EXPLORING THE MANY FACES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT: Social media and their effects on society have come under increased scrutiny and have merited increasingly divergent evaluations. They are usually seen either as natural promoters of emancipation and democracy or as tools for manipulation, oppression, and disempowerment. This introductory article seeks to develop a balanced account of social media and their effects, and presents a case for rethinking the architecture of today’s environment of information. It then concludes with an overview of the articles in this special issue.

KEYWORDS: Social media, Democracy, Manipulation, Empowerment, Disempowerment.
Social media have truly become an integral part of our everyday lives. However, their effect on social and political life still remains debatable. The conventional account of social media has long portrayed them as tools for empowerment, social and political change, freedom, and democracy. These views were particularly fuelled by events such as the Arab Spring. And yet, this conventional wisdom has come under attack – new research on co-optation of social media by non-democratic regimes, terrorist recruitment, the unfolding of events in Ukraine, and other developments have cast doubt over the overwhelmingly positive interpretations. Hence, this special issue calls for a balanced approach to social media and their contribution to everyday life. In fact, it is crucial that social media are understood to have no essence of their own, but instead are seen as empty vessels, as carriers of whatever is generated by the users themselves (Kalpokas, Mininger, Rusinaitė, 2013).

On the one hand, of course, a significant degree of democratisation has been achieved, with everyone possessing a smartphone and a social media account having the potential to make the news and to be the next emerging influencer (Harding, 2015). On the other hand, the misuse of such information, either institutional, as manifested by Facebook’s ‘fake news’ crisis (Lee, 2016), or political, including through creation of narratives intended to manipulate public opinion (Kalpokas, 2016). As a result, there is a pressing need to account for the multi-faceted nature of social media that goes beyond either the positive or the negative – and that is precisely the aim of this introductory article. It first introduces the positive and negative sides of social media before moving to the broader context of mediatisation and exploring the contents of this special issue.

**SOMETHING POSITIVE: POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

As for the positive aspects of social media, perhaps the most notable change has come in terms of reduced need for intermediaries, i.e. traditional media (Etling, Faris and Palfrey, 2010; Breuer, Landman and Farquhar, 2015) and creation of “direct and relatively constant channels of communication and diffusion of ideas” that, in turn, incite and sustain collective action (Rane and Salem, 2012: 108). Such function of social media can easily be seen as an antidote to today’s increasingly concentrated and corporate interest-driven mass media (McChesney, 2015). Hence, social media can be easily employed to provide and disseminate information that would otherwise be unavailable due to market, political, or other pressures (Valenzuela, 2013). However, some researchers point to context-dependency: particular social media have to be first politicised by
activists and only then can contribute to democratisation (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015), and information itself can be acquired, interpreted, and employed in numerous ways (McPherson, 2015). Nevertheless, users are seen to be empowered to independently promote their own perspective, challenging dominant and/or government-backed narratives (Loader and Mercea, 2011; Price, 2013) and thereby create both national and international protest networks and pressure groups that would otherwise be excluded from having a voice (Al-Momani, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). That is done by enabling people to connect, both emotionally and informationally, across different locations— in other words, by “making the remote local” (David, 2015). Some would even go as far as to imply an ethic of “perpetual participation” (De Luca, Lawson, and Sun, 2012) and that increased access to the Internet “facilitates democratic change by cultivating pro-democratic attitudes” seemingly on its own (Stoycheff and Nisbet, 2014: 642). Meanwhile, from the perspective of government institutions and bureaucracies, their use of social media and audience engagement, while not necessarily best suited for direct involvement of the citizenry in governance, can still increase perceived legitimacy and public support (Connolly Knox, 2016; Ekman and Wikholm, 2015).

Likewise, “citizen-initiated campaigning” seems to be democratising even the ‘high’ end of politics, whereby the previously dominant professional mode of election campaign organisation is being increasingly outsourced to the grassroots, particularly through social media (Gibson, 2015)—something that has become especially visible with the election of Donald Trump (The Economist, 2016), although such strategies have been successfully trialled before that as well, most notably during the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns. Such participation often is manifested through a creative can-do attitude, enabling citizens to take centre-stage in what would otherwise have been projects led almost exclusively by politicians and their staff (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016).

