

The Information Dilemma: Exploring the Impact of Social Media in Public Discourse in the United States

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While information still carries the connotation of facts and truth, a severe shift in the media landscape has taken place with the emergence of social media. Driven away from mainstream media into filter bubbles and echo chambers¹ communities and societies have lost a common ground of what once was perceived as a shared reality and, to some extent, shared values. The egalitarian utopia where everyone can be heard, where each individual can contribute to a common public discourse for the sake of consensus, which shapes the identity of a nation, has long given way to a dystopia where everyone hysterically demands to be agreed with. This article explores the historical and economic context and the key players in media and politics responsible for a public discourse that seems to be, as of 2021, shattered beyond repair

Obwohl Informationen immer noch weitestgehend mit Fakten und Wahrheit gleichgesetzt werden, hat sich die Medienlandschaft durch soziale Medien und Netzwerke stark verändert. Dadurch, dass Gruppen und Gesellschaften weg von den etablierten Medien in Filterblasen und Echokammern² gedrängt werden, fehlt eine Basis für das, was einst als gemeinsame Realität und in gewissem Maße auch als gemeinsame Werte wahrgenommen wurde. Die auf Gleichheit beruhende Utopie, in der jeder eine Stimme hat und zu einem gemeinsamen, auf Konsens bedachten, öffentlichen Diskurs beitragen kann, der identitätsbildend wirkt, ist längst einer Dystopie gewichen, in der alle hysterisch Zustimmung einfordern. Dieser Artikel untersucht die historischen und ökonomischen Kontexte und die Hauptakteure in Medien und Politik, die für den derzeit (Stand 2021) zerrütteten öffentlichen Diskurs verantwortlich sind.

Introduction

Shortly after the President of the United States waved goodbye for the last time before boarding Marine One on the lawn of the White House, it was up to the U.S. Congress to restore confidence

in the political system. This system had been attacked by an unprecedented and painstakingly orchestrated act of perpetration for the sole sake of maintaining political power. While an impeachment process had been inevitable, GOP representatives soon reverted to pushing back and attacking the political opponents by re-framing the negative coverage as “part of an ongoing series of partisan attacks against the Republican Party that emanated from several corners of the so-called liberal establishment” (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 17). The attempt to divert the President’s responsibility went to the extent of framing the entire scandal as “just a political ploy by the president’s enemies” (Unger, 2008, p. 100), concluding that the Democrats’ reaction “proved that their political opponents had little interest in rebuilding national unity” (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 17). Though this description insinuates news footage of Donald J. Trump heading off to Mar-a-Lago after inciting a violent insurrection, it was indeed Richard Nixon leaving the White House on August 9, 1974, before being impeached for obstruction of justice, abuse of power and contempt of Congress. The relevant similarities are to be found in the Republicans’ response to the political and public outcry after Gerald Ford’s Proclamation 4311 on September 8, 1974, when the sitting President granted his predecessor “a full, free, and absolute pardon [...] for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in.” Like their predecessors in 1974, the first move of Republicans in 2021 was to divert the attention away from the culprits of the insurrection attempt on January 6 to the political foe. Capitol rioters proudly displaying their devoted support for their “cult leader” (Cohen, 2020) Trump³ with flags and MAGA hats were now twisted as a mob that was infiltrated and provoked by Antifa, who allegedly “orchestrated the Capitol attack with clever mob control tactics” (RepMoBrooks, 2021), seconding Representative Matt Gaetz’ tweet that “Facial recognition firm claims Antifa infil-

trated Trump protesters who stormed Capitol” (RepMattGaetz, 2021). After these accusations were widely refuted, GOP Senator Ron Johnson attempted to deflect responsibility from Trump evangelists to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, suggesting she deserved some blame for the Capitol Riots on January 6 when pitching the impeachment trial against then-President Trump as “another diversion operation” meant to “deflect away from what potentially the Speaker knew and when she knew it.” This was followed by the recourse to the entire (second) impeachment being another part of the Democrats’ cancel culture, a famous mantra among Republicans. Finally, it was concluded that impeachment threatens the unity of the country: “President Biden, in his inaugural address, talked about healing, talked about unifying this county. Is the impeachment trial of a former president, is that healing? Is that going to unify? I would argue no, it’s very vindictive, it’s very divisive, and we need to heal” (Manning, 2021).

