

Conference Report

sef:

Dresden Forum for International Politics 2019

Participation or Polarisation? Social media and societal peace

Larissa Neubauer

Social networks have, over the past decade, revolutionised how we use and consume news and information, offering new opportunities for global networking and information-sharing. Two thirds of the world's population now uses the Internet, and more than half of these users are active on social media. How do social media networks influence participation in democratic processes? And what kind of polarising effect do social media have within societies? These were just some of the questions explored at the Dresden Forum for International Politics 2019, which took place on 19-20 March 2019.

“The good, the bad, and the ugly” he good, the bad, and the ugly“

During the opening conversation, Nanjala Nyabola, a writer and political activist from Nairobi, illustrated with reference to Kenya how social networks bring out the good, the bad and the ugly within society. Communities or social groups with little or no access to traditional media can make their voices heard on social media: in Kenya, for example, the feminist movement has succeeded in stepping up its engagement in politics in this way. However, Kenya is also seeing an increase in the dissemination of hate speech, propaganda and fake news, with the rhetoric on the Internet becoming more violent at critical periods in politics, for example around elections.

In Nanjala Nyabola's view, the “ugly” face of social media shows itself in what she called “digital colonisation”. However, it was not the interference in Western countries' elections that marked the start of online manipulation. Cambridge Analytica, for example, tried out many of its tactics in earlier elections in African countries. She expressed concern that private companies from abroad have a major influence on elections in countries of the Global South. Candidates and their supporters pay very large sums of money to these private companies in order to give themselves a head start in election campaigns. Authoritarian governments, for their part, have recognised the “threat” posed by the In-



Testing the mood on digital issues - the low-tech approach: Start of the Dresden Forum at Haus der Kirche – Dreikönigskirche, Dresden

ternet and often shut it down or block it if they can no longer control the content being shared. “Shutting down the Internet is symbolic of their fears.”

Given the significance of social media, we should ask ourselves whether we should be treating it as a public good and creating alternatives under public law, such as a publicly funded regional Africa Network. However, she also made it clear that social media – despite revolutionising the political landscape – are not all-powerful. A tweet is no substitute for a conference or a face-to-face meeting, and just because something goes viral does not mean that it is effective. She mentioned #bringbackourgirls as an example: this hashtag focused the world’s attention on the kidnapping of schoolgirls by the Islamist organisation Boko Haram but ultimately did not lead to the return of any of the girls.



Laura Chinchilla and Nanjala Nyabola, Frauenkirche Dresden

Who is behind the manipulation?

Online manipulation – for example around elections, as mentioned above – can take a variety of forms. It can include attacks on the electoral system itself ahead of or during polling. But it can also include manipulation of political debate through the sharing of hacked or false information. Manipulation is especially effective if several forms are combined. The traditional media play an amplifying role in this context: one example is the lengthy and detailed coverage of Hillary Clinton’s leaked emails during the US election in 2016. Manipulation rarely aims to move politics in a particular direction; its purpose is generally to create chaos and divisions within society.

In Russia, for example, loose networks are working clandestinely on various disinformation campaigns. These networks include not only representatives of state institutions and state media but also trolls

(bloggers who are paid to share false information) and socialbots (automated software that generate and disseminate messages). However, it is almost impossible to obtain hard evidence of their interaction. The campaigns mainly target those who may already be feeling unsettled. Olga Robinson, a journalist at BBC Monitoring, summed it up: “If you receive 100 different messages which all give a different version of events, you feel confused and doubts start to form in your mind.” Once fake news starts circulating and reaches the intended target group, it is difficult to refute because many people are stuck in their own information bubble. Election manipulation is not about winning over millions of voters, she continued. Convincing a sufficient number of already unsettled voters may be all that is needed to decisively influence the outcome of the elections.

In many of Russia’s former satellite states, fighting fake news is a particular challenge, as Tamar Kintsurashvili, Executive Director of the Media Development Foundation in Tbilisi, reported. Considerable skills are being invested in the deflection source model, for example, with the aim of discrediting Western countries. This involves publishing fake or confusing messages on copycat pages which look remarkably similar to, and are very difficult to distinguish from, the Western quality media.

Online regulation – part of the solution or part of the problem?

