Despite often being lauded as a crucial tool for democratisation, social media can just as easily harbour more negative intentions, including stigmatisation and exclusion of certain groups. Part of the explanation lies in the nature of social media and the way information circulates there. However, this leaves the crucial question of motivation unanswered: why do individuals engage in negative deeds online and why are the narratives of otherness-qua-menace particularly attractive? For this reason, the article employs Lacanian psychoanalysis to delve into the drives that make the Other a crucial benchmark. It is, therefore, claimed that there are crucial synergies to be teased out from simultaneous use of social media analysis and psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Social media, otherness, conflict, psychoanalysis, identity.

Introduction

This article offers a theoretical enquiry into the prevalence of radicalised discourses of otherness on social media. Although, admittedly, social media clearly do not hold monopoly over radicalisation and demonisation of otherness, with the ever-increasing reach and popularity of these media, it is of vital importance to illuminate the core factors as to how and why social media can be used to propagate content intended for exclusion of certain societal, ethnic, religious, or other groups.
Indeed, social media have recently been playing a pivotal role in constructing otherness in various contexts. The Ukrainian conflict and the current refugee crisis are but two examples. In the Ukrainian case, social media have been used to aggravate existing tensions and sow distrust in the build-up to the conflict and then to sustain animosity throughout. This squarely places social media and the radicalisation of otherness that it enables within the ambit of hybrid warfare. Meanwhile, in case of the refugee crisis, the unleashing of negativity over the foreign other (who also happens to come from a different culture and profess a different religion to add up to the otherness) might often broadly be part of the political process, and yet is not at all conducive towards attempts at finding a solution to the crisis, nor it contributes to integration and societal cohesion once the stigmatised groups appear next door.

In this article, it is claimed that political communication of negativized otherness can be explained through the synergy of two perspectives: the analysis of social media’s characteristic traits allows one to better understand the mechanisms behind such mobilisation of individuals and ideas while Lacanian psychoanalysis, by insisting on necessarily incomplete human selfhood and the irreplaceable (albeit dual) role of the Other in formation of one’s own identity, enables one to better understand the processes behind otherness being a symbol of division. Furthermore, it is subsequently argued that social media’s characteristic traits serve as the perfect outlet for negativity against the Other. Psychoanalysis, meanwhile, will be seen as explaining the aggregating and mobilising functions that social media so often perform.

The article is therefore structured as follows: the first part deals with social media and the primarily negative aspects of its core traits; the second part introduces Lacan’s theory of the subject and a Lacanian perspective on the negativization of otherness; then, the two perspectives are discussed together in order to tease out the synergies between them.

The Rather Negative Side of Social Media

Interactivity is what characterises social media: on it and through it users are able to share and process content created by themselves or others in order to be consumed still by others.¹ In contrast to the old model of consumers retrieving information from centralised sources, now information itself comes from

the grassroots. Especially among younger people, political attitudes are being increasingly shaped not by the immediate environment but by online ties. In fact, the present environment of (almost) permanent connectivity opens new grounds for influences and with that, of course, potential manipulation that can reach numerous individuals globally, instantly, and without tangible cost. As a result, superiority in getting one’s message across is a crucial strategic advantage, especially for those opposing the status quo. Notably, when information proves to be particularly attractive (for whatever reason), very large numbers of people can be reached within an extremely short period of time, resulting in a temporal dominance of a single topic that consequently leads to a large volume of communication. In addition, ‘by substituting physical with virtual interaction, social media have introduced a novel avenue for community building, transcending established administrative boundaries,’ which can be both a positive development in creating global stakeholder networks but also a negative one enabling global manipulation of opinion. Almost instantly, a rather mixed picture of social media’s contribution to the public sphere is beginning to take shape.

Hence, it is safe to say that social media have already proved beyond any serious doubt their value as a tool for political communication. On the other hand, what they have not proven yet, is the normative value of their contribution: whereas the academic discourse has mostly been dominated by positive accounts stressing their liberating and democratising potential, some more recent research manifestly contradict the trend. In fact, social media can easily be

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8 For an overview, see e. g. KALPOKAS, Ignas. Influence Operations: Challenging the Social Media – Democracy Nexus. SAIS Europe Journal of Global Affairs, 2015 (forthcoming).
used for perpetuation and strengthening of autocratic regimes,\textsuperscript{9} radicalisation of political views,\textsuperscript{10} or inciting violence, either accidentally or by design.\textsuperscript{11} It is the latter, negative, contribution of social media that is analysed in this article.

