyse individual Facebook profiles and determine personality traits linked to voting behaviour. With this system, so-called swing-voters were targeted with highly personalised political advertisements (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018a), and hence likely effected the outcomes of both, Trump's win in the presidential elections in 2016 as well as the success of the Vote-Leave camp in the UK's Brexit referendum.

The case is sociologically relevant from many perspectives: the scandal firstly tells the highly complex story of elections in the digital age. Political advertisement methods like the one used by the Cambridge Analytica firm commence a categorically new form of political manipulation, as I will show in this thesis, and has the potential to directly undermine democracy. The breach also discloses the unchecked power Facebook's owner Mark Zuckerberg has over a quarter of the world's population, by owning the monopoly that constitutes the biggest social network platform in the world. In this

thesis I want to investigate the political and civic consequences of such big-data scandals. Popular media rarely go beyond exploring big data as a hot, new topic and an exciting new tool, and rarely consider the issues of power related to it (Tufekci, 2014). It is here, I believe, where sociological research has both an opportunity as well as a responsibility, to pick up the zeitgeist and offer relevant insights for policy makers as well as academics and illuminate and clarify complex and novel problems in the digital age.

On March 30th, 2018, just days after the scandal, Zuckerberg himself wrote an article in the Washington Post and called for stronger regulations and rules online (Zuckerberg, 2018). This is important because even though this scandal is clearly an illegal act of manipulation, and therefore (hopefully) a rare case, it sheds light on the possibilities and dangers of social networks at large. In combination with “normal” yet highly intransparent algorithms, filter-bubbles, fake news, and a post-truth culture, the age of big data needs to undergo a cultural transformation in order to fit into our predominant value system, characterized by citizen sovereignty, freedom and democratic citizenship.

I will explicate these new realities, as illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, by utilizing Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy and mainly drawing on the crucial concept of the public sphere. To do this, I will first look at the historical development of the concept of the public sphere over time and focus especially on citizens’ sovereignty as well as the role of the media. I will use an elaborated, modern version of this concept as a lens, to analyse what kind of changes this scandal is bringing about. In doing so, I will analyse several questions, the main ones being: (1) “Are the new forms of political manipulation, as exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica case, illustrating an entirely new form of manipulation via the media or is it merely larger in quantity?”, (2) “How do the democratic challenges in the digital age of 2019, as illustrated by CA, challenge the role of democratic citizens in the public sphere?” and (3) “What do these findings imply for real-life democracies?” In other words, in this thesis, my main aim is to find out how the democratic challenges in the digital age, illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica case, impugn the role of democratic citizens in the public sphere.

To get to the roots of this I will first show how political manipulation has changed over time, and in what way the Cambridge Analytica case, as an illustration of severe political manipulation, stands out as a new phenomenon. For this reason, I tackle the problem in a chapter which looks at the historical development of political manipulation. After that I will move on to the analysis of my second research question. This will be done after having laid out the trajectory of Habermas original concept of the public sphere from the 1960s until today and using it as a research tool in order to understand the democratic challenges the Cambridge Analytica scandal reveals. I will then ponder on the implications of my findings for democratic systems as they stand today and touch upon the third question in my

discussion section, even though I do not aim to answer this question fully, but rather open up the implications my findings could have on a broader, more empirical, level.

The approach in my thesis is theory-driven and my setting leans heavily on Habermas' theories. I relate Habermasian concepts to an empirical case in contemporary social reality. I chose this approach, because there has been rather little conceptual theory-building about the political and civic consequences of big data (Tufekci, 2014), a research gap I would like to address with this work. Therefore, this work constitutes an empirically-based, conceptually sensitive, theory-driven setting that addresses the consequences of a newly emergent complexity of problems in politics in the digital age. I hope that I was able to do both in this thesis and offer some interesting insights into a new phenomenon of sociological interest and high relevance.

2. Methods and Data

To present my case, I will use the original Cambridge Analytica newspaper articles published in the Guardian as my data. This collection of 93 articles is openly accessible on the website of the Guardian. The Guardian has a business model which relies 100% on readership-funding, meaning that it does not employ any form of advertisement, and is neither influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or any shareholders. This also means that there are no paywalls or any other restrictions on the website, so the files are freely and unlimitedly accessible. I chose to use these news pieces as the data for my case, as the Guardian was the paper where the data breach was originally published, after a year-long investigation of the case and close collaboration with the whistleblower Christopher Witley. For this thesis, I want to show that the Cambridge Analytica breach is a case illustrative of a relevant current social and political phenomenon and analyse the role of citizens in the practices of representative democracy against relevant theories.

As a methodology to analyse this data, I have chosen content analysis, as it is a flexible and appropriate method for analysing text data. This analytic method struck me as appropriate for my research, as it is a way of reducing textual data, making sense of it and of deriving meaning (Given, 2008). Content analysis is a method for making valid inferences from texts, to the contexts of their use, and is thus able to provide new insights on the topic studied through this inference (Krippendorff, 2004).

In this thesis, I am not interested in distinct frames, discourses or narratives used in the Cambridge Analytica articles, but rather in what the case represents and tells about social reality. I want to use the case as an illustrative example to depict a shift in citizens' roles, responsibilities, and accountability

in democracy, via the concept of the public sphere. To be able to show this, I want to investigate the Cambridge Analytica case, and its influence on our political reality, with a relatively heavy focus on theories. More precisely, I will be using Habermas' theorizations on deliberative democracy, with a special focus on his conception of the public sphere as a theoretical lens for this thesis. In doing so, I am placing the theory at the beginning of my work and will use it as an *a priori* framework to guide my research questions. This is a deductive, theory-driven approach to my analytical procedure (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). This form of qualitative content analysis of my data will enable me to understand and analyse the content or contextual meaning of the text. Content analysis is a widely used methodological tool to describe a phenomenon in textual data. In my case, especially a directed (theoretical) approach to qualitative content analysis makes sense, because of my strong focus in Habermas' theories. In this approach to content analysis, existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that would benefit from further investigation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The goal of a directed, theoretical approach to content analysis is often to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory. My intention, however, is not to "test" Habermasian theories with my case, to see if the theory holds or needs to be refined somehow. Instead of using deliberative democracy and a refined, updated version of the original conception of the public sphere, as an adequate theory about today's world, I see it as an ideal conceptualization of democracy against which I can analyze relevant events of today.

Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely, for the sole purpose of classifying large amounts of text into a few categories that represent certain meanings, narratives, or discourses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Instead, the goal of content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314, cited from Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Based on my research aim and my interest in the realist (versus constructivist) meaning of the Cambridge Analytica scandal for our democracy, the analysis of my data will not entail counting of words, as it is often done in qualitative analysis. This is also because my aim is not to offer supporting and non-supporting evidence for the theory, hence I do not find it necessary to present evidence in the form of codes or the like, as it is usually common in the deductive, theory-driven, approach to content analysis (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Counting words or coding would not serve my initial research aim in any way and the frequency of certain words is simply irrelevant when interested in the social reality of a recent phenomenon, the anatomy of the public sphere and current trends relating to the ideals of (deliberative) democracy. In practice this means that my analysis will entail the extraction of the general narrative about what happened from my data and will be supported in the form of short, relevant and illustrative extracts, which provide a description of the way things happened. Instead, of using my theory to guide certain

coding schemes, I will use it as a theoretical perspective against which I can analyse recent events and draw on it for thematic illustrations. This approach adheres to a naturalistic paradigm, hence, offers a realist way of looking at the data, in opposition to constructionist one, in which one is interested in the meaning making of a certain text, which is in line with the nature of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

My analysis, will then focus on the extent to which the empirical data relates to the theoretical conceptualizations chosen and end with a discussion on the architecture of political communication and manipulation as they stand today in the digital age, how the current trends relate to the ideals of deliberative democracy, and how they may be consequential to the democratic system in general.

3. Theory

3.1 Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy which emphasizes public discourse, public consultation, citizens' participation in political, democratic decision-making and, more generally, the interaction of deliberation and decision-making.

While the roots of deliberative democracy can already be found back in the ancient Greek philosophies, Jürgen Habermas's work on communicative rationality and the public sphere is often identified as the most influential contribution in this area (Ercan, 2014). The reason I have chosen this theoretical framework to analyse recent events of political manipulation is because Habermas (and later scholars) have developed a very suitable framework for my overarching interest and motivation for this thesis, namely, modern-day challenges to democracy by novel, digital means. The relevance of the public sphere for the legitimacy of the whole political system lies in the normative self-understanding of democracies until today, as theorized by Habermas. The two conceptions that this normative self-understanding of democratic systems is based on are, according to Habermas, human rights and popular sovereignty (Habermas, 1996, p. 94). These ideas are unquestioned, indispensable, and presumed in modern constitutional democracies and therefore constitute the very basis of them (Habermas, 1996). It is especially the second idea, popular sovereignty, that this thesis is drawing on and that I theorize to be potentially threatened by manipulation in the digital age as illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

These concepts of deliberative democracy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty are closely related and together make up the overarching project of Habermas' version of democracy. I will now

briefly explain the underlying idea of deliberative democracy, before moving onwards in more detail to the trajectory of the concept of the public sphere, which is most central to my thesis.

Deliberative democracy was developed as a response to the legitimation problems of representative democracies, but it is generally not conceived as an alternative to liberal, representative democracy, but rather as an expansion of it, where the public deliberation of free and equal citizens become central to legitimating collective decisions (Ercan, 2014). Theorists of deliberative democracy however differ on the questions of how and to what extent deliberative democracy should work, and different strands can therefore be identified. As has already been mentioned, Habermas' contributions to this topic have been especially influential and I will therefore, and due to the limited scope of this thesis, focus on his version of deliberative democracy.

According to Habermas (2006), all theories of democracy are normative to begin with, and simply highlight distinct aspects, where the difference lies in a varying emphasis on one of three prerequisites for democracy, namely (1) the private autonomy of citizenship, (2) democratic citizenship and (3) the independence of the public sphere, which constitutes an intermediary system between state and society. These elements are the normative foundation of all versions of liberal democracy, irrespective of the potential diversity of constitutional texts and legal orders, political institutions, and practices. For Habermas, any democratic design must, among other factors, guarantee "the diversity of independent mass media, and a general access of inclusive mass audiences to the public sphere" (Habermas, 2006, p. 412). Habermas maintains that his communication model of deliberative politics holds two critically relevant conditions: Firstly, for a successful deliberative legitimation processes a self-regulating and independent media system, which facilitates mediated political communication in the public sphere, is of utmost importance, and, secondly, an empowered and responsive civil society must be enabled, which has the potential and capabilities for genuine participation within deliberative democracy's communicative processes.

Beyond its normative demands, Habermas argues that the deliberative paradigm also involves an empirical point of reference; a democratic process, which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes (mainly regarding the impact of arguments on rational changes in preference). This presumption of reasonable outcomes rests in turn on the assumption that institutionalized discourses, in the form of deliberation, bring to discussion relevant topics and claims, promote the critical evaluation of contributions, and lead to rationally motivated reactions (Habermas, 2006).

To Habermas' thinking, the argument that deliberation must be open to all who are affected by its outcome is central (Ercan, 2014). He depicts that there should be no constraints on topics as long as it is relevant to the issue under discussion. Habermas' version requires rational arguments that are 'in the best interest' of all participants which aims to promote rational reasons, instead of powerful interests, as the basis of the common good as well as the path to achieving unanimous consensus as a result of public deliberation. Importantly, Habermas conceives deliberation as not only taking place in small-scale forums, but rather defining it as a broad communication process, that takes place on different levels in the public sphere (Ercan, 2014). A vital public sphere is of central importance to Habermas theory, as it constitutes the place where contestation among citizens, groups, movements and organizations, and opinion formation can take place. The core function of the public sphere then is "to identify social and political problems and thematize them in such a way that they are taken up by formal decision-making bodies such as parliaments" (Ercan, 2014).

The public sphere, the place where deliberation and political opinion formation processes are carried out, is therefore the most fundamental concept to his theory of deliberative democracy. It is the very arena in which the formation of considered public opinion, the goal of any deliberative democratic system, takes place, and where the media holds a central role. And it is especially the modern idea of popular sovereignty that gives the theory legitimacy and relevance. Citizen sovereignty, or in other words, self-legislation of the people presupposes that people are free and equal (Habermas, 1996). The collective opinion- and will-formation that, according to Habermas (1962), takes place in the public sphere must be a voluntary process that consequently calls for political participation. As an inherent precondition of the collective, presumably rational and necessarily repression-free deliberation and will-formation process that is to inform the self-legislation of the people, the free individual must be presumed and indeed constitutionally safeguarded, thus, requiring both public and private autonomy (Habermas, 1996).

The two ideas of a deliberative democracy and the public sphere populated by free and equal citizens are therefore deeply intertwined and highly relevant. After all, democratic political life, also today, can only thrive if institutions allow citizens to debate matters of political importance, and we therefore need to create norms and institutions which support this kind of free communication (Calhoun, 2007, p. 360).

It is because of this central importance of the public sphere that I will soon turn to this concept and spend some time laying out its development over the last decades. Before I do this however, I have to address some of deliberative democracies' most serious criticism, in order to justify its application in my thesis, despite obvious drawbacks.

The ideal of deliberative democracy, as well as its public sphere, has been harshly criticized for being naïvely utopian in a world where politics is factually about unequal power relations and the furtherance of self-interests (Ercan, 2014). Many critics emphasize the gap between the ideal of deliberation and the actually existing conditions to show the impracticality of deliberative democracy. While some acknowledge that deliberation can in fact be practiced, they characterize it as an exclusionary and elitist model of democracy, that fails to take into account the pervasive differences of race, gender, and class (Ercan, 2014). Nancy Fraser for example sees the Habermasian notion of the public sphere as a unitary bourgeois construct and expands it through a focus on multiple publics which includes oppressed minorities as I will show in more detail below. Some of these criticisms have already been incorporated into the theory of deliberative democracy and the public sphere and modern versions of these concepts have therefore changed somewhat significantly since their original coining.

Even though deliberative democracy is without a doubt a very idealistic, perhaps even somewhat unrealistic project, it still bears significance for both, political theorists and practitioners. The core idea, namely that reason for and against various options are to be weighed against their merits, cannot be denied as an ideal and central idea of liberal democracies. And while it is commonly noted that some of the values of deliberative democracy are somewhat discordant from conventional democracy, it does unarguably have laudable characteristics which are valued across democracies (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003). Deliberative democracy should therefore not be rejected on the basis of its idealism, but the question should rather be how it can be achieved, and how can we make democracy more deliberative (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003).

Furthermore, political theory does not need to correspond to political reality in order to be relevant. O'Donovan (2013) argues that the holistic political system is too complex to be correctly described by any single theory, which could be backed up by empirical data. And secondly, even if such data was available, it does not refute the legitimacy of essentially normative theorizing. In saying this, he argues that the relevance of deliberative democracy in contemporary political thought is still very much justified, and the conditions under which it can work are not as demanding as many of its critics suppose. Moreover, within political science, normative theory has frequently served as a guide for research, thus bridging the gap between normative theory and empirical reality (Habermas, 2006), and giving the idealistic conception both relevance and validity.

Habermas himself was very much aware of the apparent gap of normative theorizing and empirical reality with regards to his theory of deliberative democracy. He retains however, that those are only *prima facie* doubts, and that there is an abundance of empirical evidence in favour of the verifiable

potential that political deliberation can have. The epistemic dimension of deliberation in the context of political will-formation and decision-making is in fact supported by an impressive body of small-group studies that construe political communication as a mechanism for the enhancement of cooperative learning and collective problem solving (see for example Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005) (although there is also research pointing in the opposite direction and acknowledging the harmful consequences of deliberation such as extremism, see e.g. Sunstein, 2000). While deliberation surely is a demanding form of communication, Habermas argues that it grows out of inconspicuous daily routines of asking for and giving reasons and thus bears significance and application in our everyday lives (Habermas, 2006). We can derive from this, that various forms of deliberation are in fact practiced, and that deliberation as a form of political communication holds great potential for decision making and opinion-formation. Despite its idealistic claims, deliberative democracy is an ambitious, yet relevant, and to a certain degree both realizable and realized political theory.

