Social media: A threat to democracy?

by Niklas Kossow

Initially, reactions to the chances and opportunities posed by social media and the age of digital democracy were almost euphoric. The internet promised more transparency, an approachable political class, and a social discourse encompassing the entire public sphere. Yet even years ago, some approached the new media with scepticism. Jürgen Habermas, grand theorist of the structural transformation of the public sphere, warned of a potential decline in the quality of public discourse as early as 2008. In the virtual realm, he claimed, the public sphere threatened to splinter off into “random groups, united by special interests.” The past 18 months seem to have confirmed these fears. Today, we speak of the filter bubble. In the context of the Brexit campaign and the US presidential election, Facebook and other social networks functioned as a type of unsocial media, undermining public debate rather than reviving it. Hate speech tainted public discourse, while fake news and targeted hacking attacks derailed it further. Data-driven information and manipulation campaigns, often in connection with the British firm Cambridge Analytica, made elections campaigns look like a farce. To many, it appeared as if social media was eating away at the very foundations of our democracies.

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That said, doom and gloom is not the only thing on the horizon. In many ways, the Internet and social media have changed our democracy for the better. Online petitions capture the sentiment of countless citizens, politicians are placed in direct contact with their voters via Facebook or Twitter, and more people than ever take part in public debates. Nevertheless, social media’s dark side is undeniably real: populist parties and movements in particular use automated bots, fake news and data-driven manipulation in their public relations.

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work, while foreign hackers interfered with the American and French presidential elections. None of this, however, has really managed to sway the outcome of an election. Neither Cambridge Analytica, nor WikiLeaks or hackers alone made Donald Trump President of the United States. Hence, while this type of interference is unlikely to change the outcome of an election, it does threaten to undermine our trust in the political processes that make up the backbone of our political system. Fake news can increase citizens’ distrust in the media. Hate speech and social media bots threaten the viability of civilised public discourse online. Hacks and leaks, often mixed with disinformation, undermine public trust in the political establishment. Manipulative campaigns suggest that the ability to influence voting decision is only a click away.

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Responding to these challenges is not easy. The German Network Enforcement Law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or “NetzDG”) looks like a desperate and legally questionable attempt to somehow find an answer to the challenge posed by hate speech. The law imposes heavy fines on social networking companies should they fail to delete evidently illegal content from their websites within certain, very short time frames. What precisely is considered evidently illegal remains unclear. In cases of uncertainty, an independent, “regulated self-regulatory” body is supposed to decide. By passing the law, the German federal government has outsourced the decision of what is considered criminal online hate speech, taking it out of the judiciary’s hands. The law is thus opposed not only by digital industry, but also by a broad alliance of civil society organisations concerned with human rights and freedom of speech. The initiative proves that not all social problems can be solved with premature legislative initiatives. Rather, we have to learn how to deal with the new media landscape. Targeted trainings and public campaigns should be used to increase media literacy in the population. Moreover, we need to learn how treat each other respectfully – online as well as offline. Children should be learning what constitutes good journalism and how it differs from propaganda in school. Audiences should begin scrutinising the news media rather than chasing after every headline. This is neither a fast nor an easy solution, but the Internet and social media will have a lasting impact on our public discourse – a process of change which, in turn, is connected to a social learning process. It is up to us to shape it.

Social media’s potential lies in its diversity and ubiquity.

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