As already indicated, social media enable bottom-up creation or at least propagation of meaning. Social media certainly provide user-generated content and enable its dissemination avoiding official networks,\textsuperscript{12} connect people with similar grievances and facilitate the creation of communal feeling among those consuming and propagating the same message.\textsuperscript{13} The removal of intermediaries makes the communication process significantly more effective, thus enabling citizens to play a truly active role in the society. However, that civic power can be very easily employed for initiatives that are far from inclusive or aimed at group empowerment. Crucially, voices of otherwise marginalised extremists can be heard just as easily as those of underprivileged minorities seeking emancipation, allowing for dissemination of propaganda, radicalisation of other social media users and fostering discontent or outright violence.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, the online environment can easily – and reasonably – be treated as a psychological and social laboratory, in which all kinds of human interactions can be observed and, under right conditions, fostered.\textsuperscript{15} Under such premises,
it is entirely reasonable to see the actual use of social media as completely contingent. And in terms of communicating otherness, once a strong and compelling narrative can be established and the fears of certain grassroots communities captured, the contingency of use is laid bare: virtual inclusion of networks of fear is used for purposes contrary to inclusion of other groups.

Furthermore, social media are ‘a unique information source to deal with information- and cognitive-overload problems, find answers to specific questions, and discover more valuable opportunities for social and economic exchange’. In fact, research has shown peer recommendations and advice to be a valuable and sought-after commodity on social media. Crucially, people tend to connect with others that are similar, they end up locking themselves in a filter bubble, in which the information one has access to extends only as far as one’s present interests and those of his/her friends do; this, coupled with the dominance of trending topics that generate significant amounts of communication over a brief period of time, can create an impression that everybody is talking about the same thing, hence, it must be important and/or true. One is thereby locked within the confines of one’s friends’ opinions; moreover, the social networks themselves have rating algorithms that only select messages that are deemed to be interesting to a particular user, and that selection is, to a significant degree, based on what his/her friends are talking about. Moreover, there usually is a significant degree of clustering involved: ‘if user a is connected to user b and user b is connected to user c, then the chance is high that user a is also connected to user c’, leading to the so-called echo chamber effect, whereby friends propagating other friends’ messages that had earlier been propagated by yet other friends create an impression that the same message is coming from everywhere, whereas in practice it is merely bouncing around relatively limited confines. Hence, the characteristics of social media tend to increase the likelihood of information ghettos.

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19 Ibid., 120.
20 Ibid., 122.
21 Ibid., 122.
22 JOSEPH, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
In addition, one has to keep in mind that on social media ‘users mostly generate unverified information – both true and false’. Social media thereby become dominated by collective truths: by searching for and creating information, interpreting what they know and attaining new knowledge often from unverified (or even unverifiable) sources, users build a particular picture of what reality looks like, and by being shared and collectively discussed, such picture solidifies into a truth claim, representing that particular community’s view of things as they are, will be, or are supposed to be. It is not at all surprising then, that discourses of inclusion and exclusion, those of sameness and otherness, tend to create separate, parallel realities that, by being so diametrically opposed, only serve to further rally their adherents around the core claims of a particular worldview. With the above in mind, it is not at all surprising that whereas traditional mass media tend to have a pacifying effect, transmitting the same message across a given territory and thus creating a broad community that transcends at least some of the differences between its members, social media tend to exacerbate tensions, e.g. ethnic ones. In contrast to the vertical establishment of narratives over mass media, the horizontal nature of social media fosters linkages along the lines of segregation and/or difference. Even for those who enjoy heterogeneous networks of online friends, such diversity does not automatically translate into less radical opinions. In fact, researchers have struggled to find conclusive correlation between network heterogeneity and lower radicalisation; on the contrary, those who had heterogeneous networks and frequently partook in discussions and debates between adherents to opposing doctrines actually seem to have a tendency to radicalise themselves. It has been suggested that the side effect of such active partaking in variety is biased information processing: the individuals select and pay more attention to information that might be useful in future discussions, thus unconsciously compensating for the absence of an echo chamber. Certainly, it might be objected that not everybody is constantly thinking about the next political discussion they are going to have on social media and sifting through information to find new arguments. Yet, it has also been suggested that less