What I am trying to show here is that, even though Habermas' theory is very demanding, it is neither easily dismissible nor irrelevant. Habermas (and others) have created a very well-established political theory around an ideal (rational deliberation on topics of political importance) that is unarguably an inherently valued principle in liberal democracies. There is also an abundance of studies that construe political communication as a mechanism for the enhancement of cooperative learning and collective problem solving, therefore giving the theory empirical relevance. Whether or not this theory can be proven to be true, or to what extent it is realized in different democratic systems is not a question I want to answer in this thesis. Rather, I want to show that the theory of deliberative democracy, and especially its concept of the public sphere with its sovereign, self-legislating citizens, is a relevant and well-known theoretical framework, against which I can analyse the new forms of political manipulation, as illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

3.2 Public Sphere

Habermas coined the term *public sphere* notably with the 1962 publication of his habilitation, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere). Habermas defines the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” and to which access is guaranteed to all citizens equally (Habermas, in Lennox & Lennox, 1974, p.49). Besides his approach to the concept of the public sphere, in this work he also lays the foundation for his moral-political theory which revolves around his interest in a communicative ideal and is characterized by the idea of inclusive critical discussion, that is free of social and economic pressures and where conversational partners treat each other as equals in a

cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern (Bohman & Rehg, 2017), as I have introduced above.

Historically, the public sphere in Europe developed essentially due to the rise of coffee houses, salons, and the newsprint media as a means for critical exchange and conversation in the 18th century and replaced the "representational" culture (Calhoun, 2007, p. 360). Habermas postulated that it is the reading public, bourgeoisie private persons, discussing newspapers and journals in clubs or other organized forms, which bridge the gap between the private and the public sphere (Habermas, 1996, p. 393). This 18th century bourgeoisie public sphere is replaced in the 20th century by something more like publicity, in which the general public is manipulated by commercial and party-political interest groups (Outhwaite, 1996). Habermas imagines "the public sphere as an intermediary system of communication between formally organized and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas at both the top and the bottom of the political system. At the periphery of the political system, the public sphere is rooted in networks for wild flows of messages—news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, and shows and movies with an informative, polemical, educational, or entertaining content" (Habermas, 2006, p. 415). Hence, newspapers, magazines, radio, and the television are the media of this public sphere and thus have a fundamental role within this notion. Public discussion depicts the key act in his conception of the public sphere and constitutes the link to his theory of deliberative democracy.

Habermas himself identifies two types of actors without whom a political public sphere could not function. Those are politicians and professionals of the media system, for example journalists (Habermas, 2006). This emphasis on the role of a free and active media system is central to the notion of the public sphere, after all, it is the intermediary system between the state and the society. It is the source of information to the public and therefore the driver of political opinion and discussion. This thesis will in particular look at social media as a new medium within political processes, and I will therefore devote the next chapter to the development of political manipulation on different media over time. What is important to note here is the central function of journalists and a free, independent press, which meets its role of a political watchdog, and provides its citizens with accurate, objective, and fair information on important developments and reflects the work of elected politicians to its people.

Habermas however also witnessed and incorporated the transition from a cultural discourse to a culture of mere consumption into his notion of the public sphere, and the role of the media in this system (for a summary see Hohendahl, 1982). Habermas argues that in the 18th and 19th century, culture was clearly separated from the market, but that by the end of the 19th century, culture has

become a commodity that is simply consumed as leisure-time entertainment. For Habermas, the transition of the media as a public organ concerned with formulating opinions, becomes quite explicit in the example of the press, which is no longer concerned with this primary goal, but instead aligns itself largely with the interest of advertisers, a narrative we will encounter several times in the course of this work. It is in his original work where Habermas also already criticizes the political consumerism which results from an oppressive form of marketization and de-politicisation of democracy, in which politicians practice voter hunting periodically, and a staged public opinion is supplied by the marketized mass media (Habermas, 1962). To summarize, Habermas, similarly to other scholars of the Frankfurter school, saw mass culture in advanced capitalism as a manipulated version of culture, in which the masses have become mere objects (Hohendahl, 1982).

Habermas nevertheless continued to examine the possibilities and limitations of political emancipation under conditions of advanced capitalism through his notion of the public sphere. Besides these obvious challenges he formulated and refined his normative project as follows; Habermas did not see the public sphere as the space where political decision making is taking place – this task is reserved for the institutionalized political process. Neither do two people engaging in a conversation interact in the public sphere. The public sphere is rather an informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion, which serves as a counterweight to the state (Fraser, 1992). It constitutes the realm of opinion formation and expression for the citizens of a democratic system. What makes a variety of opinions into public opinion, according to Habermas is the controversial way it comes about, as well as the amount of approval that “carries” it. Aggregates of individual opinions can only be called public opinion then, if it has been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-focused process which was created in a mobilized public sphere by engaged citizens (Habermas, 1996). In other words, the conditions of communication are different, and mark the threshold that separate the private and public sphere (Habermas, 1996, p. 393). Habermas goes on to argue that this realm forms whenever individuals assemble to form a public body and when they form and express their opinions in a free and unrestricted manner. The public sphere thus is a sphere which “mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion” (Habermas et al., 1974, p. 50). The deliberative model of democracy therefore expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions (Habermas, 2006), brought about by means of rational argumentation, critical discussion and the exercise of reason.

While the same criticism of a highly idealistic model and utopian expectations apply here as well, Habermas argues that mediated political communication does not always have to fit the pattern of fully-fledged deliberation. Rather, political communication circulates “from the bottom up and the top

down throughout a multilevel system (from everyday talk in civil society, through public discourse and mediated communication in weak publics, to the institutionalized discourses at the centre of the political system), [and] takes on quite different forms in different arenas. The public sphere forms the periphery of a political system and can well facilitate deliberative legitimation processes by “laundering” flows of political communication through a division of labour with other parts of the system” (Habermas, 2006, p. 415).

After having introduced the original notion of the public sphere as it was developed in the 1960s by Habermas, I now want to take a look at how the conception was modified and updated over time. It is also important to mention here that the public sphere is, despite its wide intellectual influence and popularity, still an essentially contested concept (Rauchfleisch, 2017). While scholars widely disagree on its use and meaning, there is perhaps no “right” interpretation of it (Rauchfleisch, 2017). The way that I understand the public sphere, is as a historical concept which was developed by analysing actually existing public spheres in the 18th century. While the concept does have normative aspects - and its flaws - it is rooted in careful historical analysis which affords its insightfulness and descriptive force. Based on this, Habermas’ concept is perhaps not perfectly mirroring, but surely reflective of the social reality it aims to describe, as Habermas frequently argued himself (e.g. Habermas, 2006). It is for this reason that I found it to be a very suitable tool for this thesis project.

But besides its general popularity and usefulness, the criticism of Habermas concepts has been extensive and serious. His ideal of the bourgeoisie public sphere has been criticized for being uncritical, sexist, elitist, inflexible, out-dated, and too static. I will address some of the most serious criticisms in this paper though I will not be able to go through all of the criticism due to its sheer abundance. My aim is to track down an updated conceptualization of the public sphere in the state of the art literature, which shows its persistent relevance and usefulness today, and allows me finally to use it as a tool to analyse a modern-day challenge to both, the public sphere in particular, and democracy at large.

The outstanding volume titled *Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere* combines numerous critiques and improvements of Habermas’ original conception. While it addresses issues such as the exclusion of family and the economy of the public sphere, or the problem of rationality, I want to begin with one of its most serious critiques, that led to a crucial advancement of the theory.

One major criticism has been on Habermas’ focus on the bourgeoisie in Europe and his alleged ignorance of plurality of society. Feminists have accused Habermas of ignoring or downplaying gender and minority issues. Many scholars therefore conclude that in our current pluralistic, welfare state mass democracy, Habermas’ bourgeois, liberal model of the public sphere is no longer feasible. Nancy Fraser is one of the most prominent scholars criticizing the unsatisfactory acknowledgement of gender and minorities in Habermas’ original version of the public sphere. She argues that, while Habermas’

coining of the term might have adequately described the public sphere of the 17th and 18 centuries, it is no longer feasible in the current-day welfare state mass democracy (Fraser, 1992). Some new form of public sphere is required to salvage that arena's critical function and to revitalize democracy. The main problem is that Habermas fails to examine other, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres and ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere. The fact that women were excluded from the public sphere, according to Fraser (1992), is deeply ideological and rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public's claim to be the public. Fraser eloquently points out how masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the public sphere and led to the formal exclusion of women from political life. She goes on to stress how, historically, civil societies all over Europe were anything but accessible to everyone. Sexism was therefore a deeply intertwined characteristic of the public sphere, which highlighted gender forms enjoining feminine domesticity, which in turn later became hegemonic. Fraser finds it ironic that a discourse of publicity which touts accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself constructed as a strategy of distinction; bourgeoisie men, who were anything but the status quo, were coming to see themselves as the universal class of publicity. Status, she reasons, is much more complex than Habermas understood, and just postulating that a deliberative arena should be a place where status distinctions are neutralized, is not sufficient to make it so. Critical historical documentations further show that there were a variety of ways in which women accessed public life and engaged in a multiplicity of public arenas already in the 19th century in a variety of ways. Thus, the claim that women were excluded from public life turns out to be purely ideological; "It rests on a class and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeoisie public's claim to be *the public*" (Fraser, 1992, p. 116), even though bourgeoisie men were never in fact *the public* and there have always been a variety of competing counter-publics.

This criticism shows how the bourgeoisie conception of the public sphere was a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule, rather than being an unrealized utopian ideal (Fraser, 1992). This ideology turns out to have been a mean of political domination, which fostered the shift from a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one. Fraser unveils how the bourgeoisie concept of the public sphere is inadequate in so far as that it does not see social equality as a necessary condition for participatory parity in the public sphere and she points out how societal inequalities infect formally inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them. As a solution to this deeply ideological problem, Fraser postulates that in a stratified society, a plurality of competing public spheres are a better conception to illustrate and promote the ideal of participatory parity than just a single public sphere. She sees an emancipatory potential of the dialectic between different roles of subaltern counterpublics: On the one hand it constitutes a space

of withdrawal and regroupment, on the other hand a training ground for agitational activities targeted at wider public. She goes on to admit that, “although in stratified societies the ideal of participatory parity is not fully realizable, it is more closely approximated by arrangements that permit contestation among a plurality of competing publics than by a single, comprehensive public sphere” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124-125). This allows us to derive a new definition of public spheres which does justice to the multiplicity of public arenas in stratified societies. A public sphere then constitutes “the structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place”. Fraser’s enhancements of Habermas’ original conception undermine one of its biggest flaws; the bourgeois man as the normative ideal of the public sphere, and postulates a multiplicity of public spheres, rather than just one single arena.

Some other critiques towards Habermas’ model of the public sphere are related yet deserve to be briefly mentioned as well. Especially the assumption of rationality in public discourse is an ever-recurring topic for discussion. McCarthy for example postulates that it is impossible to reach consensus when different needs and interests are involved (Hohendahl, 1992, p. 104), again hinting at the neglect of the plurality in any given society, which brings about various needs, values, standpoints, and demands. Practical discourse, McCarthy concludes, is simply not suitable at all as a normative ideal for discourse in the public sphere. While the importance of a public sphere as a site for democratic deliberation can hardly be contested, it is precisely the ostensible inflexibility for the concerns of a modern pluralistic society which make Habermas model susceptible for criticism (Hohendahl, 1992, p.104). It is nevertheless true that without rationality and reason, public debates seem futile as Hohendahl (1992) highlights. Furthermore, an argumentative discourse, is at least normatively indispensable in the context of a democratic public sphere. In other words, Hohendahl (1992) argues that one does not uncritically have to presuppose universal demonstrative norms for a rational debate to be possible and desirable.

Another recurring criticism concerns the very space of the public sphere, which Habermas, for example, thought to exclude the family and the economy. Benhabib (1992) therefore depicts the boundaries of a public sphere as rather fluid, and it thus responds to much criticism regarding the rather harsh yet fuzzy distinction of public and private. Benhabib (1992) redraws these boundaries between the public and the private and pictures them as fluid rather than static. As we will now see, this problem is further amplified by the increasing role of the internet and social media as a site for discussion and a source of information. I will turn to this recent development next and reproduce how the ride of the internet has impacted the concept of the public sphere.

3.2.1 The public sphere and the internet

The internet has unarguably changed the way we live. It is infiltrating every aspect of society, private and public life, as well as politics, economy, and the global world order. The internet has become an important site for both, source for information as well as place for discussion, thus infiltrating the public sphere and moving some of its key elements to the intangible space of the world wide web.

Dahlgren is one well-known scholar who undertakes the task of scrutinizing the impact the internet has on the concept of the public sphere. How exactly is it then that the internet permeates the public sphere? Dahlgren defines the public sphere as “a constellation of common spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates (...) and also the formation of political will” (Dahlgren, 2005, p, 148). The mass media, and, in the recent decades increasingly so, the internet, serve to facilitate communication and provide information and resources, to both citizens and holders of power.

Dahlgren conceptualizes the public sphere as consisting of three dimensions: the structural, the representational, and the interactive. For him the structural dimension constitutes the institutional features of the public sphere, such as media organizations, political economy, legal frameworks etc. The representational dimension generally refers to the output of the media, which raises all the relevant questions of accuracy, fairness, agenda setting etc. In the dimension of interaction, Dahlgren reminds us of one of Habermas’ original claims, namely that a public must be more than just a media audience. Individuals only transform into a “public” when they enter a discursive interactional process. This claim is especially relevant in view of those versions of democratic theory which see deliberation as fundamental, such as Habermas’ deliberative democracy (Dahlgren, 2005). The dimension of interaction again can be divided into two aspects: the first one has to do with citizens’ engagement with the media, how they use, interpret and make sense of the media, while the second aspect is between citizens themselves. These three dimensions offer a handy analytical tool to examine the state of the public sphere and scrutinize the contribution of new communicative technology to it.

The rise of the internet accentuates the sprawling character of the public sphere and offers novel opportunities and challenges of its own. While it is of course nothing new that novel information and communication technologies affect and challenge all areas of life, the political dimension is affected to a considerable, and above all very unique, extent. Dahlgren argues that there remains ambiguity about the enhancing or disruptive impact on democracies (Dahlgren, 2005). He refers to a review on the destabilizing character of political communication in modern Western democracies. Some of the factors which contribute to such destabilization are an increasing sociocultural heterogeneity, the

difficulty to distinguish journalism from non-journalism, a surplus of media outlets and channels, an increasingly strong impact of the market logic within the media landscape, the weakening of traditional borders as well as an increasing disengagement among citizens. Today, threats to democratic politics and the social welfare state also arise in the struggle for capitalist globalization. Citizens can only defend themselves by a new model of solidarity beyond the nation state. Essential to this is an activist public sphere where matters of common interest can be discussed, political issues deliberated, and the force of public opinion brought to bear on the administrative-political system. (Calhoun, 2007, p. 361). Surely the internet can and does constitute such a space for exchange, where groups can form, discuss, exchange ideas, coordinate and organize themselves and so forth, but it nevertheless also constitutes a new mode of estrangement as the Cambridge Analytica case will illustrate. With the rise of the internet and social media, as well as the therewith accompanying transformation of the public sphere, Habermas' work takes on special importance again. How does this relatively new mode of mass communication then influence the concept of the public sphere?

Dahlgren argues that there are obvious positive consequences to the way in which the internet extends and pluralizes the public sphere. The fact that the public sphere is not a single space has already been established, and also Habermas' emphasis on the bourgeoisie has been criticised and developed further. The internet then most obviously contributes by opening up the public realm in terms of accessibility as well as offerings. This pluralization, Dahlgren (2005) argues, not only extends but also disperses the clustered public sphere of the mass media. As I will argue in more detail below, this widespread heterogenization of the public sphere in the digital age, also brings about a fragmentation that is much accentuated from what we know from the "offline" public sphere which was most strongly influenced by the traditional mass media (for example Dahlberg, 2007; Sunstein, 2001; Habermas, 2006). Dahlgren (2005) too acknowledges the trend of subgroups to connect internally online before venturing into the larger public sphere, which can lead to what he calls "cyber ghettos" – social realms which threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, which in the end may lead to foster intolerance and inhibit contact with different-minded people.