During the House Oversight Committee hearing on Wednesday, May 12, 2021, Rep. Andrew Clyde trivialized the Capitol riots as what looked to him as a normal tourist visit, right after denying that an insurrection had taken place at all: “Let me be clear: There was no insurrection. And to call it an insurrection, in my opinion, is a bold-faced lie” (Clyde, 2021). This historical repetition of a derogatory discourse indicates that the self-perception of both parties as being morally and ideologically superior is so prevalent that any form of criticism is seen as outrageously unjust, to which the immediate response is to a) divert attention, b) rebut and reframe negative coverage, c) discredit sources of negative information (individuals or institutions), d) invoke a partisan framing and political identity (political warfare).

Maybe consensus would be too much to ask for from representatives who are expected to stand tall for their specific agenda and their constituency – when signals of goodwill or concessions could be seen as weakness or worse, as treason to be punishable by not being reelected. However, should not at least media representatives deliver

what political representatives fail to provide: a genuine public discourse for the sake of common denominator driven by the quality of the arguments rather than defamatory rhetoric? A weak public political discourse was exposed as early as 2004 when the former host of Comedy Central’s Daily Show Jon Stewart was invited to CNN’s show Crossfire on October 15 of that year. While the hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala intended to talk about Stewart’s new book release, soon the show concept of Crossfire and the hosts’ complicit role in it was at the center of attention when Stewart pleaded to their hosts: “Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America. [...] Right now, you’re helping the politicians and the corporations. [...] You’re part of their strategies. You are partisan, what do you call it, hacks. [...] – you’re doing theater when you should be doing debate [...]. What you do is partisan hackery. [Y]ou have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably [...]” (CNN, 2004). With his comparison to pro wrestling, Stewart ridiculed CNN’s attempt to mock political discussions while adhering to the imperative of private network television: content has to be entertaining to sell advertisement. In 2021, conservative blogger Ben Domenech commented on Stewart’s appearance in Crossfire in the following way: “Crossfire was canceled months later – what do we see? There is today essentially no program on all of cable television that pairs left and right perspectives on camera as co-equal hosts, allowed to engage in free and open debate about the topics of the day” (Domenech, 2021).

The Division of a Country

From an increasingly complex world with multilateral implications of any national policy and forces acting efficiently from the dark depths of the world wide web derives the ever-growing desire to have a foe in plain sight, with defined features and specific ideas of morality to despise vehemently. During the Cold War, the communist regime was the epitome of this opposing force from which identity and unity were stemmed. However, the “decline and demise of the Cold War removed one of the last sources of consensus

in American life, allowing the polarization and partisanship to reach new depths” (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019). After the victory celebration over communism in the early 1990s, the U.S.-American society woke up with a massive hangover: The victorious ideology of neo-liberal capitalism picked up the pace of moving its production and capital to countries like Vietnam and China which previously had remained inaccessible behind the iron curtain. This process initially commenced “four decades ago, when corporate America [...] shifted from a multiple stakeholder focus (shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers and communities) to a singular focus on maximizing shareholder value and rewarding CEO’s disproportionately for doing that” (Islam & Crego, 2020). It was and is the logical continuation of an economic system that is blind towards sustainable growth for the sake of its nurturing society but always favoring revenue and profit for the few. The result is a growing division of a hyper-wealthy 1% versus an increasingly impoverished 99%, putting further pressure on a struggling middle class which sees “others getting ahead and wonder why, to feel centuries of privilege and values slipping away” (Sedensky, 2016). While the answer is blatantly apparent, an alternative narrative had to be established to suppress a public discourse about the sustainability of an economic system that exploits so many for the benefit of so few: the erosion of status, class and identity was linked to minorities with little to no lobby. But “LGBT people didn’t outsource their jobs. Minorities didn’t cause climate change. Immigrants didn’t issue predatory loans from which they now have lost their houses and everything they ever had. These guys are right to be angry, but they’re delivering the mail to the wrong address” (Kimmel, 2017).