23 AULA, op. cit., p. 45.
24 Ibid., 46.
25 CAMBER WARREN, op. cit.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 715–716.
informed individuals then tend to over-rely on emotions, making the presence and discussion of difference more unpleasant. Finally, another psychological issue is the relation between attitude homophily and the perception of information credibility: if a particular message corresponds with the view that one happens to hold already, it is as if automatically deemed to be more credible than it would have been in case of a divergence of opinions; this also works in a slightly different direction: the more credible the source is perceived to be, the stronger cognitive defences are launched against information that contradicts it. In this way, individuals seem to display a clear tendency to push towards coherence and clear-cut distinctions in the way they access, select, and process information. Referring back to the communication of difference in particular, once again there is an aptitude for strong messages and narratives (and as it will be shown, the narratives of otherness tend to operate on very strong unconscious drives) to monopolise individuals’ fields of communication and acquisition of information, ultimately turning cognitive biases into self-perpetuating modes of thinking.

Narratives are the tools (as carriers of meaning) and objects (as personal attributes to be affected in order to draw individuals in) of such communication. They ‘explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests’ serving as ‘a power resource setting out what characterizes any state in the world, or how the world works’. One could think of System Narratives that explain the international environment, National Narratives that describe a particular national community or interaction between national communities, and Issue Narratives that provide an account of a particular problem or situation, all setting any actions in a particular context and, in fact, motivating ever new modes of acting. Discourses of otherness, although primarily falling into the category of Issue Narratives, either portraying or inventing a particular problem, can also, depending upon their reach and success, acquire some attributes of the other categories as well. One thing, however, is relatively clear: in order for a particular cause to gather support

32 Ibid., 76.
online, one needs to go down the consumerist route: the content needs to be packaged lightly and, therefore, deciphering it should require little time and effort, it should easily lend itself to clear headlines, and be simplified (or even oversimplified) as much as possible.  

Narratives involving archetypical otherness, as will be shown, are particularly suited for such endeavours as they cut straight to the heart of the political community and, at their core, presuppose a very simple ‘either-or’ dichotomy which can, in turn, be presented in a clear-cut manner. Due to the above qualities, social media are prone to so-called online firestorms defined as ‘the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM [word of mouth] and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks’. Characteristically, ‘intense indignation is often expressed, without pointing to an actual specific criticism’. As will be shown in the subsequent part of the article, negativity and otherness can be more than easily conflated. Hence, whichever group is effectively labelled as the Other par excellence of the day, it becomes particularly susceptible to such firestorms. What is eroded here is first and foremost trust: a crucial quality in either maintaining existing societal relations or forging relations between the pre-existing society and the newcomer group(s). Trust is of paramount importance in societal interactions and in helping solve collective action problems without obsessive monitoring of partners, it signals openness to one’s vulnerability, as opposed to closing oneself within a narrow ‘own’ vs ‘alien’ mindset, ushers political engagement and participation and so forth. Since trust in its political dimension reflects the attitude towards society in general, the erosion of it cuts right at the heart of the society in question.

33 LIM, op. cit., p. 638.
34 PFEFFER, ZORBACH and CARLEY, op. cit., p. 118.
35 Ibid.
MECHANISMS OF COMMUNICATING THE ‘OTHER’ ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
OUTLINING A THEORY