Another problem of a public sphere which is largely situated in the internet is the influence of neoliberal and market logics into its very essence. Dahlgren (2005) argues that media industries in general, which are driven to a large extent by market forces, increasingly threaten all normative considerations which should be elementary to this sector. The sheer power of private capital under the prevailing neoliberal order have increasingly constricted and weakened democracy since the hegemony of capitalism in the Western world. Where the internet was long seen as a new, grassroots way around the issue of power and capital in the media, it is now unfortunately too an integrated

element in the dynamics of global capitalism, and market logic coupled with convenient legal frameworks (or the lack of such) and the impetus toward political restriction, “serves to constrain the extent and forms of representation for civic purposes in ways quite familiar from the mass media, diminishing its potential as a properly civic communicative space” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 151). Moreover, issues of political relevance are clearly overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, and social, non-political networking, thus limiting the potential deliberative and democratic potential of the internet.

With the increasing importance of social media websites such as Facebook, which will be the focus of my analysis, a common discussion circulating the public sphere concept is amplified; namely the distinction between the public and the private. Scholars in the field are largely agreeing that social media as political communication tools are accentuating the blurring and liquid boundaries between the two spheres (e.g. Fuchs, 2014). While some argue that the rise of social media is a revitalizing element for the public sphere and has the potential to facilitate political discussion online, those arguments are largely theoretical, and empirical research rather points to the opposite. Qualitative research findings indicate low levels of political discussion online, where a lack of civil discourse has been named as one potential reason for this shortcoming (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2018). In other words, studies suggest that social media as sites for discussions create additional barriers to civil political discourse. This trend of uncivil political discussions is even stronger compared with the level of uncivility in face-to-face interactions. Social media therefore seems not to revitalize public spheres as opposed to many theoretical assumptions (Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2018). Furthermore, it is also wrong to assume that the internet, and social media sites in particular, allow an unlimited access to information, equal access and participation nor is it free of institutional influence (Dahlberg, 2007; Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2018), as we will see clearly in the Cambridge Analytica example. In line with this, Dahlberg (2007) asserts that just like in the offline world, “mainstream’ online discursive terrain is being structured by corporate portal and media sites promoting consumer discourse, with debate largely confined within the boundaries of market-capitalist assumptions with limited opportunities for discursive contestation” (Dahlberg 2007, p. 840). Instead of having a truly revitalizing character and being a space for political deliberation, online users appear as passive and individualized consumers, who focused on individual pleasure maximization instead of political development (Dahlberg, 2007).

3.2.2 The Affective Public Sphere

Corporate social media challenge the concept of traditional media in a number of ways, which I will elaborate on in more detail in a following chapter. What is however important to note here, is that big data is the new currency of the web, overhauling to monetary profit. This in turn generates a number of challenges for the media user which translate to challenges for the public sphere; audiences are being commodified by constant, real-time surveillance, predictive algorithms forecast activity with an alarming accuracy, limited and personalized content is made available to the user and turn their data into a private good, controlled by social media companies, which goes largely unchecked (Fuchs, 2014; Kruse, Norris & Flinchum, 2018).

In a public sphere in which access to information is so heavily influenced by algorithmic, personalized predictions, manipulation and affect play a whole new, and surely amplified role. Zizi Papacharissi is a communication scholar who has researched this field extensively and is one of the most prominent names in this research area. She has a number of publications (e.g. Papacharissi, 2004; 2015) which highlight exactly this connection between affect and ideology, feeling and belief, emotion and reason, which is so relevant to new conceptions of the public sphere in the digital age. Her concept of “affective publics”, which considers the role of affect in politics and the ways in which online media facilitate political formations of affect, is most relevant to the trajectory of the public sphere and this thesis, and I will therefore spend some time now reviewing this concept.

Papacharissi postulates that there is a constant, however often unrealistic, emphasis on rationality in political discourse, which has the consequence that affect and emotions are frequently discounted as irrational and disastrous. This is, Papacharissi goes on, even though they are actually a relevant and important part of decision making and deliberation. In her book *Affective Publics* (2015), she investigates the role of affect in politics and the ways in which online media facilitate political formations of affect. Here she argues, that affect, feeling, and emotion often are the driving force in movements that convey rationally focused expressions of ideological and political beliefs, thereby addressing one of Habermas’ public sphere’s biggest drawbacks: the rationality bias.

Papacharissi scrutinizes the relevance of affect in politics in general, as well as its augmentation on social media. She argues that social media platforms afford important storytelling infrastructure, as they invite participants to tune into events, that people are physically removed from, by allowing them to imagine what these might feel like for people directly experiencing them (Papacharissi, 2015). She does acknowledge that this capability is neither new, nor specific to digital media. Journalism, and the 24/7 television news cycle in particular, amplified this ability to affectively tune into distant events

previously. Nevertheless, novel forms of media follow, amplify, and remediate that tradition of affective storytelling. In line with this, the internet has often been given the role of an entirely novel tool for political revolutions such as the Arab Spring or the Occupy movement (Papacharissi, 2015). Through social media, disorganized publics may be connected, activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, via digital networks, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be. The connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics on a new scale. One of the favourable characteristics of the internet as part of a public sphere is that online media afford visibility to voices which are otherwise marginalized by the societal mainstream. Papacharissi (2015) claims that the internet indeed pluralizes, but does not inherently democratize spheres of social, cultural, political, or economic activity per se. While online media are utilized as resources that help accelerate mobilization, they present a necessary but not a sufficient cause for radical mobilization and it is rather affect which characterizes the networked digital structures of expression and connections. Affect, as she goes on to argue, is the sum of feelings about affairs, public and private, and constitutes the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics. She grounds her arguments in research which suggests that social media facilitate feelings of engagement, most notably, by activating latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics. It is important to note however that, according to Papacharissi, while media may be capable of sustaining and transmitting affect, this will lead to emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, which are not directly measurable or predictable. We can nevertheless conclude that digital media invite affective engagement, through activities that both exploit affective and other labour and promise empowerment.

Papacharissi's most important contribution is highlighting the liaison, rather than the opposition, of emotion and reason. Affect, instead of being a hinderance to political participation, is and always has been an integral part of it. A number of examples from the history of political movements shows how the discredit of the validity of emotion-driven politics has frequently been used to silence minorities and social movements. The women's rights movement for example, has been strongly fuelled by affect and emotions, such as anger, disapproval and resentment, and has led to important and necessary political changes. Papacharissi draws on research in psychology to argue that affect is the link between how we think and how we act, that affect and cognition are inextricably connected, and that it is therefore inherently political.

In arguing all this, Papacharissi ultimately says that the assumption that democracies are rationally based is false. Politics are and always have been messy affairs that are "driven by aspirations of rationality" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 26). Disorder, marginality, and anarchy constitute the habitat for affect as opposed to the mainstream hegemony and hierarchy which are upheld by rationality and

“logic”. This latter approach to politics further expects rational reactions of citizens, whose typical daily responses to political developments are a mix of emotion with fact-informed opinion - not mere logic. Finally, and most importantly, this approach marginalizes emotion as an important element of political expression. Thus, empowerment lies in liminality, in pre-emergence, emergence and change, and often fostered by affect in the first place. In this way, affect may lead to disruptions of power hierarchies and therefore constitutes an important political tool, a tool which is often expressed through social media online.

In terms of the public sphere concept, Papacharissi claims that networked publics, meaning publics that have been connected via digital media, include civic formations that develop beyond the model of the classical public sphere and in this way permit us to consider the novel possibilities for engagement that the affordances of convergent technologies, such as the internet and social media, introduce. Papacharissi also calls these spheres “third places”, which means to describes informal meeting places away from the home and the workplace that are essential to community life, social capital, and civic engagement, and are sustained chiefly by conversation, thus adding a new layer to the concept of public sphere. The potential of the internet as a public sphere however gets compromised by the fact the internet frequently privileges the net savvy, fragments conversation, and occurs in commercially driven spaces.

The line between the private and the public sphere, neatly separated in Habermas’ notion, is blurred here. Various online activities, she goes on to argue, are increasingly supported by such hybrid spaces which blur the public and the private, civic and consumption-based, collective and personal narratives that assemble the story of who we are, and these stories are personal and political. Furthermore, life in and around the media blends the aesthetics of commercial and alternative, public and private, entertainment and politics, work and leisure, individuation and collectivism, and countless other dualisms around which we have organized our everyday routines in the past, including, as she concludes, rationality and affect.

To summarize; while Habermas theories, and with it the conception of the public sphere are clearly not free of flaws, it remains a tool to hold the state accountable to society via publicity (Fraser, 1992), an act that is indispensable and inherent in any democracy as I have argued above. With some refinements that acknowledge recent developments in the medial system, as well as the problem of inclusivity and elitism, the public sphere conception still represents an adequate tool to analyse important parts of democracy-related incidents like the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Modern conceptions of the public sphere highlight various, rather than a single sphere. The lines between public and private, economy and domestic, rationality, and affect are blurred, however not

dispensable. The internet as a site for political discussions has extended the reach of public spheres, although it still constitutes a space that is much more frequently used for consumption and entertainment than for discussion or deliberation.

An important question that for example also Papacharissi poses, is how people can develop mechanisms for resisting systematic ideological exploitation and knowledge management which operate through affective control and manipulation; an issue that becomes all the more accentuated after the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018. I will now move on to review the history of political manipulations via older and newer forms of media and then analyse the impact of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, through the conceptual framework of modern public spheres.

4. A short history of political manipulation

The literature on political manipulation is vast. The stories of both, the history and development of propaganda, as well as new forms of this in the digital age fill whole book shelves. Therefore, I had to be very selective, and was not able to cover all the important work done in the field. For this chapter I have instead selected the work that is relevant for the argument I am building in my thesis. In doing so, I will argue that, while political manipulation has always existed, and various forms spread in well-known formats to the digital sphere, there is nevertheless a fundamentally novel development, that requires new thoughts, debate, policies, and regulations. I hope that this will become clear through the work I have chosen to review in what follows.

Politics and its communication have never been a straightforward and simple endeavour. And what constitutes political manipulation or propaganda is not always clear-cut. The main aim of this thesis is to analyse the forms of political manipulation in the digital age and explore how they impact the public sphere and democratic system in general. In doing this, I of course assume that there is something special and novel about political manipulation today, compared to the forms of political manipulation that have always existed. Therefore, this chapter will be devoted to documenting the development of political manipulation and propaganda. While it is often assumed that the forms of manipulation that are being practiced right now are merely more effective quantitatively, but essentially nothing new, I want to show that there is in fact a qualitative difference in the ways we are being manipulated today, and that this poses novel challenges to democracies in post-industrial Western liberal societies.

It is of course difficult to make claims about the performances and processes of the entirety of media systems in all Western democracies. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, the focus of my thesis, has

however had tangible influences on the 2016 presidential elections in the United States as well as the Brexit referendum in the same year. It thus suggests itself to focus on the USA and the UK especially in this context. I nevertheless want to emphasize the transnational relevance and impact of these developments in the digital world. Not least through technology and digitalization, borders are becoming more and more meaningless. Everyone with an unrestricted internet connection has access to (almost) everything at any time. Social media connects people all over the world (while also doing many other, much more dubious things), lets us be part of other peoples' lives, no matter how far away. Moreover, Western liberal democracies, besides all their differences and variations, share important traits and cultures: The Western democratic system is built upon the principles of representative democracies which are characterised by elections between multiple distinct political parties, a separation of powers into different branches of government, the rule of law in everyday life as part of an open society, a market economy with private property and the equal protection of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties and political freedoms for all people. Because of these very important and concrete similarities I believe it is fair to make some assumptions about the ideal of press freedom and media operations across Western countries, despite the disparity in media systems. Because of my choice of available literature, and the already mentioned special relevance for the USA and the UK of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, I will focus on those countries in particular. I do however want to make claims about Western liberal democracies in general, which currently witness a vital change in the media landscape and the political sphere. The public sphere, the concept I am using to analyse the given changes, is too idealizing an intangible space across boundaries, and I want to continue in this tradition.

4.1 Propaganda: A historical excursion

Historically, the term *propaganda* implied a more neutral meaning than today. The term originally derives from the Latin term *propagare* and simply means to reproduce or to spread. It gained currency in the 17th Century where the Roman Catholic church utilized the term to describe their missionary activities. The term was then advanced to also describe the advancement of secular causes in the English language and finally took on its political, and with it a more negative, meaning in the mid-19th century (Diggs-Brown, 2011). World War I and II notably added to the negative connotation of the word and more benevolent, apolitical, forms of communications are today replaced with less morally frightening terms such as “public relations”, “strategic communications”, and “marketing” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). The state-of-the-art definition of propaganda adopted by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937 reflects the common, modern-day understanding of the word:

“Propaganda is the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations.” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 26). Today, the term shifted to become a critical framework from which to criticize modern liberal market societies, most famously in Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* which I will discuss in more detail below.

A definition I find even more useful is the one from Benkler, Faris & Roberts’ (2018) which they developed in their notable book *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* which I will review in more detail later. In their words, propaganda is “communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with political goals of the propagandist” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 29). This is very helpful as it limits the term to intentional communications which are targeted at a population with a political aim, as well as making a reference to affect, which I believe, and will later on argue, plays an important role in political communication in the digital age. There is clearly a tension between this understanding of propaganda and a deliberative or participatory view of democracy (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018), as for example theorized by Habermas. While this concern was already explicitly present in Lippmann’s essential 1922 *Public Opinion*, the concern intensifies today’s political sphere, which is precisely the topic of this work. For this thesis, I also want to add a definition for manipulation, an important element of propaganda, which the authors of *Network Propaganda* define as “directly influencing someone’s beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in ways that fall short of what an empathetic observer would deem normatively appropriate in context” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 30). Manipulation adds to propaganda, the “need to explain why the communication falls short of a normative ideal for how beliefs, attitudes, or preferences ought to be shaped. Outright false or materially misleading communications are relatively easy to categorize as normatively inappropriate, but emotionally evocative language presents harder questions” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 31). They continue that “manipulation is a necessary part of justifying the normatively negative connotation of “propaganda” and that connotation must have a well- defined normative foundation other than “I don’t agree with what they said.” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 32). In this paper, I use the terms rather interchangeably, as my topic is precisely the political aspect of manipulation, and is therefore, in my view equitable with propaganda.

I will now turn to the work on propaganda and political manipulation I have selected to illustrate the development of this field. I have constructed this chapter chronologically, where I start in the 1980s

(with case studies from as early as the Roman Empire) and end with the most recent work in the field, which emphasizes the novel character of political manipulation in the digital age.

4.2 Riker: The art of political manipulation

In his book *The art of political manipulation* (1986) William Riker gives a historical overview over exactly that – political manipulation. He compiled twelve stories spanning the ancient Roman Senate of Pliny the Younger to Lincoln and finally to the then contemporary U.S. Senate of Warren Magnuson which is rich with historical detail and tellingly shows the art of exploiting agendas and rules. The book offers a vivid picture of how leaders in democratic societies over time forged agreements when no underlying consensus existed (Fowler, 1987). Riker applies social choice theory and his concept of herestethic; which denotes a strategic way to structure the world in a way that you compel your audience, without necessarily being persuaded by good arguments (Riker, 1986). Riker, a notable social-choice scholar, applies this tradition to show how individual members of a group are consolidated into a decision for the group as a whole. Riker draws this social-choice tradition (and the Arrow's theorem in particular), to explain that, as long as choice depends in part on the way it was chosen, then politicians can reasonably be expected to change the outcome if they can change the way that questions are posed. The reasons why agendas are manipulated he continues, is because agendas, and indeed institutions are manipulatable, and no institution or agenda can it be guaranteed to be independent of the method by which it was chosen. It is therefore natural, that strategic manipulation plays a fundamental part in politics where politicians want to persuade a large group of people. In this book, Riker gives examples of how in democracies, outcomes are not always the “will of the people” but rather mostly an unanticipated combination of wills of participants and of the way relevant politicians have set the “machine of aggregation” to implement their own wills. What does this book tell us with regard to political manipulation? It points out that appeals to unconscious processes regarding political opinion formation have indeed always existed, and that flaws (or manipulation) are often inherent in the method we choose to arrive at a conclusion.