The Dilemma of a Revenue-Driven Media Landscape

Nothing signifies better the purely profit-oriented disruption of the public discourse during the 2016 presidential campaigns than a group of teenagers and young men from a small town named Veles south of Skopje in North Macedonia:

looking for opportunities to generate online traffic that would result in advertisement revenue, the young villagers found a highly profitable market within the rapidly growing culture of public outrage in the United States. With no shares in politics nor any interest in the ideology or political agenda of either candidate, Clinton or Trump, the group learned fast that “the best way to generate traffic is to get their politics stories to spread on Facebook – and the best way to generate shares on Facebook is to publish sensationalist and often false content that caters to Trump supporters” (Silverman, 2016). They created more than 140 U.S. political websites with catchy domain names like DonaldTrumpNews.com or TrumpVision365.com and successfully emerged as revenue-driven click-bait entrepreneurs, all the while significantly contributing to the stream of hyper-partisan posts on Facebook. The business concept of social media and its underlying algorithms aiming at the user’s undivided attention in an aggravated and unregulated socio-economic setting allows for an explanatory approach for the ‘perfect storm’ hitting democracy since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. That year, social media consumers in the United States may have noticed that their feeds drifted either in a blue or red direction. “Either way, in [2016], it has almost certainly become more intense” (Herrman, 2016). This growing intensity was not the result of an increased interest in political content during the 2016 elections evoked by cleverly conducted campaign strategies. Nor was this election considered to be historically more relevant than previous ones. The world witnessed how the public was rapidly slipping fast from confusion to annoyance to frustration to becoming increasingly furious and finally downright outraged about either of the two presidential candidates. What had happened compared to previous years? Well, social media had happened: even though the Obama campaign already utilized social media platforms in 2008, their functionality back then was rudimentary and mainly focused on raising awareness and financial support. This all changed when Facebook introduced the Like-Button on February 9 and FriendFeed on August 10, 2009, with

significant effects on users and on the dynamics with which posts were and are spreading: even though only a minority of adolescents fall under the category of social media addicts, the Like-Button must be seen as a critical component for a prevalent habitual social media use, which is triggered by a “craving for validation, experienced by billions around the globe, that’s currently pushing platform engagement in ways that in 2009 were unimaginable” (Morgans, 2017). This engagement is not an incidental phenomenon but the result of design techniques⁴ developed by programmers who understand the neuroscience of ‘brain hacking’: “[...] since we’ve figured out, to some extent, how these pieces of the brain that handle addiction are working, people have figured out how to juice them further and how to bake that information into apps” (Cooper, 2017). Now with many smartphone users conditioned to be online and hooked to social media platforms, the mechanics behind the phenomenon of emerging populism around the world, the division of the United States into two irreconcilable camps and the shift towards totalitarianism culminating in the attempt to topple the U.S. government during the insurrection on January 6, 2021, are coming in sight. At the very core of this torn-apart society lies an entirely unregulated economy, whose business model pivots around a highly profitable, more and more fragmented, divided and hence scarce commodity: our attention.

With the introduction of its 24-hour cable news network on June 1, 1980, CNN disrupted the media landscape by shifting the journalistic focus from editing news to getting out news quickly. In the late 1990s and early 2000s the expansion of the internet opened up myriad options for media consumers and thus spurred the dissemination of information exponentially. However, this did not lead to better-informed citizens making well-informed decisions based on crossed-checked research. In an “information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes: [...] the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to

allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (Simon, 1971). The saturation of information led many viewers to abandon the news entirely or become more suspicious and fatigued about politics (Dagnes, 2010). Hence, media personalities such as Tucker Carlson or Chris Cuomo, who formulate opinions on complex matters that resonate with their own belief system, have become an integral substitution for deriving a personal stance on each topic arising by rationally weighing the pros and cons. The proliferated fragmentation of the media landscape towards “hybrid forms of information and comment that blur the boundaries among journalism, politics, entertainment, public relations activism” (Hallin, 2021) has mostly caused a shift towards opinion and belief warfare which in its nature doesn’t aim for consensus but rather for domination. Yet, the blatant partisan alignment of ‘news’ anchors and night show hosts today and their obligation to convey any arising topic entertainingly in either an appalled or cynical manner for the sake of market shares were and are not the divisive factor driving a wedge into U.S. society. It is the logic of the attention economy first infiltrated and now dominated by technology that pushes individuals “from milder to more extreme content” (Ribeiro et al., 2020) by its surreptitious algorithms: once a person starts using any social media platform its artificial intelligence begins profiling the new user, continuously testing his or her preferences for posts, pictures, ads, news and videos based on the attention time allocated for various content. Similar to the marketing rule that maintaining a customer is much cheaper than winning a new customer, retaining the attention of the user within in the app or platform is way easier than to bring him or her back. Thus, keeping the user’s attention is the imperative goal. But even if AI-driven profiling algorithms know all our preferences and feed us exactly what we want, this will eventually wear off. So, one of the essential design techniques is not to feed us with our desired content continuously but rather withholding it before releasing it in bursts perfectly timed just before we are about to shift

our interest away. The second, equally important design technique is to expose us with slightly more aggravating content to keep us engaged. This technique is addressing and exploiting our biological disposition to have a heightened awareness and receptiveness for negative information, called negativity bias (Hanson, 2013). In the evolutionary context this may have been an effective filter for survival. But with the beginning of civilization negative bias has become a highly efficient tool of manipulation both for economic and political interest. Social media critic Tristan Harris considers it “unsurprising that social media content generating fear, anger, and disgust spreads much faster than positive content. We marinate in this negativity, and it propels deeper engagement. Fear and outrage become the norm [...]” (Harris, 2021). In this stimulated state of heightened anxious alertness “companies sell user’s attention and personal information to the highest bidder, who uses it to manipulate thoughts and beliefs – be it about products or politics – with very little transparency” (Harris, 2017) and with no concern for the democratic stability of a nation. In 2016, Steve Bannon, at that time chief executive officer of Trump’s presidential campaign, advised the latter to ride the ticket of a populist, nationalist position intensely. Firstly, because this was already in line with Bannon’s belief system that he had been advocating as CEO of the far-right news, opinion and commentary website Breitbart, where “immigration was [its] issue long before Trump gave it the perfect candidate” (Benkler et al., 2018). Secondly, with what had happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, there was compelling historical evidence that xenophobia could be induced in order to establish a ‘savior,’ who would be the ‘last hope’ from a fabricated existential threat.

The Trump campaign could have used conventional communication channels to establish the narrative of a “pure nation” that was about to be “polluted” by “criminal,” “violent,” “Muslim,” and “disease-infested immigrants” (Faris et al., 2017). However, for Bannon’s taste, there was not enough certainty that even with cleverly designed

Facebook ads and marketing-based campaigns the political adversary Hillary Clinton could be defeated. Bannon believed that a war cannot be won if the enemy has access to the same weapon arsenal. Hence, a propaganda tool was needed that had already proven itself to effectively change the behavior of targeted population groups in developing countries and would be exclusively available to the Trump campaign: Cambridge Analytica (CA), a subsidiary of the global election management agency SCL group, delivered this tool, that was designed to conduct psychological operations titled Project Alamo. It utilized a database of fifty million Facebook users, which had been harvested between June and August 2014 (Stahl, 2018) to create psychological profiles of 230 million Americans and 5,000 data points on each American voter. Brittany Kaiser, former director of business development at CA, explains the tactics of combining micro-targeting with new constructs of psychology:

The bulk of our resources went into targeting those whose minds we thought we could change. We called them the persuadables: They are everywhere in the country. But the persuadables who mattered were the ones in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Florida. [...] If we target enough persuadable people in the right precincts, then those states would turn red instead of blue. Our creative team designed personalized content to trigger those individuals. We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos, ads, every platform you can imagine. Until they saw the world the way we wanted them to. Until they voted for our candidate. (Amer & Noujaim, 2019)