Overall, there is clearly a double-edged relationship here. On the one hand, it is more than commonplace to proclaim, with regard to social media, that ‘[t]oday, anyone with an internet connection and a Twitter account can make the news. If you choose, the powers that be are you.’\(^{40}\) There is, clearly, an element of radical democratisation. But on the other hand, this democratisation comes at a price – it brings about a potentially explosive cocktail of collective biases, easily shared and deceptively authoritative. Likewise, although social media have enabled individuals ‘to network and contribute to all kinds of dynamic dialogues by sharing their expertise and opinions,’\(^{41}\) there is nothing intrinsically positive about those opinions as well as about the actual content of networking. Instead, one has to keep in mind that on social media very often ‘[p]ropaganda of every kind attempts to rally the base or influence others […].’ Hoaxes and scare-mongering campaigns seek to subvert public order, then generate and exploit the resulting chaos so as to benefit or gain in some way,’\(^{42}\) turning the human mind into ‘a target of influence to either mobilize, intimidate or terrorize a targeted population.’\(^{43}\) In fact, one has to be constantly aware of social media’s potential for distortion, whence bystanders are caught in a torrent of partial information which has gone viral and only pick those bits and pieces that either neatly slot into their preconceptions or provoke their emotions sufficiently; and if a message has become viral and is being repeated sufficiently often by a sufficient number of people, its status as a ‘truth’ solidifies.\(^{44}\) And once such messages have reached the critical mass of self-perpetuation and increased radicalisation, any feasible solution becomes less and less likely: the adherents on both sides begin living in parallel informational universes with (almost) no common vocabulary.

Certainly, some criticisms as to the actual role of social media in shaping attitudes and behaviour can be launched. For example, one notable critic stresses that social media can be most effective when people are not asked to do too much; in fact, it is claimed, ‘Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things


\(^{41}\) ZENG et al., op. cit., p. 14.

\(^{42}\) GOOLSBY, op. cit., p. 4.

\(^{43}\) YANNAKOGEORGOS, op. cit., 57.

that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.\textsuperscript{45} Following this point of view, social media ‘makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact.’\textsuperscript{46} Yet, viral social media communication, either genuine or as part of a hostile influence operation, can bridge the difference between the passive and the active: proliferation of narratives, such as the narrative of otherness, might not require too much of an effort (just a few clicks to further propagate the message) but the actual cumulative result is a massive collective exercise in political communication with the potential of changing the attitudes in a given society and beyond or at least significantly disrupting the public sphere.

**Positing the Other as a Threat**

The communication of conflict is truly a self-fulfilling prophecy: one postulates the existence of a conflict between the ‘own’ and the ‘other’ and, in case of successful communication, literally speaks this conflict into existence. But for such a process of communication to be successful, it has to be based on a strong distinction between identity and difference, either a pre-existing or a newly-manufactured one. In fact, identity almost by definition needs difference in order to be established; this difference, in turn, must refer to concrete otherness and, hence, be grounded in (what is perceived to be) everyday life.\textsuperscript{47} If this concrete embodiment is lacking, the entire edifice will lose its foundations. On the other hand, such need often converts otherness into something evil, ugly and nasty, turning the very fact of difference (which is value-neutral in itself) into a relation of superiority and inferiority.\textsuperscript{48} It has been acknowledged at least since Weber that ‘the resulting social action is merely negative: those who are obviously different are avoided and despised or, conversely, viewed with superstitious awe\textsuperscript{49} regardless of their merits or inner


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

traits. Otherness is henceforth reduced to a symbol, a particular set of traits and aesthetic attributes that fails to reveal anything about the actual Other⁵⁰ but is particularly handy when it comes to communicating conflict.

If, according to Rancière, politics is aimed at ‘reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible, which defines the common of the community to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals’,⁵¹ here one encounters the reverse side of political action: removing certain speakers and reducing them to mere noisy animals or preventing them from becoming meaningful subjects. That not only conforms to the Schmittian analogy between ugly and beautiful in aesthetics, and enemy and friend in politics⁵² but also a near-equation of friend and beautiful as well as of enemy and ugly; in fact, according to Schmitt, ‘emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction […] draws upon other distinctions for support’.⁵³ This type of distinction-making is especially effective where other standards and distinctions are ambiguous, in conflict, or debatable, thus calling for an outside denominator.⁵⁴ Essentially, capitalisation on the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is a sign of narcissism which ‘turns difference into a mirror. In this mirror, a narcissist does not see the others for themselves; he sees them only as they reflect upon or judge him’.⁵⁵ What is seen in the other is, in fact, the ugly side of oneself. The ‘own’ political community, therefore, becomes an ideal ethical and aesthetic terminus as ‘it signifies the formal unification both of the citizen with the community and of community with universal humanity’.⁵⁶ Those who are left outside are thus rendered not only different but also unequal, and consequently, excluded: a self-propelling and self-fulfilling triad of epistemological, normative, and empirical ostracism. If one is locked in a filter bubble which contains within itself, first and foremost, messages of