What the work on political manipulation and propaganda thus far had in common was the general agreement about the difficulty of an objective mass opinion formation, the susceptibility of the unconscious and the difficulty of governing the novel masses of post-industrial societies without creating some form of consent. What changed with the following work in the field of media studies, is its focus on the critical tradition when scrutinizing the (US) media landscape and the consideration of the impact of market dynamics in favour of the elite. This form of critique of the mass media became

quite prominent in the aftermath of this book in the 1980s to the early 2000s, and it thus constitutes an important cornerstone in the history of political manipulation.

4.3 Herman and Chomsky: Manufacturing Consent

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* from 1988, Herman and Chomsky develop a propaganda model which is applied to the performance of the mass media in the USA. The two authors challenge the democratic postulate that the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they are presumably not merely reflections of power. The media commonly claims to be objective and independent but the authors argue that if the powerful are in the position to fix the premises of the discourse, and manage public opinion by propaganda, the “standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, preface). Herman and Chomsky define propaganda as the “manufacture of consent” and borrow the term from the American journalist and media critic Walter Lippman. Propaganda, they argue, is a “regular organ of popular government” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, preface).

Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model focuses on the inequality of wealth and power and its profound, multi-level effects on the mass-media’s interests and choices. In doing so, they developed a model that works through five filters, through which the raw material of news content must pass, leaving the cleansed product ready to be published, and ultimately ensures the hegemony of elite interests. This propaganda model suggests that the media is not, as commonly believed, providing the public with unbiased and objective information and facts, but instead are both, dominated by and upholding the dominant economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups. They showed that the media do this in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing issues, filtering information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debates within the boundaries of acceptable premises. In their book they give empirical support through content analysis of several cases as well as paired comparison, which demonstrate the subordination of the media to the requirements of the state propaganda system. It is important to note that Herman and Chomsky do not claim that the US media function in the manner of a propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit and even encourage spirited debate and criticism and dissent as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presupposition and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system that is so powerful that it is internalized perhaps even without awareness. What they do show however, is that it is very difficult for news to find their way into the mass media if they fail to conform to the framework of established dogma. In many cases media professionals do similar things because they

see the world through the same lenses, are subject to similar constraints and incentives, and thus feature stories or maintain silence together in collective action and leader-follower behaviour.

I will now describe each of the five filters briefly below to provide some context, before moving on to some of the model's most serious criticism and discussion. The first filter is related to concentration of media ownership and the limitation on ownership of media with any substantial outreach by the requisite large size of investment was applicable a century or more ago and it has come increasingly effective over time. By the time of the first publication of the book in 1986, there were around 2500 media entities in the US, but the 29 largest ones accounted for about half the output of newspapers. Today, this trend has intensified dramatically and in 2012 90% of the media output in the US was controlled by only six companies (Lutz, 2012). The consequence of such intense concentration of power, according to Herman and Chomsky, is something like a private ministry of information and culture which can set the national agenda. Herman and Chomsky show that most media entities are owned and controlled by a small number of wealthy individuals, which are integrated into the stock and bank market and are therefore profit-seeking corporations. While this fact does not immediately convey control, it surely allows investors can make themselves heard. Similarly, the second filter refers to the reliance of advertisement as the primary source of income which tend to drive out of existence or marginalize media companies and types that depend on revenue from sales alone. This advertising system does not yield a neutral system in which buyers choices decide, but instead a system in which advertisers choices influence media prosperity and survival. Advertisers will seek out profitable targets only, which in turn sharply impoverishes the plurality of the media landscape, and the authors emphasize how especially working-class and radical newspapers are at a disadvantage. The third filter concerns the issue of sourcing. Here the authors address the symbiotic relationship of journalists with powerful sources of information. By economic necessity and reciprocity of interests, it makes sense that resources are concentrated where news happen. This leads to a moral division of labour in which officials have and give the facts and reporters merely get them. According to the authors, this leads to powerful sources regularly taking advantage of these media routines and which allows them to "manage" or to manipulate the media into following a special agenda or framework. The fourth and fifth filter – flak and anticommunism – describe a system in which negative feedback by government officials, in form of letters before congress or other modes of compliant, threat or punishment, impact media profitability. The ability to produce such flak is of course again related to power which in turn enables elites to act on the basis of their own principles which are, with rare exceptions, culturally and politically conservative. This strong bias towards a conservative or right-winged media culture in the US is also the main finding of Benkler, Faris, and Roberts' *Network Propaganda* and it thus seems that Chomsky and Herman's analysis was not only correct but has since also intensified.

Herman and Chomsky's model has been harshly criticized, one of the most common being the dismissal of the model as a conspiracy theory. Herman and Chomsky have addressed this criticism directly in newer editions of the book and emphasize that they are not depicting an active conspiracy on the part of journalists or the media, but instead point out problems that are inherent in the US market system of the media. A variety of scholars have also noted that Chomsky's work is often being dismissed systematically, which is likely driven by an ideological frame of reference (Comeforo, 2010). Many scholars have in fact agreed with the model and have pointed out how it successfully shows, not the flaws of individual journalists, but how journalists in the US are bounded by a profit-driven system (see Comeforo, 2010). While some criticism and inconsistencies of course remain, the model has been shown to be applicable in a wide range of cases and context, even outside of the US (Comeforo, 2010). Comeforo argues that, "to ignore the model and the levers of power it lays bare is to allow the status quo of the 'system' to remain unchallenged, and therefore flies in the face of critical theory." Critical theory, he continues, "does not claim objectivity, but rather moves from a strong, stated ideological perspective and commits to it" (Comeforo, 2010, p. 227). The authors provide empirical evidence for their claims via a careful and systematic content analysis. Coupled with their critical social theory approach their book offers an insightful look into the hegemony and structural bias of the US media system, which has built the myth of a democratic and objective media. Other notable contributions in this vein include Ben Bagdikian's *Media Monopoly*, Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Robert McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, and Ed Baker's *Media, Markets, and Democracy* (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

To summarize, Herman and Chomsky's model shows us that propaganda is deeply ideological and hegemonic. By an elite domination of the media system, the illusion of a democratic and objective media has been created which Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model was able to dismantle within the tradition of critical theory. While many news professionals operate in complete integrity and goodwill, and believe to be working objectively, this is only true within the limits of the filter constraints which are extremely powerful and built into the system in such a fundamental way that alternative bases of news are hardly imaginable. Herman and Chomsky do acknowledge that the media is free, but only within the very principles that serve the societal purpose. More or less subtle forms of propaganda have therefore always been present and have, historically, always been closely attuned to elite interests. Consequently, we can retain that news and the media were never free from propaganda and systematic errors. Yet, it was a very different kind of manipulation as I will argue in what follows. With the emergence of the internet, and the shift of our information and media sources online, we have entered an utterly new and substantially different era of media manipulation, which is not only more effective quantitatively, but indeed of a qualitatively different nature.

While the propaganda models that Herman and Chomsky, as well as Riker described did not allow for a critical and fair representation of reality via the media, it nevertheless communicated a more or less unified propagandistic picture. With the pluralising nature of the internet, and the accompanying fragmentation of the public(s), political manipulation in the digital age divides societies in a not-before seen dimension as I will argue below.

4.4 Political manipulation in the digital age

In this section I want to review novel forms of political manipulation. In doing so, I will argue that there is a qualitative difference in the way that people were manipulated previously and now, in the digital age. My claim is that these changes are illustratively evidenced by the case of Cambridge Analytica. This new phenomenon deserves special attention in order to adequately face the challenges that threaten democracy, and the political system as we know it. Only if we acknowledge a problem we can respond appropriately; and to say that today's political manipulation is just reaching larger quantities of people is greatly underestimating both the potential as well as the danger to democratic ideals of propaganda online. In this section I will review novel forms of propaganda, such as computational and network propaganda, before moving on to the problem of social media monopolies and filter bubbles.

Numerous studies indicate, that more and more people are finding and consuming news on social media platforms, primarily Facebook, as opposed to more traditional media forms such as radio, print, and television (Pew Research Centre, 2018; Reuters, 2019). In 2018 the number of adults who got their news on social media was as high as 68%, of which 43% were corresponding to news via Facebook alone (Pew Research Centre, 2018). What is so interesting about this development is that mainly because of the social network's inherent algorithms, an ever-growing number of news consumers now find and follow sources of news that solely are limited to what they "like" on their personalized Facebook feeds (Pew Research Centre, 2016). But also, the far-reaching fake news debate has had an effect on social media users; according to the 2018 Pew study on social media usage, 57% of all social media users expect that news on social media are inaccurate. Notwithstanding, numerous studies indicate that people are quite bad at actually distinguishing real from fake news, and most think that they themselves are not susceptible to the deceiving character of fake news (see for example Jang & Kim, 2018).

The extreme concentration of power, especially with regards to the media system, has already been adequately criticized by Herman and Chomsky in the 80s, and I have provided some statistics that

show an intensifying tendency in this arena today. What is however even more worrisome, is the uncontested monopoly status of just a handful of companies in the tech industry. Facebook is the unchallenged monopoly in the social media world, and Google, YouTube, and Amazon are further examples of the immense concentration of power online. Today around 90% of internet searches are via Google, some statistics state that up to 94% of young people have a Facebook profile, and only 1% of smartphones use an operating system that is not developed by Google and Apple (Cable, 2018). This concentration of power poses many problems: sloppy, yet uncontested privacy practices, slow responses to violent rhetoric and fake news, a huge danger for abuses of power just to name a few. Facebook, often emphasizes its status as merely a social media platform, thus eluding from many responsibilities. Practically, Facebook is however both, a platform and a publisher and in this it is inevitably making decisions about values (Hughes, 2019). Even Facebook's co-founder, Chris Hughes acknowledges that "the most problematic aspect of Facebook's power is [Zuckerberg's] unilateral control over speech. There is no precedent for his ability to monitor, organize and even censor the conversations of two billion people" (Hughes, 2019). Zuckerberg, owning three core communication platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp), indeed has an unprecedented power. Further, because it dominates social networking, Facebook faces no market-based accountability (Hughes, 2019). Even when people want to quit Facebook, they don't have any meaningful alternative. This concentration of power is not the exact focus of this thesis, but it does intensify the urgency of the topic: with a huge influence on the market, users/consumers and now also politics, and no meaningful alternatives, Mark Zuckerberg, and his media platforms, are indisputably having an influence over billions of people in the world that is unprecedented.

Not only unrestricted power, but also media manipulation continues to play a pivotal role in the digital age of news consumption: Trump's infamous attacks on traditional media outlets and a continuous decrease in trust in the media (Reuters, 2019), raise new questions and challenges about how to fulfil the news media basic mission in a balanced and fair way in the digital age.

"Media manipulation" however, has a double meaning today. While it is certainly possible to have a biased media outlet which manipulates news and intentionally or unintentionally misleads the public, there is also a second, a rather reversed form of media manipulation. According to Fitzpatrick (2018), in this era of social media, it is certainly possible that the media itself can be manipulated and misled by individuals and organizations.

Increasingly, there are examples for this: false information, retouched photographs, or edited videos are being released on social media and are then picked up by traditional media outlets and disseminated even further. In many cases, this happens because information goes "viral" in a very short period and traditional media are picking up this trend. According to Fitzpatrick, the competitive

nature of journalism plays a role in this, in a way that it can lead to reporters and/or their supervisors to feeling pressured to report something as news as soon as possible without first verifying its authenticity. One of the major challenges is that the sophistication of social media platforms and their users means the speed at which information is disseminated has increased dramatically and continues to accelerate (Fitzpatrick, 2018).

These and other developments, such as big data, bots, fake news, algorithms and filter bubbles, create challenges that are new for media professionals and consumers. In the following sections I will illustrate and explain some of these new challenges in some more depth. I will focus on network propaganda, as well as computational propaganda, and also discuss the novel phenomenon of filter bubbles. There are still many sociologically relevant questions about the specific mechanisms of influence, which are complex and difficult to answer: How do forms of civic engagement affect political outcomes? To what extent do online echo chambers and selective exposure to information promote political extremism? And to what extent does manipulation online translate to a change in voting intentions or attitudes? While we cannot answer all of these questions in detail yet, I now want to give an overview over what we do already know about political manipulation in the digital age.

4.4.1 Computational politics: Before Trump and Cambridge Analytica

The Cambridge Analytica scandal was surely a wake-up call for many, and showed just how far algorithms, big data, and online propaganda have already entered our political sphere. There were nevertheless people who worried about the influence of the internet on politics much earlier on. Zeynep Tufekci is one such scholars who engaged with the implications of digital technologies on politics early on. In her 2014 paper she analysed the dynamics that gave rise to what she calls computational politics on the basis of Obama's campaign, which was to date quite sophisticated, though it has been outmoded by Trump's campaign by many factors. Before going more into detail about the practical side of this, I want to present her account on the social implications of this development, before its impact became blatantly obvious. Tufekci (2014) described new technologies to be able to carry out "highly effective, opaque and unaccountable campaigns of persuasion and social engineering in political, civic and commercial spheres" (Tufekci, 2014, p. 1). Big data, Tufekci argues, needs to be examined as a political process which involves questions of power, transparency and surveillance. She presents six intertwined dynamics that give rise to computational politics: the rise of big data, the shift away from demographics to individualized targeting, the opacity and power of computational modelling, the use of persuasive behavioural science, digital media enabling

dynamic real-time experimentation, and the growth of new power brokers who own the data or social media environments. She describes computational politics as a set of political practices which depends on, but is not solely defined by, the existence of big data and accompanying analytic tools and is defined by the significant *information asymmetry*. By this she means that, while the campaigners know a lot about the targeted individual voters, the voters themselves do not know what campaigners know about them.

Tufekci argues that computational politics introduces significant qualitative differences to the long march of historical trends I have sketched out above. Unlike previous data collection efforts which required complicated and time-consuming techniques, and allowed only for broad profiling in the aggregate, new data technologies provide significantly more individualized profiling and modelling, much greater data depth, and can be collected in an invisible, latent manner and delivered individually.

Following her analysis, Tufekci concludes that big data driven computational politics engenders many potential consequences for politics in the digital era. An interesting point she makes, something I will pick up later on in my analysis, is that this form of big data enabled computational politics is a private one, and is at its core opposed to the very idea of a civic space as a public, shared commons; an idea that is closely related to Habermas' ideal democracy. With the pluralising nature of the internet, and the accompanying fragmentation of the public(s) Tufekci concludes, political manipulation in the digital age divides societies in a not-before seen dimension, a claim that is backed up by what will follow.

I will now continue with a closer, and more practical look at computational propaganda and its effects on the networked public as one could call it.

4.4.2 Computational Propaganda

With new forms of media emerging, there are also new forms of propaganda popping up all over the media landscape. In an ever-changing political environment, digital technologies provide the platform for a great deal of contemporary civic engagement as well as political action, which brings about new opportunities but also new challenges. As I have already mentioned above, various studies have shown that social media play an important role in the circulation of news, ideas, and conversations about politics and public policy. This also makes these platforms prone to be vehicles for manipulative disinformation campaigns.

Computational propaganda is one new term to describe political manipulation in the digital age. More precisely, computational propaganda describes the phenomenon of digital misinformation and manipulation. It interprets this phenomenon in light of the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation which are applied to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks. As part of this process, coders develop and use automated software products (such as bots - automated software built to mimic real users), which will learn from and imitate legitimate social media users in order to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms and device networks. In other words, political campaigns, governments, and regular citizens around the world are employing combinations of people and bots in an attempt to artificially shape public life (Woolley & Howard, 2018). This is especially relevant for the political public sphere. I will get back to this in more detail later on, do however find it important to point out that the intention of applying these bots on social media is explicitly to artificially shape the perception of a widely shared public opinion and the general atmosphere in a given context.