The various forms of manipulation described have prompted calls for regulation of online platforms. The leading international corporations’ reputation has been severely dented in recent months. Given the multitude of problems, however, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The online giants’ business model is based on their respective (secret) algorithms, which result in a certain type of user behaviour being “rewarded”. This means that popular news tends to be displayed first. But popular does not always mean accurate, and in many instances, it does not necessarily mean legal. A search for information about migration on YouTube, for example, often leads to sites that feature dubious conspiracy theories. Another topical example is the debate about the side-effects of immunisation. An Internet search is more likely to bring up a list of anti-vaxxer websites than pages with well-researched information. Can this be avoided without radically changing the private platforms’ business model?

The discussion about the regulation of platforms raised a number of other questions: who can and should do the regulating – the platforms themselves or states and their justice systems? Which types of content are illegal, and which are not? Raymond Serrato, a Social Media Analyst at the Office of the

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, was generally in favour of basic Internet standards but argued for them to be devel-



Julia Pohle at the Haus der Kirche – Dreikönigskirche, Dresden

oped within individual countries' cultural contexts. In authoritarian countries in particular, social networking sites can quickly become complicit if they remove “undesirable” content when instructed to do so by the government. The specific context must also be considered when assessing humorous or satirical content. Precisely defining what “terrorist content” means is equally problematical. Authoritarian governments are quite happy to apply a definition of “terrorism” in order to silence critics of the regime.

Wanted: political commitment

Renate Nikolay, Head of the Cabinet of Commissioner Vera Jourová at the European Commission in Brussels pointed out during the discussion that platforms should not be compelled to do the work of the government. The removal of criminal content, as provided for by the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz) in Germany, is welcome but is no substitute for criminal prosecution by the public authorities. If something is illegal and attracts penalties offline, it should be treated in the same way online. There is room for improvement here.

What is frustrating is the continued lack of political leadership. When Obama launched his social media campaign and began communicating directly with voters on Twitter, there was an enthusiastic

response, she said. But these “glory days” are over. Today, we face a situation in which national leaders in the US and Europe are themselves disseminating hate and discontent on the Internet. And as long as there are no political models, it will be very difficult to address this hate and disinformation.

Laura Chinchilla, Chair of the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age, also drew attention to this initial enthusiasm for the way in which social media have improved political communication and underlined her own positive experience as President of Costa Rica from 2010 to 2014. Granted, “fake news is as old as news, and hate speech is as old as speech”, but the digital age has reinforced both aspects. The risks are obvious: “Democratic freedom and fairness are at risk.” In order to protect elections in future, there need to be shared rules on dealing with disinformation. Independent fact-checking needs support, with more information-sharing, and the security of online voting systems must be guaranteed.

Nanjala Nyabola raised the question whether we may be focusing too much on the current platforms. She called for more energy to be invested in creating a climate within society in which these platforms no longer have so much power over democratic pro-



Renate Nikolay at the Haus der Kirche – Dreikönigskirche, Dresden

cesses. As she pointed out, Facebook, Twitter, etc. are now third-generation social networks and there is no guarantee that they will still exist in the next five or ten years.

Dr Julia Pohle, a Research Fellow at Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), cautioned against panicking excessively and compared the current situation

with the common cold. It is clear, she said, that something is amiss in our democracies and that we must address the problem. But only around 5% is a problem – the remaining 95% is working well.

“Reading to the end helps”

As well as focusing on attempts to minimise disinformation by technical and regulatory means, many speakers called for the human factor in the



Dr Michael Kreutzer, Kate Wilkinson and David Scheuing during the roundtable discussion (l.t.r)

equation not to be overlooked. Dr Michael Kreutzer from the Fraunhofer Institute for Secure Information Technology (SIT) in Darmstadt is involved in DORIAN, an interdisciplinary project which looks at the spread of disinformation and ways of dealing with it. He pointed out that in most cases, disinformation is still disseminated by humans, not machines. Older people are particularly susceptible. He offered some advice: read to the end, be attentive and watch out for discrepancies. The Internet – and free access to information – comes at a cost: the lack of willingness to pay for quality journalism, which increases the sources of error. He also had some advice for professional journalists: accuracy, rather than speed, should become a higher priority again.