⁵³ Ibid., p. 27.
distinction, the negation of otherness can easily become a conditio sine qua non of social existence.

Indeed, following Lacan, 'both the subject and the social order are radically incomplete or impossible: they are structured around a lack or an antagonism.' The ego is born in the mirror stage, which is the moment of fascination with one’s own image. This image, however, is taken for reality and stands in for the illusory wholeness, something that the subject will constantly strive for in the future. Thus, as Sean Homer explains, ‘the ego is based on an illusory image of wholeness and mastery and it is the function of the ego to maintain this illusion of coherence and mastery.’ It is a key function of the ego to try to cover the lack, the displacement central to the subject and thus enable the discourse as such. This pattern of identification plays a central role in assuming an imaginary relationship with any entity, such as a national or ethnical entity, in an attempt to recuperate the supposed unity and purposefulness of the subject, and to enable self-definition in general. Hence, the phrase ‘I is an other’; i.e. I am such-and-such because I recognize myself as being like the other, whom I recognize to be such-and-such. Consequently, I, as a subject, emerge, or am born, only at the moment when I emerge as a signifier in the field of the Other, which is the source of the unavoidable primordial split. Thereby my very existence is based on, or is guaranteed by the recognition by an-other, by the mediation of my image by the gaze of the other. Having said this, it is obvious that ‘any identity resulting from identification is always an unstable identity, [...] marked by an alienating dimension’. Alienation is not alienation from something; rather, alienation is the very essence of being, even though we constantly struggle for wholeness, unity (which is an imaginary unity) and coherence. The desire and quest for fullness of enjoyment is eluded every time because whatever enjoyment we experience is less than what we expected, i.e. no object is enough to satisfy us. Therefore, we constantly

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60 Ibid., p. 23.
displace our desire from one object to another. The Other is always in a position to assume the blame and responsibility for one’s failure to achieve the desired coherence – always in a position to become a screen onto which one’s own lack of fulfilment is projected. This is why Slavoj Žižek explains, ‘[a]ll we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment’. Having said this, it becomes clear that this national way of being first and foremost belongs to our imaginary and symbolic orders of existence, and thus it exists only as long as we believe in it and as long as we believe that others believe in it. It is for this reason that we continue to materialize it in special practices, rituals and myths. Furthermore, the object of identification, such as the nation or group, ‘appears to us as “our Thing” [...] as something accessible only to us, as something “they”, the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by “them”’. Therefore, it might easily appear that the only possibility for us to keep our reality stable is to negate the other, and to prevent the other from stealing our reality even if that supposed ‘theft’ is nothing but the presence of an alternative to our way of enjoyment – even as such it is unacceptable since it discloses the fundamentally imaginary nature of the object of identification. Unsurprisingly, then Lacan insists that ‘to exercise control over one’s goods is to have the right to deprive others of them’ and, hence, that the ‘domain of the good is the domain of power’.

Slavoj Žižek describes that feeling of difference as follows: ‘We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the “other” is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the “excess” that pertains to this

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64 Ibid., 45.
67 Ibid., p. 201.
68 STAVRAKAKIS, op. cit., p. 80.
way: the smell of “their” food, “their” noisy songs and dances, “their” strange manners, “their” attitude to work.” In short, it is about difference, about incompatibility between ‘our’ and ‘their’ ways of enjoyment. Furthermore, this different way of enjoyment would not invoke such a strong reaction if it was only marginal, unworthy of attention. On the contrary, it captivates, it fascinates, and this is its most dangerous aspect. ‘In everyday life, what I see in the other is nothing but my own ideal image (ideal ego), which I both love and hate: the eyes of the other indeed reflect my own specular image.’ Thus it becomes evident that ‘the subject meets lack and alienation where it seeks fullness and identity.’ In this way the alternative manner of enjoyment betrays us — it betrays the imaginary nature of our identification by posing a doubt in the chain of belief (I believe in the Thing and I believe that others believe in the Thing) that brings the Thing into being; it reveals that the identification that we have merely serves as a means to cope with the lack. That certainly stipulates the image of the other as a threat, as something to be defended against.