Equally essential to win over undecided voters for Trump was to discourage Clinton-supporters to vote in the election. In October 2016, “[t]hree major voter suppression operations” (Green & Issenberg, 2016) were specifically targeting idealistic white liberals, young women and African Americans who were pivotal to Hillary Clinton’s victory. People who belonged to these groups received so-called ‘dark posts’ which were visible only to them. Roger McNamee, as one of the

first investors who saw the vast potential of Facebook also understood the highly detrimental effect the social media platform has on democracies and their election process through targeted voter suppression campaigns: “Social media can do this by, for example, running ads which show long queues or disturbances at voting stations, or messaging creating apathy about the democratic process” (McNamee, 2020). The Trump campaign spent \$70 million a month on their digital operations and ran “5.9 million visual ads on Facebook, in contrast to Hillary Clinton’s 66,000” (Amer & Noujaim, 2019). This asymmetric propaganda warfare was unmatched by mainstream media, which responded with negative coverage about both presidential candidates to adhere to the journalistic paradigm of neutrality. However, “in an asymmetric propaganda environment, neutrality is complicity” (Benkler et al., 2018).

The aftermath of these psychological warfare tactics resulted in a segment of the American population being turned into a constant state of anger, fear, outrage, or anxiety. These emotional states of heightened alertness kept this segment highly susceptible for any further incendiary headlines, feeding the narrative of the American culture existentially threatened by minorities and the political left.⁵ The attention had shifted towards right-wing media outlets and with it substantial market shares: “‘Last month, Breitbart achieved 192 million page views, 31 million uniques, and 89 million visits,’ said Breitbart Editor-in-Chief Alexander Marlow. ‘And we’re the number one political Facebook page in the world, with two million more engagements than Huffington Post. We look forward to keeping up that same standard of excellence in Steve [Bannon’s] temporary absence’” (News, 2016). What was initially intended as a ploy to push Donald Trump into office turned out to be a highly effective measure to detach Trump’s devotees entirely from mainstream media. Locked into echo chambers and deprived of the ethics of objective journalism, the Trump fan base was now fully exposed to partisan fiction of right-wing media players such as Fox News, Breitbart, The Daily Caller, TheBlaze, Infowars and Newsmax⁶ (Polskin, 2017), which turned out to be a very lucrative

market. These prominent right-wing media protagonists are seconded by a “growing sea of bloggers, podcasters, message board moderators, conspiracy theorists, social media pundits, extremist preachers and ‘news’ outlets [who also] feed off Trump directly, using the president’s lies” (Ludwig, 2021). By acting as clickbait entrepreneurs in an outrage culture they attempt to skim off the remaining attention for the sake of gaining followers, whose likes and hits directly translate to donations and ad revenue.

The economics of right-wing media, strongly correlating to the number of social media followers, became apparent when the biggest concern of right-wing media figures in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, insurrection attempt was not the attack on the institution itself, the epicenter of the U.S. democracy and thus the epitome of the free world. Neither did the death of Police Officer Brian Sicknick cause outrage among right-wing media hosts, who are usually known for their law-and-order ideology and highly sympathetic for the Back the Blue movement.⁷ The main concern of right-wing media figures was losing substantial amounts of Twitter followers after Donald Trump’s account got suspended: Fox News host Brian Kilmeade announced on January 9, 2021: “So I have actually lost 30k followers in 4 hours? Is that even possible? [...] Is this to please @JoeBiden?” (Kilmeade, 2021). After losing more than 100,000 Twitter followers in the weeks following the Capitol riots, Fox News host Maria Bartiromo traced this loss to the “censorship obsession” of Democrats (Haroun, 2021). After banning Donald Trump permanently from their platform, Twitter deleted more than 70,000 accounts responsible for sharing QAnon conspiracy theories, justifying this step as a measure of risk management: “Given the violent events in Washington, D.C., and increased risk of harm, we began permanently suspending thousands of accounts that were primarily dedicated to sharing QAnon content on Friday afternoon” (Safety, 2021).