In order to lay out the new opportunities as well as challenges of computational propaganda, I will mainly draw on the book *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media* (2019), edited by Sam Woolley and Phil Howard from the Oxford Internet Institute which. This insightful book is a collection of country-specific case studies and features a comprehensive introduction to this new field of research.

Computational propaganda is a new form of manipulation online, which typically involves one or more of the following ingredients: bots that automate content delivery, fake social media accounts, often managed by bots, as well as junk news (misinformation about politics and public life). Bots are software applications that behave like real people online, mainly by generating and responding to messages. They are usually deployed all over social media sites in order to amplify or suppress particular political messages. In combination with human troll armies (real internet users who quarrel in the net with the intention to provoke other users) they can be managed to manufacture consensus or otherwise give the illusion of general support for a, maybe controversial, political idea or policy with the goal of creating a bandwagon effect. Social bots are programmed to pass as genuine social media users and can rapidly deploy messages, interact with other people's content, and affect or manipulate trending algorithms. For these reasons, bots are effective tools for driving online propaganda and hate crimes and artificially shape and distort public life. Studies have found that bots generate about half of all web traffic and recent estimates suggest that over one third of Twitter's users are in fact bots (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Furthermore, conservative estimates suggest that around 83 million Facebook-accounts are fake, which corresponds to the entire population of Germany. The immense scale of this has been unprecedented. Automation and anonymity and the

immense potential for a far-reaching scope lie at the heart of these forms of manipulation and distinguish it from previous forms. Numerous studies on computational propaganda in various countries and contexts provide evidence for the fact that many social media platforms, especially in the political context, are to a significant extent controlled by governments and organized disinformation campaigns. Half of Russia's twitter activity, for example, is managed by highly automated accounts and a majority of political tweeting in Poland is produced by just a handful of alt-right accounts. The World Economic Forum has therefore rightly identified the rapid spread of misinformation online as one the top 10 threats to society (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

One of the most damaging forms of computational propaganda is the spreading of false news reports, which is again mostly achieved by bots on social media platforms. Because of social media's business models and the interrelated nature of the algorithms, they favour sensationalist content, thus accelerating the problem (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p.9). Newer forms of bots can even gather information on other users in order to push a particular and personalized argument or agenda. This technique infiltrates social media platforms with a high degree of success and thus diminishes the democratic potential of the internet. Social media bots further manufacture consensus by artificially amplifying traffic around a political candidate or issue. Armies of bots make a candidate look more legitimate and more widely supported than he or she actually is. This can evoke political support where this might not have previously happened by giving the illusion of widespread support. This can then lead to actual support through a bandwagon effect. Trump for example, received far more media attention than any other candidate in the 2016 presidential elections (his free media attention was worth 5 billion dollars to be exact); as Woolley & Howard (2018) put it: "The press may not be successful in telling its readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 190). It is commonly agreed that Trump's victory is largely due to his successful digital campaign, his unfiltered use of twitter, as well as some more dubious, especially digital, campaign strategies which I will discuss in more detail later on. Many government officials and campaigners actually do not deny the use of computational propaganda such as bots, but they often say it is unlikely to have influenced elections because "likes do not equal votes" (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 195). An in-depth study of the 2016 presidential elections however shows that bots reached positions of measurable influence in the elections, and that bots were more actively involved in influencing the uptake of Trump-related hashtags than Clinton-related hashtags (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Leading researchers in the field come to the conclusion that bots are a growing threat to (American) democracy, especially given that more than 60% of Americans now rely on social media for political discussions and news content (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 195). If it can be shown that bots do

influence political discussion online, which is already starting to happen, then it becomes tenuous to view social media websites as neutral spheres for the democratic marketplace of ideas (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Those new tools also bring about complex socio-technical issues and create a new field of the influence of technology on politics. This entails new tasks for politicians, policy makers, citizens and academics. If academic research on these novel forms of propaganda do not engage with the systems of power and knowledge that produce it (the human actors and motivations behind it), “then the very possibility of improving the role of social media platforms in public life evaporates” (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 5). Engagement and the recognition of these new socio-technical challenges is therefore of utmost importance, and I hope that this thesis can contribute to this endeavour.

As already mentioned, automation, scalability, and anonymity are the hallmarks of computational propaganda. The advantage is that this new form of propaganda enables the rapid distribution of large amounts of content, often personalized in nature. It is precisely this personalization that makes computational propaganda fundamentally different to previous means of propaganda, as I will argue below with regards to filter bubbles and echo chambers. While propaganda surely has existed previously, as I have briefly sketched out above, this has always been a shared experience for citizens. While the tactic of distributing false news and hate against opponents is not a new tactic at all, the difference to today’s propaganda is the immense personalization and fragmentation that it brings about.

Another problem that Woolley and Howard (2018) also acknowledge on several occasions in their book, is the underlying market problem of the social media landscape that I have acknowledged before as well; a small circle of giant tech companies controls and directs the flow of information through profit-driven algorithms, diminishing regulatory and public concerns just as much as competition. While social media are significant platforms for political engagement, crucial channels for disseminating news content and the primary media over which young people develop their political identities, they are at the same time vessels for control. This is especially problematic because companies like Facebook have effectively become monopoly platforms for public life – monopolies that go largely unchecked and uncontrolled, yet, have such a huge impact on shaping the political public sphere. This raises the question of responsibility of the platform owners, which will come up at several points in this thesis: While social media platforms typically do not see themselves as media platforms, thus not having to obey to the same checks and standards as professional journalistic institutions do, they do control information flow and could therefore be classified as media companies instead of neutral platforms. By using trending features, algorithmic curation and personalized news

feeds, these companies arbitrate truth (Woolley & Howard, 2018), a role that should be checked more responsibly, transparently, and democratically.

4.4.3 Network Propaganda

In *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Benkler, Faris and Roberts study the transformation of the American public sphere in light of the United States political media landscape. They sketch a detailed map of this landscape based on the analysis of millions of stories and social media posts, revealing a highly polarized and asymmetric media ecosystem. In doing so, the authors argue that the current epistemic crisis in political communication in the USA is not the result of, as often believed, novel technologies, social media or Russian influence, but is instead due to structural weaknesses in media institutions.

In the first part of the book the authors document how the right-wing media ecosystem in the USA differs systematically from the rest of the media environment and show on the basis of millions (!) of data pieces how much more susceptible it has been to disinformation, lies, and half-truths. They argue that something fundamentally different is happening in right-wing media than in centrist, centre-left, and left-wing media. The main difference, the authors found, is, that that the media ecosystem with centre, centre-left, and left-wing sites are almost always committed to journalistic truth-seeking norms, while the right-winged media sites are not. Those norm-constraining mechanisms of high-quality journalism then serve as a consistent check on dissemination and validation of the stories, also more extreme ones, when they do emerge on the left, and quickly identify fake-news and untruths, while this watchdog is not present on the right (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

The authors go on to make the argument throughout the book that the behaviour of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the entire American media system. While an analysis of left versus right-winged changes in the public sphere is not explicitly my research aim, I nevertheless find it important to acknowledge this research finding as it is still inextinguishably interrelated with the changes in the public sphere that I will analyse in this thesis. Cambridge Analytica has most obviously had an effect on both, Trump's victory as president of the United States, as well as the *Vote Leave* campaign during the Brexit referendum.

What is of bigger interest to me for this thesis, is the authors' analysis of *network propaganda*, a term they use to describe "the ways in which the architecture of a media ecosystem makes it more or less susceptible to disseminating manipulations and lies (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 24), "in particular with regards to the role of network architecture and information flow dynamics in

supporting and accelerating propagation, as opposed to resisting or correcting the propagandist efforts as they begin to propagate” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 33).

The authors postulate that new technological processes allow for the convergence of social media, algorithmic news curation, bots, artificial intelligence, and big data analysis which create novel challenges to consumers and policy makers such as the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforced our biases, are removing indicia of trustworthiness, overwhelming our capacity to make sense of the world, and with it our capacity to govern ourselves as reasonable democratic citizens (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 4).

The authors however argue that the current crisis of the US media system is more institutional than technological and is driven by asymmetric political polarization rather than by commercial advertising systems. Their major research findings suggest that the present epistemic crisis has an inescapably partisan shape and that each of the “usual suspects” of threats to democracies, such as Russian hackers, bots, market driven algorithms and so forth, acts through and depends on the asymmetric partisan ecosystem that has developed over the past four decades. Their analysis of the graveness of our current epistemic crisis brought about by social media and new technologies is therefore rather comforting than alarming, the authors nevertheless acknowledge several factors which are significant for the information disorder, post-truth era of American political communication.

One such factor through which network propaganda operates is by so called clickbait, which are media items, often headlines and titles, which are designed to trigger an affective response from a user that leads them to click on the item, as opposed to a merely informative or fair description of the content, because the click itself generates revenue on social media, based on their business model. While the appeal to affect versus reason, especially in political decision making is not new, as I have already discussed in this thesis, it is surely intensified in the fast-paced age of a digital society.

Another factor in network propaganda that has the potential to disrupt political communication is Facebook’s news feed which, lures us into echo chambers and filter bubble, as I will discuss in some more detail below. This concern more generally reflects the problem of algorithmic governance, or “the replacement of human, legible, and accountable judgments with “black box” algorithms” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018, p. 10).

Within the age of network propaganda, we have also entered the age of “behavioural marketing” which is nothing else than microtargeted advertising. The exact system that the Cambridge Analytica researchers used to target voters, both in the US and Great Britain. While this form of advertising has been used in marketing for a while, the Cambridge Analytica exemplifies what these practices can do to democratic elections, and normative considerations are acutely different in this context (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

Without going too deep into the analysis of what happened during the Cambridge Analytica machinations yet, what happened in this novel form of political manipulation carried out via social media, is that Facebook allowed campaigns to directly target voters by drawing on multiple sources of data that linked together Facebook accounts with email addresses, postal addresses, phone numbers and over thousand data points on specific American voters. Facebook then also provided the interface that allowed campaigns to target specific voters, their geographic regions, or demographics or to send ads to hyperspecific segments of the population based on this personal data. This capability was coupled with tools which were originally designed for commercial applications and helped to quickly evaluate how well different alternatives of the same message elicit engagement in the target audience. This form of testing supported broad-scale experimentation, removed much of the guesswork from advertising of previous political campaigns and allowed campaigners to know exactly which advertisement worked on who and when (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018).

While previous propaganda was often a guess work and a story that was sold to more or less to the whole population, propaganda today is targeted specifically at desired segments of a populations, and new testing techniques quickly tell the campaigners how well certain forms of advertisements work and can be adjusted accordingly. This not only promotes certain candidates and bashes others as it has always happened, but it directly and significantly undermines citizens sovereignty, and misuses their data, without consent, in opacity, and lacking the necessary and appropriate legislation to control this. This matter becomes especially relevant coupled with the statistics to fortify the amplification of this trend; digital advertising spending are increasing every year, with the highest spending being on Facebook and necessary legislation to avoid a spill-over effect from marketing to politics is still not in place. Even after scandals such as Cambridge Analytica and numerous privacy policy outrages (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

4.4.4 Filter Bubbles

Eli Pariser, an internet activist and author, coined the now famous term “filter bubbles” in his 2011 book of the same title which describes a state of intellectual isolation that occurs because website’s algorithms selectively show us content based on previous information. In this book he argues that the digital world is fundamentally changing. Personalization through algorithms, he postulates, are driving us into a state of intellectual isolation, a point I want to take up for the last part of this chapter.

Mainly focussing on the opaque algorithms of Google, Facebook and the like, Pariser argues in his book that there is no common standard anymore. When two people search identical terms on Google, they end up getting entirely different results, based on around 57 factors such as previous searches,

location, device type and so on. Google's announcement in 2009 to introduce personalized searches for everyone, marked, according to Pariser, the turning point of an important yet nearly invisible revolution in the ways we consume information. And this personalization is shaping how information flows far beyond Facebook and is quickly moves us to a world "where the internet is showing us what it thinks we want to see, but not necessarily what we need to see" (Pariser, TED Talk, 2011). What happens in "filter bubbles" is that algorithms create a unique universe of information for each of us, based on precise data on how, when, where, for how long, and what we consume in the internet, which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information. Because of social media's business model, they provide us a free service, and we pay with our information. This information is used for targeted, highly relevant advertising. This mechanism then, creates everyone's own personal universe of information that we live in online. This universe is built upon factors I have already reviewed above, clickbait, sensationalism, right-winged biases and so on. And not only is our access to news online biased and very limited, in a personalized world, important but complex or unpleasant issues are also less likely to come to our attention at all (Pariser, 2011). The focus on the technical, algorithmic personalization online is incidentally how filter bubbles differ from echo-chambers, which are typically used to describe the social phenomenon of being surrounded by like-minded people with similar opinions.

The dynamics this creates brings up three problems that we have never encountered before according to Pariser (2011), whose analysis I share: Firstly, we are alone in the filter bubbles. While there are certainly TV or radio channels as well as newspapers that caters to a narrow interest, they nevertheless have always had other viewers with whom you share a frame of reference. What is changing now with highly targeted advertising based on intransparent algorithms is that you are the only person in your bubble, nobody sees the exact same thing in the same combination that you see online. In an age when shared information is the bedrock of shared experience, Pariser argues, the filter bubble is like a centrifugal force which is pulling us apart. The second problem is that the filter bubble is invisible. Most viewers of conservative or liberal news sources know that they are engaging with a news outlet that is curated to serve a particular political viewpoint. But Google's and Facebook's agendas are opaque. Google does not share with you their assessment of who it thinks you are or why it is showing you the results that you are seeing. It is almost impossible to check or challenge whether or not these assumptions about you are right or wrong, and most people might not even be aware that there are assumptions being made about them in the first place. Finally, we do not choose to enter the bubble. When you turn on for example Fox News or read *The New York Times*, you are making a conscious decision about what kind of filter to use to make sense of the world. This is an active process and you can guess how the editors' leaning shapes your perception. We however do not get to make the same

kind of choice with personalized filters. They come to us and are impossible to avoid if you want to use the internet because of their profit driven business models.

While people have surely never been perfectly rational and fair citizens when it comes to opposing views and counterintuitive information, the point is that we had a choice, a choice that is now made by a handful of profit-driven companies in Silicon Valley in the USA. A functioning democracy requires citizens to see things from one another's point of view, but filter bubbles and echo chambers are making this increasingly unlikely (Pariser, 2011). The costs of this, Pariser (2011) concludes, are both personal and cultural. There are direct consequences for all of us, with our horizon being increasingly dictated by personalized filters. To be the author of our own lives, we have to be aware of the variety of options and lifestyles that we have; when we live in a filter bubble however, companies construct which options we become aware of. Furthermore, there are also societal consequences, which emerge when masses of people begin to live a filter-bubbled life. And these consequences are what I want to address in the following chapters.

There are many things that continue from the analogue times of propaganda to the digital age: the monopolization of media outlets, the concentration of power, the promotion of favoured ideas, the bashing of political opponents and even the dissemination of lies, untruths or, as we call it nowadays, fake news. Many of these factors intensify in the digital age but some also open up fundamentally different problems for democracy. I have outlined above how algorithms create filter bubbles and echo chambers and allow for hyper-personalized (political) advertisement. I have explained how political advertisement is no longer a guessing game, but is instead targeted at a specific segment of the population, whose success can be constantly monitored and adjusted. The possibility of a shared (medial) experience is hindered or even nullified. Bots and troll armies can fundamentally change the perception of public opinion, and an increased monopolization has created a newer-before seen centralization of power. These developments enable a number of fragmented spheres in which fake news can flourish, extreme-right winged news gain popularity, and a division of society is the consequence. People – citizens – are degraded to users and consumers.