The aesthetics of difference often attributes the categories of purity, order, novelty, etc. to the ‘own’ nation and its culture, while leaving the Other nasty, ambivalent, disorderly, often sexualized, and generally speaking, creatively impotent, thus excluding him/her from the national aesthetic realm, while on the other hand further strengthening the togetherness and the sense of belonging among the similar. Such cognitive practices have a tendency to ‘lead people to privilege some ways of thinking and reject others in their everyday lives, at home, at work, in the formation of foreign policy, and so on.’ Cultural artefacts and even elements of historical heritage are similarly distinguished as belonging to either ‘us’ or ‘them’ by ‘indexing them through perceptions of sustainability and meaningfulness (or a lack thereof) to cultural groups,’ at the same time ascribing ‘other’ groups the inability to create a ‘meaningful’ or aesthetically ‘valuable’ culture. Such ascriptions have a crucial effect on the perception of difference. With the above in mind, “[t]he problem of political

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22 STAVRAKAKIS, op. cit., p. 36.
25 ROELOFS, op. cit., p. 204.
subjectivity is a question of naming, of naming a political subject and organizing politically around that name [determining] particularity in society and then hegemonically constructing that particularity into a generality that exerts a universal claim.  

Therefore, any binding structure of a collective entity, including society as a whole, exists by the merit of it being opposed to nothingness and not due to its universal or rational nature. In this case, we find ourselves immersed in the pool of antagonisms and differential relations that exclude the possibility of a totalizing unity of the particularities that are aggregated. Thus, once the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is established, ‘the lack or antagonism around which the subject and the social order are constituted is concealed and forgotten. In retrospect, it appears that the social order has always existed, or rather that there is some completely plausible account of why it exists in the form it does.  

A narrative then comes in support, explaining the world, and supposedly leaving no place for lack or excess, thus suturing and totalizing the social.  

Discussion

The social networks’ interactivity and the ensuing potential to attract and sustain attention by involving individuals in an ongoing issue are what make them a particularly apt environment for political communication. That is especially the case when the issue revolves around questions of identity or identification: instead of merely outpouring their frustration in front of a TV set or a newspaper, individuals are now capable of immediate public response; being taken out of the solitude of information consumption and placed within a network of similarly aggravated individuals only exacerbates the appeal of a particular message and the communal feeling within the virtual networks. As we have seen in the previous section, the distinction between ‘the own’ and ‘the other’ is particularly strong and pervasive in any case and, if spread along the lines of similar viewpoints and identifications (rather than across the lines demarcating divergent beliefs and identifications), has a tendency to lead

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77 EDKINS, op. cit., p. 104.


towards radicalisation and to stigmatisation of the Other. In fact, the preceeding part has already shown that the Other is easily converted into something negative, somebody who has no place in the ‘own’ community.

By commenting, sharing, and occasionally acting upon an issue or a piece of information, individuals have the opportunity to become part of the story and thus invest themselves in a cause more heavily than they would by merely consuming information via traditional media which does not demand (or, in fact, does not even allow) active participation. In this way, virtual stakeholder networks are formed, paving way for even more involvement and an increased prominence of a topic. Social media are, certainly, a perfect information source for an audience characterised by permanent connectivity: on the one hand, they allow for almost anything that can be captured to become information (thus actively contributing to the information overload so characteristic of today’s environment) while, on the other hand, enabling a new way of selecting information: one based on friends’ recommendations, shares, and likes and also on filtering by the networks’ algorithms. That, however, also allows for stigmatising and conflictual narratives of otherness to catch on: one initially might have no interest in or inclination towards the narrative but, by being first exposed to stigmatised otherness by one’s online contacts and then constantly reminded of the already familiar lines, one is beginning to feel increasingly insecure. That insecurity is caused by the longing for a stable and self-sufficient identity – essentially, a striving to cover the void at the heart of one’s existence, with satisfaction being always-elusive. One might not be fully aware of such striving until a reminder is encountered – and that reminder is thereafter deemed responsible for the loss of that blissful ignorance.