The attention economy is entirely indifferent towards the nature or direction of public discourse. Its primary concern is solely to generate as much attention as possible, as Tristan Harris,

advocate for a humane technology, diagnoses on CBS's 60 Minutes: "It's not because anyone is evil or has bad intentions. It's because the game is getting attention at all costs. And the problem is it becomes this race to the bottom of the brainstem, where if I go lower on the brainstem to get you [...] using my product, I win" (Cooper, 2017). And if the topic catching the public attention happens to be politics in 2016, so be it. However, since politics mainly deal with rational responses to complex problems and require lengthy analysis and discourses to achieve consensus, they do not provide the material to stir up emotions. In this environment, a presidential candidate prone to polarize due to his psychological disposition and populist stances was much more likely to be pushed by algorithms in surge for more clicks, shares and comments through the discord he naturally evokes on his own. On November 9, 2016, it may have been a big surprise for observers of the U.S. presidential campaign that a 'wildly ill-disciplined' candidate with no expertise in politics whatsoever and appalling outbursts towards women, minorities, and anyone daring to criticize him had "pulled off the most astonishing victory in U.S. history" (Smith, 2016). However, in hindsight, with the knowledge of the underlying currents of a fundamentally distorted, tweaked and to some significant extent irreversibly eroded public discourse, Donald Trump was the logical, maybe even the inevitable choice for the attention economy. Facebook critic Roger McNamee identifies a clear correlation between economic interests of social media platforms and their lenient handling of politically motivated hatred: "Having politics take place on social media has given the social media platforms enormous power. And so, when you look at hate speech, disinformation, conspiracy theories, if you take them out, the level of engagement on these platforms goes way, way down - and with it, their economic value. Hate speech, misinformation, conspiracy theories, that is the lubricant for their business" (McNamee, 2020). From Donald Trump's announcement on June 16, 2015, to run for president until the inauguration of Joe Biden on January 21, 2021, Facebook has increased its annual revenue from \$14,639 to \$94,399 billion.

The Dilemma of Foreign Influence on Public Discourse

Domestic economic and political interests were not the only driving forces meddling with the free will of U.S.-American voters. In April 2021, evidence of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign emerged (Treasury, 2021). Attacks on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) email server and its influence on the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns were conducted as a result of collusion between Donald J. Trump and Russian intelligence.⁸ With or without collusion, Russia was intrinsically motivated to favor Trump: he was a political rookie with no expertise whatsoever in foreign policy or diplomacy; he suffered from pathological narcissism, which made him predictable and thus prone to manipulation and corruption.⁹ At the time of his presidential candidacy, Trump and his senior advisors, Paul Manafort and Carter Page, had extensive ties with Russian financiers (Nesbit, 2016). Trump's open dismissal of the NATO and his cheering Britain's vote to exit the European Union made him an ideal future President to weaken military and political opposition to Putin's expansion plans in Eastern Europe. Finally, Donald Trump's personality trait of a radical right-wing populist (Betz, 2020) was bound to polarize the political landscape and the entire U.S. society, drive a nation into trench warfare of evangelists and haters and thus would absorb most of the media attention domestically. This would eventually open up room for Putin's desire to "Make Russia Great Again," as lifelong Republican Max Boot expressed his concern back in 2015, that the Trump campaign Make America Great Again should be revealed as the deceptive front end of Russian geostrategic interests (Boot, 2015). Consequently, Russia "disseminated inflammatory posts that reached 126 million users on Facebook, published more than 131,000 messages on Twitter and uploaded over 1,000 videos on Google's YouTube service. [...]" (Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017). These attacks on U.S.-American public opinion were orchestrated by the Internet Research Agency, a Russian company based in St. Petersburg and described by the U.S. Intelligence Community as a troll