5. Analysis

5.1 Cambridge Analytica – Mapping the case

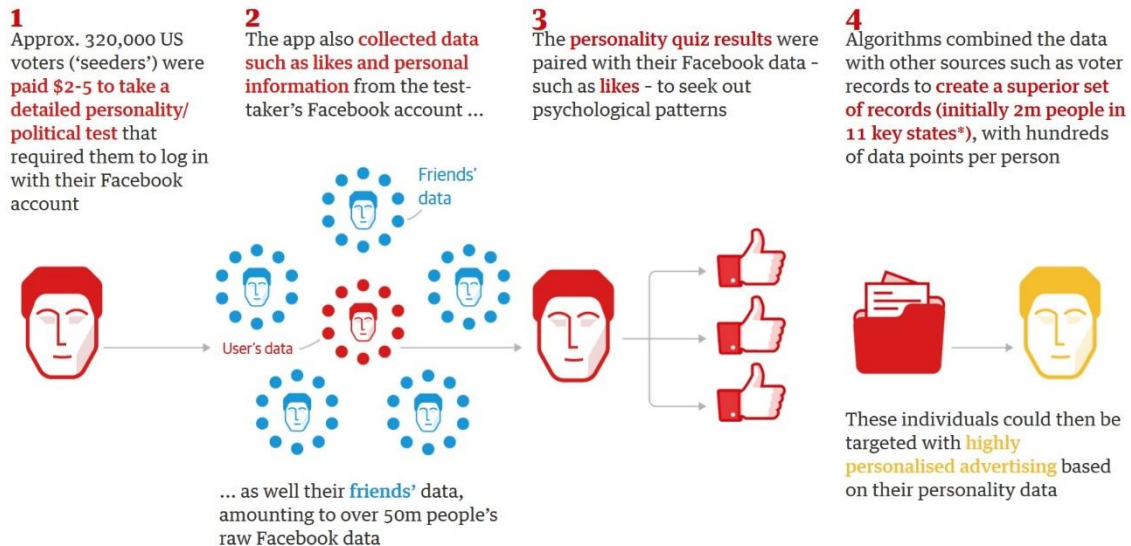
The Cambridge Analytica scandal unfolded in March 2018 and was published exclusively at the Observer/Guardian in the UK, where reporters have investigated the case, together with several whistleblowers, for over a year. I will now firstly explain how the scandal unfolded, and what the intentions and techniques behind it were. I will then move on to the analysis of how the conceptual framework of the public sphere works to explicate the events and risks involved in the Cambridge Analytica case. I will do this on the basis of the articles which can be found under the Cambridge Analytica files of the website of the Guardian. After having scanned all articles to get an in-depth understanding of the whole issue, I have selected roughly ten, especially relevant articles, with a focus on those which broach the issue of social media, problems with democracy, and the societal and political consequences of the data breach, as I found those especially relevant for the objective of my thesis. Besides offering a summary of what has happened, I have included several quotations from relevant actors, that will offer access to momentum when the case unfolded. After this, I will begin with the actual analysis. I will investigate how the concept helps to explain the events and risks of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and how it relates to broader issues in democratic systems.

Cambridge Analytica was a British data analytics firm that focused on election operations and, most notably became tragically famous for working with Donald Trump's election team and the winning Brexit campaign. Whistleblower and Cambridge Analytica's co-founder Christopher Wylie uncovered in early 2018 that the data firm illegally harvested millions of Facebook profiles of US voters through a personality application with extensive and sensitive Facebook data and used this information to build, what he called, a "psychological warfare weapon" and a "full-service propaganda machine" (Wylie, 2018).

After having the idea to combine empirical psychological test results with advertisement, Cambridge Analytica started collaborating with Dr. Aleksandr Kogan, a researcher at Oxford University. The researcher developed a Facebook app which featured a personality quiz, for which Cambridge Analytica paid people to take it. In exchange, they would, unknowingly to the test-takers, get full access to the data (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). On this test, users were scored on the "big five" personality traits – Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism – and in return they consented to give Kogan access to their Facebook profiles. The app then recorded the results of each quiz and collected data from the test taker's Facebook account (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). This included Facebook status updates, all "likes", check-ins, locations, and sometimes even private messages (Wylie, 2018). This overarching pool of information enabled the

team around Kogan and Cambridge Analytica to establish a database of an initial 50 million US voters in only two to three months (Facebook later admitted it was actually 87 million users who had their profiles mined (Cadwalladr, 2019). This quickly created a very new way of measuring personality traits across the population and correlating these scores against Facebook “likes” across millions of people (Cadwalladr, 2018).

Cambridge Analytica: how 50m Facebook records were hijacked



Guardian graphic. *Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, West Virginia

Source: The Guardian

While Kogan did have the permission to pull the Facebook data he retrieved through the app, it for academic purposes only; it was however illegal for this personal data to be sold to a third party without consent (Cadwalladr, 2018), which is was ultimately happened.

“Millions of people’s personal information was stolen and used to target them in ways they wouldn’t have seen, and couldn’t have known about, by a mercenary outfit, Cambridge Analytica.” – Carole Cadwalladr, investigative journalist at the Guardian¹

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-facebook-nix-bannon-trump>

This personal information was thus taken without authorisation in early 2014, not only from the people who actually took the test on Facebook, but it also gave access to all their Facebook friends highly personal information, thus quickly establishing a huge pool of information and data (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). All this information was then used to build a system that could profile individual US voters. The goal was to target voters according to their profile with highly personalised political advertisements. In what would become Facebook's biggest ever data breach, this information was then used by data analysts at Cambridge Analytica to build a powerful software program which could predict and influence voting choices and preferences (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018a).

“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. That was the basis the entire company was built on.” – Christopher Wylie, co-founder of C.A. and whistleblower²

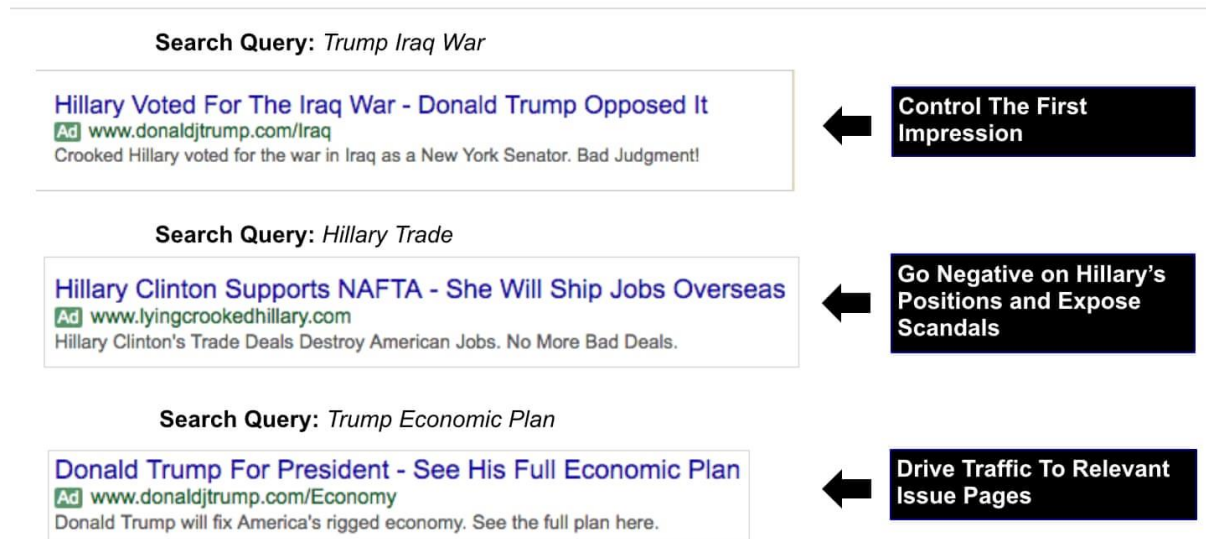
According to Wylie, who had emails, invoices, contracts and bank transfers to back up his claims, Cambridge Analytica spent 1 million US Dollars alone on the data collection for this project, which yielded more than 85 million original individual profiles that could then be matched to electoral rolls (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018a; Cadwalladr, 2019), overall however, the company created psychological profiles of as many as 230 million Americans (Cadwalladr, 2018a). The test results, coupled with the illegally obtained, sensitive Facebook data was then used to build the algorithm that could analyse individual Facebook profiles and determine alarmingly precise personality traits linked to voting behaviour. The company scanned their entire database with this new algorithm, identified likely political attitudes and personality traits, and could then decide who to target, when and how, and craft their messages precisely in a way that was likely to appeal to them for those individuals – a political approach known as “micro-targeting” (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). The company was able to learn exactly what kind of messages people are susceptible to: including framing, topics, content, tone, scariness level and so on, as well as where someone is going to consume which news and how many times they needed to touch someone with a particular message in order to change how they think about something (Wylie, 2018). The algorithm and this extensive database together created a new powerful political tool; It allowed a campaign to identify possible swing voters and craft messages more likely to resonate with them and it allowed them to not waste resources on already

² <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

convinced voters, and instead target individual swing-voters precisely and successfully (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018a).

A team of data scientists, strategists, psychologists, and designers then created the necessary content. A targeting team was responsible to inject this new content to the internet: They would create websites, blogs, and all kinds of other content on the internet that they would make sure the applicable targets could find and thus change their worldview in favour of, in this case Trump and Brexit (Wylie, 2018). At its height the company was generating 34,000 news stories a day (Cadwalladr, 2019) and targeted individuals were bombarded with the tailored content, a technique known as “informational dominance” (Cadwalladr, 2018). Below is an example from an intern Cambridge Analytica presentation that shows how they could adjust Google search results to match the desired outcome, namely controlling impressions, expose certain scandals to a certain population, and drive traffic to relevant webpages.

Persuasion Search Advertising



Source: The Guardian

Wylie explains that while microtargeting has of course existed previously in politics, what he and the rest of the Cambridge Analytica team added to this, and what makes the case stand out, were combining the data with constructs from psychology which would not only target people as voters, but instead target people as individual personalities. What is new compared to former strategic communication techniques or propaganda, is that Cambridge Analytica was able to build a psychological profile of each individual voter in a particular region or, in this case all of the US. (Wylie,

2018). Thus, voters could be targeted with a high degree of certainty of what kind of message exactly would work for them to nudge them in a certain direction, as opposed to the more or less guesswork that was previously common in political advertising.

Algorithms, some more and some less transparent or dubious, are now used by every possible website or online-application. The algorithm which lies at the heart of the whole Facebook breach, therefore of course stands for a wider complex of problems, rather than just this single instance. And the precision of today's algorithms sound almost too sophisticated to be real; Cambridge Analytica collected and combined the most apparently trivial Facebook postings, all the "likes" users have ever clicked while scrolling through their phone or browser, in order to gather sensitive personal information about sexual orientation, race, gender, even intelligence and childhood trauma (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). And it worked. A few dozen Facebook "likes" can reliably give a strong prediction of which party a user will vote for, reveal their gender, their sexual orientation, their ethnicity, social class, or predict their vulnerability to substance abuse.

"Some results may sound more like the result of updated online sleuthing than sophisticated data analysis; "liking" a political campaign page is little different from pinning a poster in a window. But [...] psychology researchers showed that far more complex traits could be deduced from patterns invisible to a human observer scanning through profiles. Just a few apparently random "likes" could form the basis for disturbingly complex character assessments." - Carole Cadwalladr & Emma Graham-Harrison, journalists at the Guardian³

Research has reliably shown that an analysis of Facebook likes alone can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender. In one analysis from 2013 for example, researchers could correctly discriminate users between homo- and heterosexual men, could predict their ethnicity, and political affiliation with an accuracy in the high 80 and 90 percentiles (Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013).

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/17/facebook-cambridge-analytica-kogan-data-algorithm>

5.1.1 Relations to Trump

Steve Bannon, who is most famous for being the former executive chairman of Breitbart news (a far-right syndicated American news, opinion, and commentary website) and former White House chief strategist under Trump, is one of the names that is frequently cited in relation to the Cambridge Analytica scandal. He served as a board member to Cambridge Analytica and was, according to Wylie, the one who even named the company – Cambridge Analytica - in order to emphasize its ties with the University and justify the data exchange between the two entities (Wylie, 2018). Steve Bannon, Wylie told, was interested in the whole project because he believed in the Breitbart doctrine that “if you want to change politics you first have to change culture” (Wylie, 2018). Bannon explained to Wylie that politics flows from culture, and “if you want to change culture, you first have to understand what the units of culture are. People are the units of culture. So, if you want to change politics you first have to change people, to change culture” (Wylie, 2018). It was Bannon who introduced Wylie to the right-winged US hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer who later funded the whole project by investing 15 million dollars into Cambridge Analytica.

It is difficult to say what was the defining factor in getting Trump elected or growing the alt-right, Wylie said (Wylie, 2018), but it is now an established fact that Cambridge Analytica targeted 10,000 different ads to different audiences in the months leading up to the election, and that those ads were seen and interacted with billions of times (Lewis & Hilder, 2018). Even though the precise impact may be difficult to determine, Cambridge Analytica’s operations are inextricable from Trump’s, as well as Vote Leave’s, victories. This becomes clear especially with regards to the very small lead in both cases; Trump (who in fact did not even win the popular vote) and Clinton only had a difference of 3 million votes in a handful of states, and Brexit was decided on the basis of 52% in favour versus 48% against leaving the EU. With the immense presence of both campaigns online, as illustrated above, combined with statistics on the use of the internet and social media as a source of news compared to the traditional media outlets, a significant impact of this operation on both elections is, to say it tentatively, very likely. This is what makes this case not only theoretically, but also practically a challenge to democracy and the public sphere.

5.1.2 The aftermath of Cambridge Analytica and its consequences to democracy

What this massive data breach shows is that “the power and dominance of the Silicon Valley – Google and Facebook and a small handful of others – are at the centre of the global tectonic shift we are currently witnessing” (Cadwalladr, 2017), and that many things that we are witnessing globally in

politics are intertwined. “Brexit and Trump are entwined. The Trump administration’s links to Russia and Britain are entwined, and Cambridge Analytica is one point of focus through which we can see all these relationships in play” (Cadwalladr, 2017).

“We are in the midst of a massive land grab for power by billionaires via our data. Data, which is being silently amassed, harvested and stored. Whoever owns this data owns the future.” – Carole Cadwalladr, investigative journalist for the Guardian⁴

Sociologist David Miller evaluated the scandals impact on democracy and concluded that it is important to understand that Cambridge Analytica was not a normal political consultancy; instead it was the product of a billionaire spending huge amounts of money to build an experimental science lab, to test new manipulative methods and, to find the tiny slivers of influence that can, and did, tip an election (Cadwalladr, 2017).

“It should be clear to voters where information is coming from, and if it’s not transparent or open where it’s coming from, it raises the question of whether we are actually living in a democracy or not.” - David Miller, sociology professor at Bath University⁵

Cambridge Analytica had to close operations in 2018 after the scandal, but the company had at least 18 active companies, branches, and affiliates with similar names, based in the UK and the US alone (Siegelmann, 2018).

Cambridge Analytica clearly stands for a bigger network and for a bigger problem. A problem I want to address in this thesis. It stands for novel techniques in political communication, for new forms or propaganda and rigged elections, it stands for a growing alt-right and an uncontrolled monopoly market that is playing with people’s data and privacy. It also lays bare the problematic unilateral power of Facebook and other data giants who are now in a position to control speech worldwide, with no fitting legislation to control or check it.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy>

“This may be the first time in history where a company literally controlled by one person appears to be unaccountable to anyone anywhere on Earth.” – Jason Kint, tech industry expert⁶

The Cambridge Analytica scandal illustrates problems and challenges to open and democratic societies in many ways; ways which I will now analyse through the lens of the public sphere.

5.2 Cambridge Analytica and the Public Sphere

In this section I will identify five challenges to the ideals of a democratic society by analysing the events of the Cambridge Analytica scandal through Habermas’ theoretical framework. Through qualitative content analysis and I was able to describe and understand the phenomenon of Cambridge Analytica from my data and extract meaning from the events, in this step of the analysis I will investigate in more detail how the current trends of the scandal relate to the ideals of the public sphere.

5.2.1 New methods of political manipulation

While it is often claimed that there is nothing categorically novel or even particularly outstanding about the ways in which we are being manipulated today (see for example Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018), I, on the other hand, have showed that one of the first things that we can take away from the illustrations of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and other literature, is that we are dealing with very novel forms of political manipulation. This is part of a much broader and deeper critique of behavioural marketing generally, in which opaque AI-driven social media advertising used for political ends, as done by Cambridge Analytica, is undermining consumer and citizen sovereignty. I have already discussed this at some lengths in the chapter on the history of political manipulation but want to establish this is the first insight of this scandal.