The aforementioned connectivity-based access to and propagation of information enable the temporal dominance of trending topics that gain more weight simply owing to their popularity. In the face of an absence of gatekeepers (and among the first things that social media did was democratisation of information supply), popularity tends to substitute veracity. For this reason, among the popular-qua-believable topics usually are messages that are catchy but not necessarily of adequate substance (n.b. that social media need light packaging and clear-cut distinctions). And since identity needs to be grounded in otherness (and therefore, the Other is a constitutive, albeit negated, part of one’s self), pervasive images, such as those of ethnic, cultural, racial and etc. otherness, tend to significantly increase the potential for mobilisation. After all, the ‘own’ here becomes the benchmark of the Good while the ‘other’ acts as its opposite, i.e. a benchmark of a very different kind altogether, becoming
the archetypal Alien. The ghettoisation of information whereby those already with an inclination towards a gated community lock themselves within a corresponding information sphere, and the bubbles of echoing messages that form around the online presence of such individuals effectively remove any realistic possibility of breaking out of a particular narrative’s influence (significant outside influence would be needed for such change). That is understandable – partaking in a closed and cohesive information environment, one at least makes a step towards the ever-elusive internal coherence and fullness. Collective truths, pertinent to particular online communities, are thus created, with a radicalised image of ‘the Other’ often being at the heart of such ‘truths’ that, in turn, solidify into narratives, affecting how the world is seen to operate and what opportunities and limitations are seen to exist.

At the same time, with the ‘I’ needing recognition in the gaze of another, i.e. recognition by what is considered to be the ‘own’, belonging to a joint information sphere gains special importance, adding to the unconscious satisfaction of being part of a closely-knit or, at least, easily definable (by whatever criterion) group. For that reason, bottom-up creation and propagation of grassroots voices might not necessarily signal inclusion (or if it does signal inclusion, then it is inclusion of a different kind, one actually based on exclusion). Individuals tend to hope that such internally inclusive common participation would allow for more fullness and self-certainty (both personal and collective), but then again the ultimate goal is ever-elusive, making such mobilisation a self-perpetuating and self-radicalising process: there always must be still something else to be done and something else to be fought against because the desired fullness is not yet here. Here one has to remember that social media by themselves could have a radicalising role: not only through homogeneity but also through heterogeneity and exposure to discussions. As a result, social media and the unconscious drives that animate humans appear to be operating in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Conclusions and Recommendation

This article has explored the online political communication of otherness through a partial integration of two perspectives: an analysis of some of the core characteristics of social media and Lacanian psychoanalysis. It has been found that despite offering distinct propositions, they can both contribute to an explanation of why radicalisation of otherness finds fertile ground online and is capable of becoming a unifying principle for significant groups of individuals or, at least, generating resentment against certain groups.
Social media, as any other platform, are about form, not content. Hence, the same qualities that have been lauded as making inclusive and democratic change happen, such as interactivity, the ability to connect individuals avoiding official channels and along interest lines, bottom-up provision of information, potential for mobilisation and etc., can just as well be directed towards more sinister aims such as exclusion or prevention of otherness from a state or other community. Other social media phenomena, such as ghettoisation of information, filter bubbles and echo chambers, only serve to strengthen the negative effects.

Meanwhile, on the psychoanalytic side, one's own self is seen as perpetually incomplete, hence the need for one's personal and group identity has to be grounded in the Other. And yet, the other is quickly turned into one's negative side, in extreme cases – even turned into an enemy or, at least, somebody who has no place in the community. That has everything to do with the striving for imaginary fullness (a corollary to the incomplete nature of the human being): in fact, the Other is made responsible for the fact that such fullness is ever-elusive. Social media act to both provide an outlet for and even strengthen the relevant drives. And both factors, when combined, make the communication of a supposed conflict between the ‘own’ and the ‘other’ a self-fulfilling prophecy – essentially, if one stresses the presence of conflict for long enough, that conflict will materialise.