Moreover, the networks created on social media are themselves often seen to be ‘multiple and diverse’ so as to promote internal equality and pluralism, preventing the dominance of a single opinion; once turned to practice, such internally diverse networks could once again be seen as a natural impetus for democracy (Lim, 2013). In general, social media users appear to be more protest-minded (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebæk, 2012; Scherman, Arriagada and Valenzuela, 2015) as well as engaged in other forms of political participation than those with no track record of frequent use (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Xenos, Vromen and Loader, 2014). An ethic of “perpetual participation” might therefore be on the cards (DeLuca, Lawson and Sun, 2012), operating under “a logic
of aggregation”, whereby viral information flows instigate people to aggregate in offline spaces (Juris, 2012). Such aggregations can take place even when social media communication had not originally been intended to lead to protest but merely to express some grievances and/or criticism, thereby leading to challenges to the prevailing order that arise seemingly from nowhere – even from the most latent of oppositions (Castells, 2012; Harlow, 2011). Regardless of the particular strategies employed by social media users, it increasingly appears that various communicative forms of action appear to be signalling the prevalent mode of political engagement of the future (Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015). Hence, some authors have been tempted to postulate social media as “liberation technology” – a gamechanger in political and social relations (Diamond and Plattner, 2012). To this extent, it is not surprising that social media use for democratic purposes are even suggested as part of different stages of curricula (Krutka and Carpenter, 2017). However, it must be stressed, social media is most certainly not only about the positive uses.

**SOMETHING NEGATIVE: DISEMPOWERING THE PEOPLE**

On the negative side, meanwhile, social media can easily be seen as providing platforms for false rumours, both deliberate and not, outright propaganda, and other subversive material (Choo, 2011). Contrary to the appeals for an automatically democratic role of social media, some recent research indicates a darker potential, particularly in terms of exacerbating group differences and thus instigating violence, in particular if participation and contact-making on social media happens to take place along (ethnically or otherwise) segregated lines (Warren, 2015). Moreover, there can easily be a destabilising effect when it comes to dissatisfaction with democracy itself, very often due to demands being raised that are too detached from the social and political context or plainly impossible, or both; such an effect could be further strengthened by exacerbating disagreement when it comes to even the most fundamental issues that are supposed to hold a society together (Ceron and Memoli, 2016) as clearly demonstrated by the 2016 US Presidential campaign (El-Bermawy, 2016). What is more, it appears that whereas consumption of traditional news media and website-located news can be associated with higher political trust, access to information through social media correlates with lower political trust (Ceron, 2015). Moreover, social media use is increasingly being associated with the rising political mobilisation of right-wing extremism across most of the Western democracies (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016). As a result, the optimism regarding social media as providing authentic information is clearly undeserved: it applies
only in the sense that people tend to believe in what they are sharing (except for the salaried trolls, of course) but not necessarily to the content of what is being shared (Kalpokas, 2016).

Moreover, social media’s anti-authoritarian impetus is not straightforward either – in fact, social media is often populated by ideas that are more hardline than the regime itself, thereby facilitating anti-democratic participation (Dalgren, 2012; Joseph, 2012). The latter traits seem to be particularly, although by no means exclusively, pertinent to homegrown social networks (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015). More broadly, though, social media can easily be co-opted by authoritarian regimes and used as a means to 1) collect information about grievances prevalent within the population; 2) employ public opinion for keeping local regime officials in check; 3) boost legitimacy through shaping public discourse; and 4) coordinate and mobilise the regime’s support base (Gunitsky, 2015). Such co-optation, then, is intended to beat the opposition in what has, until recently, been supposed as their own game, especially when such pro-regime mobilisation transcends online-offline boundaries (Rød and Weidman, 2015). Harassment of the opposition, particularly indirect, ‘outsourced’ to various pro-regime groups and individuals (often not publicly disclosed as such) is one more effective tactic (Pearce, 2015). What is more, social media can disempower activists by enabling unprecedented surveillance, not only by governments but also by businesses against which such activism might be directed (Uldam, 2014). That is, perhaps, why there seems to be no statistically robust correlation between the spread of social media and the spread of pro-democratic social movements – rather, local socio-economic conditions seem to be more significant (Rane and Salem, 2012; Rød and Weidman, 2015).