farm. The Russian President “ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election [...] denigrate [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency” (National Intelligence Council, 2017). In 2017, Twitter discovered that “more than 2,700 accounts on its service that were linked to the Internet Research Agency between September 2016 and November 2016” (Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017). The Russian agenda was not limited to get Trump into the White House in 2016; it is in the Kremlin’s interest to see the United States “in conflict on big social issues” (Entous et al., 2017), e.g., the racial tensions following the death of George Floyd. They posed an excellent opportunity for Russian intelligence to intensify discord and social tensions between ethnic groups in the United States by playing both the Black Lives Matter and the Blue Lives Matter movements, even to the extent to organize real-life political demonstrations. After continuously growing public pressure Facebook eventually acknowledged for the first time on September 6, 2017, that “inauthentic accounts from 2015 to 2017 promoted what the company’s chief security officer, Alex Stamos, characterized as ‘divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum’” (Poulsen et al., 2017). While Russia’s interest in destabilizing other countries is as old as the Cold War, the means have changed dramatically: Facebook, “an advertising juggernaut worth almost half a trillion dollars” (Entous et al., 2017) with currently 2,701 billion monthly active users, 35% of the world’s population has been and remains wide open for any kind of micro-targeted psyops, which are severely detrimental to the unity of communities, societies, and nations. During her Ted Talk in 2019 Guardian-journalist Carole Cadwalladr directly addressed “the gods of Silicon Valley” and challenged them to acknowledge, that their technology, once developed to connect people, “is now driving us apart” (Cadwalladr, 2019).

Only time will tell, whether today’s tech giants will continue to be indifferent towards their responsibility for the demise of democracies for the sole sake of profit and growth. History will tell, whether politicians will find the courage to

regulate these companies while renouncing the temptations of gaining political power through social media and populism. And our personal biographies eventually will tell, whether we as individuals will have found the strength to withstand the devious triggers of the attention economy while claiming back the agency for our own lives.

Endnotes

¹ While the term ‘filter bubble’ is limited to the domain of online mechanisms, the ‘echo chamber’ extends its reach into the analog realm of the real-life social interactions where we surround ourselves with like-minded peers

² Während der Begriff der ‚Filterblase‘ auf den Online-Bereich beschränkt ist, gilt der Begriff der ‚Echokammer‘ gleichermaßen im analogen, echten Leben, wo wir uns mit Gleichgesinnten umgeben

³ Accused Capitol rioter Anthony Antonio stated on Chris Cuomo’s Developing Tonight: “When I was 18 years old I was saved by Jesus Christ. I dedicated my life to the lord. And last year I honestly put [Donald Trump] above Jesus Christ as my lord and savior” [chriscuomo \(2021\)](#).

⁴ SnapChat uses a technique called ‘streaks’ showing the number of days in a row the user is active on an app. Other codes calculate the best moment when to give the user rewards, e.g., likes coming in a sudden rush rather than being revealed at a regular time or in real time. YouTube plays one video after another by default, suggesting further content that is slightly more emotionally appealing than the previous video. Facebook and Instagram adopted TikTok’s auto-play function into their news feeds while scrutinizing the user’s attention span for each photo or video post to calculate which content will retain the user’s attention and thus extend their time spent within their advertisement ecosystem.

⁵ The term ‘dark post’ (also called unpublished post) refers to a Facebook ad that appears in the newsfeeds of only a selected set of users and nowhere else. “With dark posts, an advertiser can target users by keyword

- making it possible for them to reach, say, all professional vegan bakers who watch Mr. Robot while practicing calligraphy [...].” Another decisive feature of dark posts is that they “appear in the user’s newsfeed along with updates from friends [but] do not appear on the advertiser’s own page. Only the targeted audience ever sees them” (Merriam-Webster).

⁶ In order of global rank in visits among U.S. conservative websites in September 2017 (Polskin, 2017).

⁷ To offset the rising recognition of the decentralized political and social movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) the decentralized movement Back the Blue emerged in the United States to display public support for law enforcement

⁸ In a press release dated April 15, 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced, “sweeping action against 16 entities and 16 individuals who attempted to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election at the direction of the leadership of the Russian Government.” Furthermore, “during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, [Konstantin] Kilimnik provided the Russian Intelligence Services with sensitive information on polling and campaign strategy” (U.S. Dept. of the Treasury).

⁹ “For the KGB, it was a charm offensive. They had collected a lot of information on his personality so they knew who he was personally. The feeling was that he was extremely vulnerable intellectually, and psychologically, and he was prone to flattery” (Smith, 2021).

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