This article has been a primarily theoretical endeavour. Hence, the synergy between the two approaches is yet to be tested by applying it in case studies. As a result, it is hoped that future studies will take up the principles outlined in this article and use them against real-life examples.

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IGNAS KALPOKAS

KITO KOMUNIKAVIMO SOCIALINĖSE MEDIJOSE MECHANIZMAI: TEORIJOS PRISTATYMAS

SANTRAUKA

Nors socialiniai tinklai dažnai pristatomi kaip itin svarbūs demokratizacijos įrankiai, šios medijos lygiai taip pat gali tapti terpe negatyviems tikslams, tokiems kaip grupių stigmatizacija ar atskirties skatinimas. Norint geriau suprasti, kodėl negatyviai žinutės neretai tampa tokios svarbios, būtina suvokti pagrindinius socialinių tinklų bei informacijos sklaidos juose principus, tačiau šis suvokimas nėra pakankamas pats savaime. Tam, kad būtų galima geriau suprasti motyvacinius faktorius, šiame straipsnyje pasitelkiami Jacques’o Lacano psichoanalizė. kitaip tariant, esama esminės sinergijos, kuri gali būti pasiekiama jungiant socialinių tinklų naudojimo analizę bei psichoanalizę. Pirmoji pade...
tinklų charakteristikos puikiai tinka negatyvumo Kito atžvilgiu sklaidai, o psichoanalizė paaiškina socialinių tinklų mobilizacinę ir agregacinę funkciją.

Socialiniai tinklai, kaip ir bet kuri kita platforma, yra visų pirma įrankis, neturintis jokio specifinio (pozityvaus ar negatyvaus) turinio. Todėl tie patys bruožai, kurie buvo itin vertinami kaip skatinantys įtrauktumą ir demokratizaciją (interaktyvumas, gebėjimas sujungti bendrų interesų turinčius individus išvengiant oficialių informacijos sklaidos kanalų, aktyvus pačių piliečių vaidmuo pateikiant informaciją, mobilizacinis potencialas ir t. t.), gali būti ne mažiau sėkmingai nukreipti neigiamieji tikslai. Šios tendencijos dar labiau sustiprinamos tokių socialinių tinklų fenomenų kaip informacijos getai, filtravimo burbulai bei aidų kambariai. Prie viso to reikia pridėti psychoanalitinį dėmesį neišvengiamai nebaigtai savasčiai, reiškiančiai, kad tiek individualus, tiek grupinis tapatumas turi būti pagrįstas Kito figūra. Tačiau šis Kita yra greitai paverčiamas paties individo (grupės) neišvengama puse ir, išskirtiniais atvejais, transformuojamas į priešo, pasisavinusio trūkstamą savastį (jos iš tiesų niekada ir nebuvo), įvaizdį. Kuomet socialinių tinklų ir nebaigtos savasties poveikiai susilieja, Kito stigmatizavimas tampa itin stiprus.

Šis straipsnis pateikia teorinį radikalizuotų kitoniškumo diskurso sklaidos socialiniuose tinkluose tyrimą. Vis didėjanti šių medijų skvarba reiškia, kad vis labiau svarbu įvardyti faktorius, lemiančius, kaip ir kodėl sklinda turinys, skirtas didinti socialinių, etninių, religinių ar kitų grupių atskirtį. Tokios analizės svarbą didina ir tai, kad socialinių tinklų radikalizacijos efektas yra išnaudojamas tokiuose kontekstuose kaip hibridinis karas (pvz., karinių veiksmų Ukrainoje atveju) ar siekiant paveikti integracijos procesus (pvz., pabėgelių krizes atveju). Kadangi šis straipsnis yra teorinis, autoriaus tikisi, kad atskleista perspektyvų sinergija tolimuiose tyrimuose bus pritaikyta praktinių atvejų analizei.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: socialinės medijos, kitoniškumas, konfliktas, psychoanalizė, identitetas.