Although social media clearly enable communication, including exchange of information and grievances, that same communication could be disempowering as well, leading to idle chatter for its own sake, which in fact reduces the impetus for offline activism, which is the only means to bring about real change (Miller, 2015). Also, there is ample evidence of social media being more about the emancipation of ‘me’ rather than ‘us’, i.e. individual wishes and desires trumping collective goals and collective action (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016). Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of identity content in social media movements – they are about the outward manifestation of action at the expense of more substantial expression of essence (Ferrari, 2016), rendering such movements unsustainable in the long term. And amongst those influencers (both group and individual) who are able to inspire action, very few are just completely random: usually it is up to those who already have a strong presence...
and strong following to drag others with them (Markham, 2014). Crucially, in both personal and institutional terms, the use of (social) media and pre-existing structures of power are inextricable (Freedman, 2014).

From a national security perspective, meanwhile, information warfare has become one of the buzzwords regarding the provision of information on social media and its potential to affect the users’ cognition of the environment. Essentially, then, “aggressive communication tactics and broader warfare through trolling and memes is a necessary, inexpensive, and easy way to help destroy the appeal and morale” of one’s opponents (Giese, 2015: 69), thereby provoking the target audience to act and desire in a particular way (Holmstrom, 2015). Such tactics are employed, with relative success, not only by state actors such as Russia and China but also non-state ones, most notably, ISIS (Giese, 2015). For ISIS in particular, social media have proved to be crucial means of recruitment and extending appeal (Klausen, 2015). Indeed, terrorist use of social media had become one of the latest trends that governments are still unprepared to tackle effectively (Tsesis, 2017).

Essentially, mobilising groups of people over distance through manipulation or tendential supply of information (Yannakogeorgos, 2014) has become the defining feature of what is now called psychological operations or information warfare (which is itself part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy (Lanoszka, 2016). That is particularly because people tend to bond with those similar to them, both online and offline, increasing the likelihood of being shut within information ghettos (Joseph, 2012; Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley, 2014). At the heart of the matter, there is always a narrative, particularly one about a given country, its population, and government (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014). Loss of support for the state or its way of life, then, merely means that the official narrative has already failed to convince a significant proportion of the population (Warren, 2014).

NO INTRINSIC QUALITIES – JUST MEDIATISED POLITICS

Although the optimistic interpretation of social media has traditionally been dominant (Boulianne, 2015), it has come under increasing scrutiny. In fact, one perhaps should strive for a middle ground and embrace the contingent nature of social media. This shift involves acknowledging that social media can, indeed, be useful, and even indispensable, in democratic mobilisation and more effective spread of information while at the same time keeping the contrary – manipulative, disempowering, authoritarian – potential in mind. In fact, both
possibilities should be seen on equal terms. Moreover, social media cannot be seen as capable of causing any – either pro- or anti-democratic – change on their own; instead, there first has to be a set of grievances or perceived dangers that has to be intentionally politicised and, then, a core of hardline devotees who are able and willing to get the ball rolling (Comunello and Anzera, 2012; Dalgren, 2012). What the prevalence of social media points out, though, is just another step in the process of mediatisation of politics.