Being (status-)free citizens and self-legislating, in other words being sovereign, is one of Habermas basic preconditions for a successful public sphere and hence a modern, liberal democracy. This condition is clearly challenged by these novel forms of manipulation as illustrated above. The lack of consent, the illegitimate use of data, as well as the application of micro-targeting techniques in political campaigning and thus its repressive character, are all undermining, or at the very least

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-year-on-lesson-in-institutional-failure-christopher-wylie>

questioning, the idea of sovereignty. I have showed that there is a profound change in the way that we are being approached as the civil society; and that is no longer as one big audience, or perhaps various sub-groups, or sub-spheres based on demographic information; but we are instead being targeted as individuals. Not only are we however targeted as individuals, a unique reality is created for each and every one of us that might be fundamentally different from the reality that is created for our neighbour, our friend, our political opponent. A shared public sphere, necessary for an open debate which is critical to democracy, is therefore nullified. On a similar note, the media as a free and active system is central to Habermas' notion of the public sphere and constitutes one of two formal actors in this sphere (Habermas, 2006). Habermas already recognized problems with the mass media in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and worried that pseudo spheres are created by the mass media where citizens are passive spectators instead of actively involved citizens, and where culture and politics are consumed rather than shaped (Habermas, 1962). This problem gains new and amplified urgency during this current crisis and the notion of a free, fair, and high-quality media system is challenged by, for example, the creation of fake content and fake spheres, as I will discuss in some more detail below. This is also challenging Dahlgren's (2005) structural dimension of the public sphere in which media organizations are thought to present accurate, fair, and relevant information to the civic public. The absence of identifications of sources or financiers of political campaigns for example, which was misused by the Cambridge Analytica team, intensifies the difficulty to distinguish journalism from non-journalism (Dahlgren, 2005). To summarize, the lack of transparency, the indistinguishability of high-quality journalistic, and fake news, as well as the highly personalized character of distinct public spheres create a novel challenge to Habermas' ideal component of democracy.

“There is a persuasive case that this is a profound change to the political ecosystem with considerable potential to subvert the open debate which is critical to democracy. In the analogue political era, we could all read the promises a party put in its manifesto, we could all see the claims a party made on its roadside billboards, and we could all watch the attacks launched on an opponent in a TV broadcast. That made it possible to call out mendacities and expose contradictions and to hold those responsible to account. This didn't prevent distortion and misinformation, but it was easier to spot and more risky to perpetrate. There is not the capacity to apply that invigilation if millions of individualised messages are being micro-

targeted at voters on social media. Even less so when the propaganda is anonymised.”

- Andrew Rawnsley, Observer's award-winning chief political commentator⁷

5.2.2 Amplified challenges to the ideal of deliberation

An obvious and well-known challenge to the conception of the public sphere (and deliberative democracy) is the lack of deliberation. I bring this point up again, because I believe that the problem of deliberation as a means to democracy, shared understanding, and informed decision making- and opinion-formation processes is yet again amplified in the digital age. It is debatable whether Habermas' ideal of deliberation has ever existed in the first place, as I have discussed at length in the theoretical chapter. In the same section, I nevertheless also established that deliberation is an important value and an incontestable goal in any liberal democracy. Whether it ever existed in the way in which Habermas idealized it is not necessarily of huge importance here. It is however relevant to examine whether we are approaching this ideal or whether we veer away from it.

First of all, it is important to recognize that people need a shared reality in order to discuss and argue about anything of importance. We need common facts and realities as a basis for understanding one another. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that different people from the same country may always have had very different experiences and lived realities. A wealthy native European man surely has always lived in a different social reality than a for example a young immigrant man, a blue-collar worker, or a single mother. While acknowledging these discrepancies, when these people turned on the TV or radio, they nevertheless were able to see the same news, had access to the same statistics, and information, and were exposed to the same kind of advertisement or propaganda. Besides living very different lives, there was a shared reality for all citizens in a society. Today, these same people may find completely different information online, may consume fundamentally different, and sometimes even fake, news, and live in an even more disparately constructed reality. They would barely be able to agree on, for example, what the president has in fact done or has not done, which goals a certain political party follows or whether the country in which they live is doing well or bad. I want to emphasize again, that of course people were not simply living in a homogenous society before, nor were they easily convinced as soon as they exchanged views and discussed with one another – nevertheless it seems that the difference that have always existed between people are now exploited,

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/25/we-cant-control-digital-giants-with-analogue-rules>

capitalized and augmented. Shared facts must be the basis of every discussion and as these cease to exist, deliberation will become impossible. As Tufekci (2014) notes, unlike broadcast, personalized online messages based on opaque algorithms are “not visible to broad publics and thus cannot be countered, fact-checked or otherwise engaged with in the shared public sphere the way a provocative or false political advertisement on broadcast might have been” (Tufekci, 2014, p. 29). This form of big data enabled computational politics and personalized advertisement is a private one, she continues, and at its very core opposed to the idea of the civic space as a public, shared commons, as theorized in the conception of the public sphere (Tufekci, 2014). Tufekci (2014) goes on to note that “big data driven computational politics can undermine the civic experience [and] is the destruction of ‘status-free’ deliberation of ideas on their own merit” (Tufekci, 2014, p. 31). She argues that, since the ideal of Habermas public sphere was envisioned as a public which interacts between status-free individuals and debates ideas based on their merits, regardless of who uttered them, the new developments discussed here constitute an anti-Habermasian public sphere. In the age of big data, every interaction happens between people who are “known quantities”, she argues, and further the public is constituted unequally. The campaigners know a lot about every person it is interacting with whereas ordinary members of the public on the other hand have no such information whatsoever. This is fundamentally opposed to the idea of status-free and equal citizens (Tufekci, 2014). The “beneficial inefficiency” known from previous political campaigning that aided the public sphere, is now removed by computational politics (Tufekci, 2014).

This challenges Habermas theory at its very basis. Of course this challenge is not new, and the overarching aim of deliberation (rationally and emotionally based) as a highly valued principle in democracies still stands as it did, but with the changes that algorithms, and highly personalized political advertisement, coupled with fake news, bots and human trolls, that change the perception of the atmosphere in society (mirrored online), this becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

5.2.3 The difference of fragmentation and pluralization

The more elaborated notion of the public sphere holds that the public sphere consists of various, often competing publics (see especially Fraser’s addition to the concept). The internet, and social media in particular, are often seen to have a democratic potential, especially for minorities and the subaltern counterpublics which Fraser described; the internet breaks down many barriers, offers a place for discussion and organization, access to much more (and free) information, and thus theoretically extends the public sphere and enables participation to political life (Dahlberg, 2007). I have however

also already summarized how this democratic potential is in reality undermined by the influence of neoliberal and market logics, the power of private capital, the unchallenged monopoly status of the GAFAs (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple) , all private companies who control the flow of data, and install algorithms which determine the visibility of content and thus have enormous consequences for politics, and overshadowed by the demand for consumerism and entertainment online.

What the Cambridge Analytica case illustrates is a new mode of estrangement, characterized by an extreme fragmentation of society. This fragmentation is categorically different than the pluralization of society that is surely desired and has been describes at length above, and is further much accentuated from what we know from the “offline” public sphere which was most strongly influenced by the traditional mass media (see again Dahlberg, 2007; Sunstein, 2001; Habermas, 2006).

My description of the history of propaganda showed that today’s (online) political manipulation, illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica case, stands out because of its never-before-seen level of personalization. While propaganda before the digital age was always a shared experience (e.g. Pariser, 2011), the highly personalized micro-targeting of today makes this impossible.

“Instead of standing in the public square and saying what you think, and then letting people come and listen to you, and then have that shared experience of what your narrative is, you are whispering into the ear of each and every voter. And you may be whispering one thing to this voter and another thing to another voter. We risk fragmenting society in a way where we don’t have any more shared experiences and we don’t have any more shared understanding. If we don’t have any more shared understanding, then how can we be a functioning society?”
- Christopher Wylie, co-founder of C.A. and whistleblower⁸

A problem that feeds into this is that of filter bubbles, which I have also discussed at length in the chapter on political manipulation. Pariser (2011) has pointed out that a functioning democracy requires citizens to see things from one another’s point of view. A democracy further requires a reliance on shared facts, but because of the opaque algorithms of Facebook, Google, and the like, and highly personalized micro-targeting as performed by Cambridge Analytica (and others) we are unwillingly more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. According to Pariser (2011) this brings us to a state where we all live in parallel but separate universes, and shared facts almost do not exist

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXdYSQ6nu-M>

anymore. Instead, we have a set of distinct spheres – all tailored to people’s unique interests and personality traits.

We can conclude from this that the pluralization of society and its public spheres, is perhaps not thoroughly abrogated, but strongly challenged and fragmented. The extreme personalization online, through inscrutable and opaque algorithms on the one hand, and highly personalized (political) advertisement on the other. This targeting on an individual level further introduces a new form of categorical inequality into the public sphere (Tufekci, 2014).

A shared experience is in this case barely possible, and democracy is challenged by a strong disagreement on basic facts, but also by a standpoint from a perhaps fundamentally different public sphere. This is further amplified by another development that I will address soon, namely the creation of “fake” public spheres by bots and human troll armies.

5.2.4 The misuse of affect

Another important factor in the development of the public sphere, as well as the exploitation thereof, is, as I have discussed in detail in the theoretical chapter, affect – as a valid and integral part of political participation. Zizi Papacharissi is the most prominent scholar in this field and added this important notion to the concept of the public sphere. Following her arguments, it is important to not only acknowledge affect as a valid driver of political participation, but also to take away a more critical understanding of the high aspirations of rationality, that are quite common in the political sphere. Papacharissi postulates that responses to political developments are a mix of emotion with fact-informed opinion, rather than mere logic, and that often only emotionally driven aspirations challenge the hegemony and the status quo. Affect, and everything that comes with it, can disrupt the power of hierarchies and therefore constitutes an important political tool. Surely, social media online can be one outlet for such emotions and can and have aided political activism and revolutions (think of for example the Arab Spring or the Occupy movement) (Papacharissi, 2015).

The potential the internet has in this respect is incontrovertible. But besides the drawbacks and realities that have already been described in this paper, the Cambridge Analytica scandal unveils yet other and worrisome realities about this contingency. With the academic as well as popular interest in psychology and its impact on everyday life we are able to understand affect and emotions better and better, and it is no surprise that Papacharissi’s study of these concepts has found such strong support among academics and political scholars. It seems that psychology can offer a lot of what has been missing to aid the understanding of what is relevant for political life. Interestingly enough the

whole idea Cambridge Analytica was based on was in essence psychology: Aleksandr Kogan was a professor of psychology, the idea for the app as well as the strategic combination of the results of the test with other psychometric factors derived from Facebook was, again, based on promising new research in psychology, and Christopher Wylie, a young data scientist highly interested in psychology, connected the dots and built the “psychological warfare weapon” we all know now. Psychology was the key in the whole scandal and to be more precise; the exploitation of emotions and affect. Through their algorithms, Wylie and his team were able to target individual’s “inner demons” as he called it, and this was possible by micro-targeting the individual psychological profiles that Cambridge Analytica has built of several million voters.

“We would know what kinds of messaging you would be susceptible to – including the framing of it, the topics, the contents, the tone, whether it is scary or not, that kind of thing. So, what would you be susceptible to and where you are going to consume that. And then how many times do we need to touch you with that in order to change how you think about something.” – Christopher Wylie, co-founder of C.A. and whistleblower⁹

In other words, the Cambridge Analytica team around Christopher Wylie studied and learned how to exploit emotions in order to manipulate the potential votes of millions of people. Coupled with personality measures, they used highly emotional appeals that they know would work on their targets. This can also be nicely seen in *Picture 2*, which shows which kind of advertisement would be shown to targeted individuals based on their psychological profiles. The headlines address highly sensitive topics and clearly position Clinton as the bad, and Trump as the good choice in the 2015 presidential elections. This alone is of course nothing new in political advertisement or propaganda. The difference again lies in the accuracy and nescience of the targeted individuals.

While people who watch FOX-News are more or less aware through which kind of filter they view the world, Cambridge Analytica’s manipulation techniques targeted individuals based on their very personal fears, hopes, angers, and worries. They created and delivered content that would respond to exactly those emotions, thus completely ruling out the rationality factor instead of combining them as theorized by Papacharissi. Affect is and should be an important factor in political participation, and to remind people of scary things that may make them fearful is in itself also not a reprehensible or novel communication tool – think for example of the very ample climate change debate which is currently headlining newspapers and news shows all over the world, and where fear is a frequently

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXdYSQ6nu-M>

used tool to get people's attention and participation. As already discussed, the personalization and the absence of a status quo and shared set of experience is the root of this problematic exploitation. Cambridge Analytica studied, analysed, categorized, and exploited people's very personal emotions, working especially with fear as is common among right-winged populists across the world (see for example Wodak, 2015).

5.2.5 Fake spheres

A last way in which the digital age fundamentally challenges the public sphere is through the creation of fake ones. The Cambridge Analytica scandal again nicely illustrates this. Both whistleblowers Brittany Kaiser and Christopher Wylie, explained in-depth how the perception of a politician can be strongly impacted by what kind of information the algorithms allow the users to see. Further, the business model of social media platforms favours, and promotes sensationalist content, thus again amplifying the issue.

“Our bodies are programmed to consume fat and sugars because they're rare in nature. [...] In the same way, we're biologically programmed to be attentive to things that stimulate: content that is gross, violent, or sexual and that gossip which is humiliating, embarrassing, or offensive. If we're not careful, we're going to develop the psychological equivalent of obesity. We'll find ourselves consuming content that is least beneficial for ourselves or society as a whole.”

- danah boyd, *technology and social media scholar*¹⁰

The perception of a public zeitgeist is further manipulated through the massive application of bots, who leave fake traces in form of comments or shared content. As I have elaborated above, bots learn from and imitate legitimate social media users in order to manipulate public opinion online. This is an, often successful attempt to manipulate. Bots work to amplify or suppress certain political messages, and because they are extremely cheap and easy to install all over the internet, their presence, and thus impact, is enormous. As I have laid out above, bots and human troll armies are used to manufacture consensus or otherwise give the illusion of general support for a, maybe controversial, political idea, policy or candidate. The aim here is to evoke political support where this might not have previously happened by giving the illusion of a widespread civic endorsement.

Given that bots generate about half of all of the internet's traffic, that over one third of Twitter's users are bots, and that around 83 million Facebook-accounts are fake (Woolley & Howard, 2018), it is easy

¹⁰ <http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/Web2Expo.html>

to see how this can artificially shape and distort public life. Newer forms of bots can even gather information on other users in order to push a particular and personalized argument or agenda, and the Cambridge Analytica breach has shown how this method is also applied by political campaigners themselves. Similarly, the creation of content and the infiltration of the net with this, as admittedly done by the Cambridge Analytica team that worked on the Trump campaign, is feeding into the same vein; it creates a new version of reality, a reality that does not necessarily correspond to any version of the truth. And not only can it be accessed online, it is directly “pushed onto” the people who will be most susceptible to it. All this leads not only to the decay of a public sphere, but to the creation of fake ones, a distinction that is very difficult or even impossible to make for the average internet users. In this way, propaganda in the digital age leads to different spheres of facts and impedes a shared reality. It fragments the public, and it disintegrates a true civic, publicly shared, publicly accessible, public sphere. It is here where democracy is threatened. To quote Edward Snowden, the perhaps most infamous whistleblower of our times, “If we cannot agree on what is happening, how can we have a conversation about what it is that we should do about it?” (Snowden, 2019).

6. Conclusion & Discussion

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate several relevant points when talking about the contemporary tendencies in political communication and manipulation evidenced by the case of Cambridge Analytica, in relation to the theoretical conceptualization of the public sphere. For one, I illustrated novel forms of political manipulation. While recognizing ongoing and intensified patterns and techniques of propaganda before the digital revolution, I also described what is different about propaganda in the digital age. Many problems from the analogue area remain or amplify; for example, the monopoly or oligopoly status of media houses (and now the digital data firms in Silicon Valley), which was already criticized in the 80s and has since then constantly intensified. Also, the problem of propaganda and lobby work remains and perhaps intensifies; How much influence do private companies have (and should have) on state politics? How much money should we allow in political campaigning? And so forth. Propaganda models in the analogue age have surely not (always) allowed for a critical and fair representation of reality via the media, as many scholars such as Hermann and Chomsky criticized adequately, but it did communicate a more or less unified propagandistic picture.