Sorting out facts from fiction is the main objective of Africa Check, whose employees – most of them trained journalists – review the content of publicly accessible news and claims and check it for accuracy. However, as Kate Wilkinson, Acting Chief Deputy Editor at Africa Check, pointed out, fact-checking is merely a reactive task that involves “chasing down fake news all over the world – and it’s diffi-

cult to keep up”. As she explained, Africa Check had been cooperating formally with Facebook for some time in order to identify possible misinformation published on its pages. However, this is extremely complex and time-consuming, which means that it is only possible to check the content of a few posts per month. So Africa Check also explains to users how they can check and review content themselves, before they click “share”.

Beyond: “media skills”: critiquing and understanding information

Techniques for navigating the flood of information should also be taught in and out of school. Uwe Schmidt, Director of the Gerda Taro School in Leipzig, and Jan Hünicke, Chair of the Parents’ Council, talked about their plans for combining democracy-building and media skills. Teaching standards and values is important for both offline and online society. However, teachers cannot do it all, even if politicians imply that they should. So they are grateful for programmes like Lie Detectors, a Belgian organisation which sends journalists into schools to give students an insight into the world of journalism. Two classroom sessions explain how news works and how errors and fake news can be identified, with practical examples. The aim is to equip students with critical information skills.

Displaying moral courage online

As well as chasing down disinformation, many civil society organisations focus on the rhetoric of violence online and how to deal with it. David Scheuing, Multiplier Coordinator for LOVE-Storm: United against Hate Speech Online, called for basic skills in moral courage to be available online. With that aim in mind, his organisation offers online training which prepares people to be pro-active and take a stand. Generally speaking, the rule is not to go online by yourself but to look for others’ support and stand up to hate together. But it is often difficult to determine whether the other side is genuinely interested in dialogue or would rather remain in its own echo chamber. This was also the experience of Dr Lutz Kinkel, Managing Director of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPM) in Leipzig. He has noticed a difference between adults who have doubts and are open to discussion, on the one hand, and, on the other, the believers who are entrenched in their belief system and with whom discussion is no longer possible. ECPM always seeks dialogue, even though this takes time and energy.

Breaking down barriers – building peace online and offline

In conflict countries in particular, online hate can incite real-world violence, as Eva Yayi Mawa Upele, Co-Founder and Executive Director of GoGirlsICT in Juba, and Stephen Kovats, Co-Founder of rog_ agency in Berlin, explained. With the start of the war in South Sudan in 2013, it soon became apparent that this was not merely a localised dispute but was being incited through social conflicts as well. In some cases, members of the diaspora were also



„Sharing the Love“ - Ronny Edry (left) organizing a group photo with all participants at the end of the Dresden Forum

getting involved and fuelling discord. #defyhatenow was an attempt by Kovats' organisation to positively influence the discussion on social media and thus prevent warmongers from dominating the debate. Young people, schools and politicians were trained in how to respond to hate and fake news. By the end of the project, it was clear that the online debate had become more balanced, said Kovats.

Social media can unite as well as divide, the conference concluded, as is evident from the example of Peace Factory, founded by graphic artist Ronny Edry from Tel Aviv. In a climate in which the “other side” (the Palestinians, the Iranians, the Lebanese, the Israelis) is constantly depicted as the enemy and any personal contact is quite impossible, the Peace Factory makes deliberate use of the “Facebook virus” to break down borders and barriers. What began with a Facebook post during the crisis between Iran and Israel (“Dear Iranians, we love you, we don't want to bomb you/I don't hate you”) has snowballed into a global campaign with countless Facebook groups, millions of followers and even real-world meetings in other countries. The most astonishing aspect, according to Ronny Edry, is the recognition that whether they are Egyptians, Palestinians, Lebanese, Iranians or Israelis, outside the conflict zone, so much more unites than divides them. They are all from the Middle East, they talk with their hands, they like the same food, they look alike – and yet much of the time, they are firing missiles at each other. So the hopeful question that remained at the end of the conference was: “Can we shoot less if we post more?”

Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. As a cross-party and non-profit-making organisation, the sef: provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on urgent peace and development issues.

The reports to the conferences and events of the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) provide information about the discussions and results in a compact form.

Published by
Development and Peace Foundation (sef:)/
Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (sef:)
Dechenstr. 2 : 53115 Bonn : Germany
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Translation
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Design Basic Concept
Pitch Black Graphic Design
Berlin/Rotterdam

Layout
Gerhard Süß-Jung

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