In broad terms, mediatisation refers to a trend whereby “contemporary society is permeated by the media, to the extent that the media may no longer be conceived as being separate from cultural and other social institutions” (Hjarvard, 2008: 105). Essentially, then, media becomes the means for various institutions to carry out their activities, meaning that we have now achieved “the integration of media into institutions whose core business is something other than media, like political, religious, and historical institutions” (Burgess, Klaebe and McWilliam, 2010: 149). The media have thereby simultaneously “developed into a semi-independent societal institution” and “have integrated into the workings of other institutions” (Hjarvard, 2016: 9). Among the most notable effects of such development has been the push of popularity and attention-grabbing above other criteria (Clark, 2012; Kunelius and Reunanen, 2012). In this context, socialised information, defined as a collective good that has been both created and consumed whilst employing social media platforms (Khan, 2013), achieves paramount importance. On the other hand, though, one should not stress information only: in fact, there are ample indications that we may be passing from the Information Age to the Experience Age, i.e. from the era of accumulation to the era of emotion and everything happening here and now (Wadhera, 2016). The latter development could, and arguably should, be seen as leading to what is now being increasingly referred to as ‘post-truth politics’ (Davies, 2016), whereby truth is more and more pertaining to identification with and experience of a statement than to the latter’s relation to verifiable facts. Since the promotion of post-truth experience is primarily a social media phenomenon (Viner, 2016), critical evaluation of their role and function in today’s societies is ever more pertinent.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Contributions to this special issue offer a rich variety of uses and abuses of social media, thereby enabling a glimpse into the new media environment. Denis Petrina offers a theoretical approach to social media, challenging the commonplace perception of social media as empowering their users to be the masters of
their action and fate. Drawing particularly from the ideas of Michel Foucault, he reveals the patterns and practices of subjectification, particularly as manifested by the absence of continuity between media and politics as well as the break between agency and structure. Both of those breaks are seen as mediated by subjectivity-manufacturing discourse. It is this subject-producing nature of discourse that is then subjected to further scrutiny, aiming to establish whether it is, in fact, empowering or disempowering.

The theme of activity versus passivity is also explored by Rūta Sutkutė who explored the communicative practices of the *Je suis Charlie* and *Je ne suis pas Charlie* online communities in the wake of the terrorist attacks against the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine. In particular, emphasis is on the discursive conflicts between demonization, marginalisation, and stigmatisation of Muslim communities on one side and calls for tolerance and inclusiveness on the other side. The communicative dichotomy and selective exposure to one particular side of the argument thereby produced has become a particularly topical issue with regards to access to information on social media and therefore an exposition of such processes is of particular importance.

Still within the remit of political use of social media, Laima Zakaraitė explores the ways in which political leaders present themselves on social media. However, instead of focusing on channels and transmission of information, the article explores self-presentation and creation of virtual identities. Accepting that today’s candidates are essentially constructs, consciously cleated in particular ways that are expected to appeal to target demographics and create (actual or perceived) audience empowerment, the author also looks at the broader context of celebrity culture in order to provide a fuller picture.

Donata Bocullo, meanwhile, introduces a completely different use of social media: film marketing. Although the use of social media for marketing purposes – from more traditional product marketing to more innovative applications, such as political marketing – has been well-documented, film marketing, and particularly outside the US context (the article deals with European cinema), is still a rather under-researched area. This article is particularly intended to understanding the circumstances under which social media can be employed to forge a continent-wide following of European cinema, in particular with regard to overcoming perhaps the most significant limiting factor, absent from the US-centric literature – the cultural and linguistic diversity of the continent and the relative absence of common identity. Also differently from the prevailing focus, emphasising external institutional efforts, rather than those intrinsic to the industry itself.
Finally, Jaq Greenspon looks into the possible clashes between self-expression and intellectual property protection occurring in the online environment. Not only there are notable conflicting business and artistic interests and potential misuse of self-expression for (primarily corporate) gain but also creation of new works, particularly in terms of memes, can be severely hampered. Therefore, the author urges both scholars and practitioners to put in more effort in order to explore and develop the limitations to and possible openings for a more artistically inclusive social media environment. Making use of both contemporary and historical examples, this is clearly a timely piece, dealing with some of the basic inherent tensions that affect almost every active user of social media.

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DAUGIALYPIO SOCIALINIŲ MEDIJŲ VEIDO TYRIMAI

SANTRAUKA

Socialinės medijos bei jų poveikis visuomenei tampa intensyvios analizės objektu, o jų vertinimai nevienareikšmiai. Socialinės medijos dažniausiai yra matomos arba kaip tiesioginės emancipacijos ir demokratijos skatintojos, arba kaip manipuliavimo, paverčimo bei socialinės ir politinės galios atėmimo priemonės. Šiame įvadiniame straipsnyje pateikiamas subalansuotas socialinių medijų bei jų poveikio vertinimas, išryškinant poreikį permąstyti šių dienų informacinės aplinkos infrastruktūrų. Pabaigoje apžvelgiami šio specialaus numerio straipsniai.

RAKTINIAI ŽODŽIAI: socialinės medijos, demokratija, manipuliavimas, įgalinimas, galios atėmimas.