With the novel opportunities of the internet, new data technologies provide significantly more individualized profiling and modelling, much greater data depth, which can be collected in an invisible, latent manner and delivered individually. These techniques lead to filter bubbles, echo chambers, and

a post-truth sphere in which truth is either not relevant or not clearly distinguishable. Coupled with an extreme monopolization and privatization of the web at large and social media platforms in particular, I have argued that these developments have fragmented public spheres and divide societies in a not-before seen dimension.

6.1 Conclusion

The Cambridge Analytica scandal has served as an expedient illustration of these developments. In my analysis I have shown that Cambridge Analytica was not a normal political consultancy, but instead the product of billionaires spending huge amounts of money to build an experimental science lab, in order to test new manipulative methods, to divide society, and rig elections in the digital age. Cambridge Analytica stands for novel techniques in political communication, for new forms or propaganda and rigged elections, it stands for a growing alt-right and an uncontrolled monopoly market in digital communication that is playing with people's data and privacy.

With regards to the public sphere I believe that my analysis has unveiled that both, the theoretical conception, as well as the ways political communication are undermining citizen sovereignty, are facing an intense crisis. Cambridge Analytica's case constitutes an illustrative example to depict a shift in citizens' roles, responsibilities, and accountability in democracy, evaluated against the concept of the public sphere. Through my analysis I have identified five unique challenges to the concept; Firstly, I have explored the novel character of political manipulation that is calling into question the validity of our democratic basic liberties such as a right to (truthful) information and elections. In a next step, I have broached the issue of deliberation in the digital age and especially on social media platforms that is again challenged if there is no shared reality as a basis for discussion and deliberation. Furthermore, I analysed the abolition of Habermas prerequisite or status-free citizens due to the mass data that is available and increasing the vertical hierarchy between normal citizens and big tech companies who own their data. My analysis also highlighted how the realm of political communication within the public sphere is highly fragmented, based on the extreme level of personalization and targeting online. In a fourth step I analysed how emotions are exploited and targeted in ill will. Lastly, I analysed how public spheres are challenged by the creation and popularity by a post-truth paradigm, enabled and fed by fake news and an attack on the free press by the labelling of them as such.

All in all, we can derive from this analysis that the ideals of the original conceptualization of the public sphere are strongly challenged. It is becoming poriferous through the intense shift to the private that is enabled through this form by big data computational politics. This shift of political matters to the private sphere, to an irrational and exploitive culture online, is at its core opposed to the very idea of

a civic space as a public, shared commons. Habermas has showed throughout his life-project that a shared public sphere, sovereignty and a free-will formation through open debate are necessary ideals within any democracy. My analysis was able to show that these ideals are seriously threatened within the public sphere of the digital age. The lack of transparency, the indistinguishability of high-quality journalistic from fake news, as well as the highly personalized character of distinct public spheres, create a novel challenge to Habermas' ideal component of democracy. The disappearance of a shared reality induced by the intense personalization online, as well as the lack of a high and common standard for truth and transparency, were identified in this thesis as the core problem of the digital age, which has started to induce a decay of the public sphere(s) as theorized by Habermas and others. My investigation of the case of Cambridge Analytica has also shown how human, legible, and accountable judgments are replaced with "black box" algorithms. This assaults and challenges the idea of citizen sovereignty in the public sphere. As a consequence, their freedom and self-legislation are strongly affected and limited. A lot of democratic potential is taken away from citizens by letting private companies arbitrate truth and control a significant amount of information, by letting them set the agenda for free speech, and thus essentially let them control public life.

6.2 Consequences for real-life democracies

What has been important to me in this thesis is not only an emphasis on timely theories, but also a focus on our empirical reality and the real-life consequences that challenges in the public sphere in the digital age bring about. The threats I have identified in light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal are not only conceptual, but they are severely consequential to our real-life practices, already have, and likely will further, materialize in the form of real problems in our political organization. Cambridge Analytica's Facebook ads were possibly the deciding factor for both, the 2016 US elections, and the success of the Brexit referendum. Both election outcomes were extremely tight, and its propaganda efforts before that enormous. In the case of the US elections, the magnitude of Cambridge Analytica's propaganda efforts become especially salient: With a population of around 330 million people in the United States, there were about 225 million citizens who were eligible to vote in 2016 of which 157 million were registered and 137 million actually voted in the presidential elections (United States Census Bureau, 2017). With a difference of not even 3 million votes in the popular vote, and, as we now know, over 87 million targeted US voters by Cambridge Analytica, it is, at the very least, quite possible that these propaganda efforts had a measurable, perhaps even decisive fact on the outcome of the elections in 2016.

With or without the ready empirical evidence of measurable effects in recent elections, Facebook continues to play an obscure role in enabling other countries propaganda efforts; In Brazil's 2018 elections, it was reported that supporters of the far-right candidate had funded mass messaging attacks against leftist rival on WhatsApp, the messaging service Facebook bought in 2014 (Spring & Brito, 2018). In Brazil, Whatsapp fills the role that is often filled by social networks in other countries, because many mobile phone networks offer unlimited WhatsApp access to subscribers, so even people can use Whatsapp even without a regular internet plan (Magenta, Gragnani & Souza, 2018). To highlight the outsized political role of WhatsApp in Brazil; the communication platform has more than 120 million users in a country with a population of almost 210 million (Spring & Brito, 2018). The scale of, and powerlessness against, such propaganda efforts is, again, unprecedented. And it is again Facebook, the uncontested monopoly when it comes to social media and communication in the Western world, who uncritically allows accounts to send bulk messages, who enables misleading propaganda, and who is, seemingly, unstoppable.

Another example is the genocide in Myanmar, where Myanmar military personnel turned Facebook into a tool for ethnic cleansing (Mozur, 2018). The military reportedly launched a systematic campaign on the social network that has been going on for several years and that targeted the country's mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group (Mozur, 2018). The military exploited Facebook's popularity and reach in Myanmar, "where it is so broadly used that many of the country's 18 million internet users confuse the Silicon Valley social media platform with the internet" (Mozur, 2018). Hundreds of military personnel created troll accounts, news, and celebrity pages on Facebook to then flood them with incendiary comments and posts with their hatred against the Muslim minority group. Human rights organizations blame this propaganda campaign for inciting murders, rapes and the largest forced human migration in recent history (Mozur, 2018). The troubles addressed in this thesis are not only theoretical assumptions, but real obstacles to democracies and citizen sovereignty today. These further incidences again show the importance to understand the anatomy of the digital landscape and the way that manipulation and political communication in the digital age work. The role of sociological research is especially relevant in this area, as it holds the potential to continue in the tradition of disentangling and trying to understand the highly complex story of the interplay of politics, civil society and the media in the digital age.

6.3 Critical reflections in a democratic context

My thesis has laid bare the problematic unilateral power of Facebook and other data giants who are now in a position to control speech worldwide, with no fitting legislation to control or check it. The novelty of my work lies in the explication of the connections of a recent and representative case of manipulation in the digital age and the functioning of democracy in the light of public sphere concept. My thesis adds to the field on a theoretical level by ways of conceptual theory-building about the political and civic consequences of big data. At the same time, this thesis is part of a much broader and deeper critique of behavioural marketing generally, in which opaque AI- driven social media advertising used for political ends, as done by Cambridge Analytica, is undermining consumer and citizen sovereignty. I therefore continue in the tradition of critical theory.

In this thesis, I have brought forward that Facebook's power has been unprecedented. Mark Zuckerberg himself has said that "In a lot of ways Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company" and I find this analogy very fitting. Facebook is more than just a very successful company and Mark Zuckerberg has more power than a very successful Silicon Valley CEO - Facebook is so powerful that it is, indeed, like a sovereign state (Farrell, Levi & O'Reilly, 2018). Facebook's community consists of more than 2 billion people around the world, Facebook's code established critical rules by which billion of people and businesses interact online (Farrell, Levi & O'Reilly, 2018), it's launching its own currency - Libra -, Facebook's algorithmic nudges are editorial choices which control, or at the very least organize, the flow of information on the world's biggest social network. And even the legislation that is supposed to regulate the social network ultimately allow them to privately and transparently control yet another aspect of social life – the German Network Enforcement Act for example, a law aimed to combat fake news and hate speech in social networks, obligates social networks to remove illegal content within 24 hours from their network. To deem what is illegal, what is right what is wrong, what is opinion and what is sedition, however, ultimately lies in the hands of a private company. Facebook's ability to install their own fact checking mechanism, gives them sovereignty over the domain of truth. Facebook's choices are opaque and intransparent, but surely not random. And not a single person in history had as much power over a quarter of the world's population as Mark Zuckerberg does. Yet he is completely unaccountable and his company, his (business) choices, and his unchecked control is utterly undemocratic.

This global data monopoly project can only work and flourish under certain social and economic conditions. I am therefore trying to embed my findings of this thesis, the categorically different forms of political manipulation we face today, the architecture of the internet and social media platforms and its relation to the concept of the public sphere, into the bigger framework of democracy at large.

The democracy in which we live, as opposed to theoretical conceptions of it, can however not be understood without also analysing and understanding the circumstances under which it exists – and in the Western world, the focus of my analysis – this is a flourishing and intensified version of a 1980s neoliberal capitalist order. It is a novel form of a digital, surveillance capitalism, that enables the developments I have described in this thesis, and which challenge normative democratic ideals.

6.4 Big data and neoliberal capitalism

In a democracy we hold certain values high – the freedom of speech and of the press, citizen sovereignty, free and secret elections - yet these values not seldomly fall short. Capitalism and democracy have been difficult to compromise all along (Merkel, 2014). This is because the two ideologies follow fundamentally different logics: “unequally distributed property rights on the one hand, equal civic and political rights on the other; profit-oriented trade within capitalism in contrast to the search for the common good within democracy; debate, compromise and majority decision-making within democratic politics versus hierarchical decision-making by managers and capital owners” (Merkel, 2014, Abstract). The German political scholar Wolfgang Merkel concludes that capitalism is not democratic, and democracy is not capitalist (Merkel, 2014). Deregulated and globalized markets, Merkel argues, have seriously inhibited the ability of democratic governments to govern. And if democratic and economic reforms do not adequately address these challenges, democracy will slowly transform into an oligarchy, formally legitimized by general elections – a trend I have shown and analysed in this thesis.

Capitalism is the hegemonic system which enables the oligarchic structures of the powerful tech companies of Silicon Valley and China, but at the same time, capitalism is transformed by big data too. With her work on surveillance capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff (2018) has evoked a new debate, and made the necessary connections, between the relation of big data and neoliberal capitalism. Zuboff too, sees surveillance capitalism as a force that is as profoundly undemocratic as it is exploitative yet remains poorly understood. It is therefore through this framework of capitalism, that allows, enables, and amplifies, this crisis of the public sphere and democracy. Surveillance capitalism claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. It works by providing free services that billions of people use, which then enables the providers of those services to monitor the behaviour of its users in astonishing detail, often without explicit consent. Some of this data is indeed used for service improvement, but the main goal of companies today is, according to Zuboff, to create and own a proprietary behavioural surplus, which fabricates into prediction products that anticipate

what you will do, desire, and buy now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace that Zuboff calls behavioural futures markets. Surveillance capitalists have grown immensely wealthy from these trading operations, for many companies are willing to lay bets on our future behaviour (Zuboff, 2018).

With this work, Zuboff makes us understand that we are not dealing merely with algorithmic inscrutability, but we are in fact confronted with the latest phase in capitalism's long evolution – from the making of products, to mass production, to managerial capitalism, to services, to financial capitalism, and now to the exploitation of behavioural predictions covertly derived from the surveillance of users (Naughton, 2019). Much of the debate around Google, Facebook and the like, for example, has been framed in terms of privacy – as an issue of control over information about the self – (Bridle, 2019) and while many of these arguments are viable, they also mostly lose the bigger framework, which is what Zuboff's work provides. Surveillance capitalism not only represents an amplified form of exploitation and exceptionalism that is inherent in the nature of capitalist structures, but it instead it seeks to shape, direct and control our inner lives. This dread force is not merely a higher expression of capitalism, but a perversion of it (Bridle, 2019), and it is strongly linked to the role ascribed to citizens, which was the main focus of this thesis.

This line of arguments ties nicely to Byung-Chul Han, an essential modern-times German-Korean philosopher, whose work is the last I would like to bring into this thesis. Han (2017) discusses the mechanisms of big data as power structures in neoliberalist societies. In his 2017 work *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, he depicts how big data allow for a detailed analysis of the psychological unconscious and how this enables a complete exploitation and control of desires and the human psyche itself. Han calls this state, very similar to Zuboff, a digital control-society and sees in it the problematic mechanisms of neoliberalism in which not labour, but the mind is exploited, and in which citizens voluntarily share and refine all possible data about themselves. This, Han argues, allows for this precise mapping of the mind. By means of deploying big data, neoliberalism has tapped into the psychic realm and exploited it, with the result that, as Han colourfully puts it, individuals being degraded into the genital organs of capital. The message is that big data knows us better than we know ourselves (Han, 2017).

In elections this means that governments have a 360-degree angle on its voters. That these new forms of available data can and do lead to micro-targeted political advertisement has been shown by the example of Cambridge Analytica. According to Han this leads to a "data driven psychopolitics", which not only transforms our psyche and inner life, but transforms humans themselves self to a mere commodity. As a consequence of this, we are incapable, Han postulates, of conceiving politics as a

communal activity because we have become so habituated to being consumers rather than citizens. Politicians then too, treat us as consumers to whom they must deliver; and the consequence is that we grumble about politics the same way consumers do about a disappointing product or service. While targeted political information becomes more and more like advertisement, and micro targeting a common political practice, this practice increasingly merges voting and consuming - it blurs and finally dissolves the lines of politics and consumption. This argument was already brought forward by Habermas in 1962 and has been discussed in this thesis. Han adds to Habermas' worry of the culture-consuming citizen the exploitation of the psyche and can therefore be understood as an extension of his thesis. Now, Han argues, people are treated and traded as packages of data for economic and political use. That is, human beings have become a commodity (Han, 2017).

When this logic of invisible coercion and exploitation, that both Zuboff and Han explain very expediently, is applied to the social sphere, its implications become extremely worrisome. The potential that human behaviour can be perfectly modelled, predicted and controlled consequentially eradicates the relations between individuals and trust in institutions, and the substitution of algorithmic certainty for any possibility of participatory, democratic society (Bridle, 2019). When people become commodities rather than citizens, then neoliberal capitalism has won at the cost of democracy.

Digital capitalism transforms our inner lives, society – including the sphere of political communication – and consequentially also democracy. The topic of big data, fake news, propaganda, democracy – and its tensions with capitalism – are extensive. I am aware that I have tackled a complex and complicated field of sociological inquiry and I hope that I have been able to shed some light on the relation and importance of these topics. In this thesis I focused on some of the key-challenges imposed on the conceptualization of the public sphere by relating its theories to contemporary tendencies in political communication. In a further step, perhaps for my PhD, I would like to analyze the capitalist structures which enable and afford these challenges to a highly normative and desirable framework in a more in-depth manner.

What is most urgently needed, in my evaluation, is a paradigmatic shift of rethinking, that allows us to not only understand the scheming of Facebook, Google, and Amazon as algorithmic opacities, or merely matters of privacy, but rather acknowledge them as issues of data and citizen sovereignty. We need to overcome our analogue mindset in order to understand highly digital and complex issues in the age of big data. One consequence must be a suitable legislation, that can grasp and control the unilateral power of the digital tech firms and restrict their unprecedented power. In a next, more critical step, we need to collectively question the suitability of a neoliberal governing framework in

times where democracy is as fragile as it is – this postulation is surely very demanding, perhaps even idealistic, but in my view nevertheless necessary.

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