1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

We must not underestimate the disintermediating, educational, emancipatory, entertainment and informative potential of digital technologies. However, we are beginning to realise the costs of reaching this potential as more people are connecting to these technologies. In order to comprehend these costs, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964) and Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (Ong, 1982) are useful points of reference. Applying historical and philosophical examinations, the two authors ascertain the impact of a medium upon culture and society. By the same token, Nicholas Carr's 2010 work *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (Carr, 2010) reasserts McLuhan's and Ong's theses vis-à-vis the digital realm. More recently, analysing the inner workings of the brain, evolutionary biologists, neuroscientists and psychologists have come to comparable conclusions on the impact of digital technologies (Landon-Murray and Anderson, 2013; Risko and Gilbert, 2016; Alter, 2017; Wolf, 2018).

The medium *is* the message, and with the possible exception of Gutenberg's printing press in the 1450s, the internet has instigated the most cultural and societal embodiment of mediation (van Loon, 2008). Examples of this include how, compared to non-digital societies, citizens of digitised societies are more likely to trigger their visual cortices, while merely skim through long-form essays (Carr, 2010). It is neither that the internet negates the written word nor that it does not value it, but as a consequence of the extensive time users spend online accessing visual content, they gradually find it harder to concentrate and think deeply about issues, preferring rather to engage with the mundane (ibid.). Nonetheless, the issue that networked citizens are more prone to engage with visually aesthetic content fails to provide a complete picture of the internet's accumulated impact.

With the advent of smartphones and social media platforms, online technologies are changing how and what we consume, how we feel, how we think, how we remember, how we see and, now, if, who and what to believe (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2018). Ultimately, the gradual rewiring of our brains has made our online and offline behaviours unpredictable at best, irrational at worst.

On a consumer level, lifestyle categories and self-objectifications of young adults looking to achieve more 'followers' and 'likes' raises serious concerns regarding the direction of digital media. As worrying as this is, internet intermediaries have focused on other issues rather than self-reform. In fact, their objectives are directly antithetical to these concerns since their overall purpose is to transform our brains' neuroplasticity and keep us 'hooked' in order to spend more hours within and across their ever-expanding platforms (Wu, 2016). In doing so, they can increase advertising expenditure while drawing users in, creating, as they do, highly impactful network effects. This mitigates shareholder pressure and keeps profits rising. As a result, most current online ecosystems are endemic to commodity fetishisms. Paradoxically, these were the same concerns of the early workings of the Frankfurt School, concerns that led to critically evaluating legacy media consumptions within capitalist systems. Marcuse's views of technology as a manifestation of a 'bourgeois ideology' (1968: 223) is pertinent, even today, in thinking critically about our consumptions of digital cultural texts. The same is true of the 'standardisation' witnessed across these platforms (Adorno and Leppert, 2002). Similarly, critical discussions on the cultural *production* of digital media remain imperative. For example, Fuchs' (2018) efforts in revisiting the critical cultural production theories of advertising in a digitalised environment is a welcome contribution. So too is Edwards (2018) on the political economy of public relations in the digital age and Nicoli (2012; Nicoli, 2013) on the erosion of public service television production values within a globalised digital context.

As relevant as consumer-level critical analysis is, it is on a citizenship level that our warnings need to be heeded. Encapsulating the logic of this volume is that, rather than attempting to stop a vessel's leaks, we should first be steering clear of the iceberg staring directly at us. Consequently, the caveats made in this volume render critical analyses of the system of production and consumption of culture a subordinated concern. The focus of this volume is toward a crisis in democracy rather than of the capitalist system, although the two, no doubt, interrelate on numerous levels. In fact, the association between capitalism and the liberal democratic order has vastly contributed to the neoliberal turn responsible for much of what is wrong today in our democracies (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). Nonetheless, it is the Frankfurt School's latter works that have been this volume's central conceptual framework. Described in detail in Chapter Two, Jürgen Habermas' normative model of democracy created a point of reference for how we should strive for liberal democracy. It gave us an understanding of the duties of civil society, the impact of universal systems of representation and the value of communicative action. Rather than moving in this direction,

we have conversely seen the rise of other systems of government, most notably those of populist, autocratic-leaning regimes. As a result, scholarly focus has turned toward explorations concerning the expansion of populism (for example, Ingelhart and Norris, 2016; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018) and examinations regarding the role of digital democracy and disinformation in its growth (Flew and Iosifidis, 2020; Iosifidis and Andrews, 2020).

Digital disinformation has indeed been a critical factor in democracy's decline, and we must again remind ourselves of the work of McLuhan and Ong concerning the repercussions a new medium can have upon societies, particularly one that had such high emancipatory potential. Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook (2017) identify several reasons behind the growth of digital disinformation, including a decline in the social capital of citizens, the political and social polarisation of contemporary everyday life, rises in inequality, distrust in media and an overall cynicism toward government. All have played out over digital media and are therefore addressed in this volume. Rather than mediated citizens using the internet's vast potential to share thoughts across virtual spaces and open up to diverse viewpoints, they choose to selectively expose the aforementioned issues that matter to them individually rather than to society as a whole. In other words, in the current structure of digital media (for example, the way in which social media algorithms are applied), online-mediated citizens use these tools to confirm their own biases. In doing so, they create online 'camps' that amplify distrust and widen polarisation. As users generate content, they become more disposed to make up or use fake content to persuade others and make their own points more persuasive. Such a vicious cycle and ominous consequence will be familiar to social scientists studying group dynamics. In the 1970s, psychologist David G. Myers demonstrated that when situating two polarised groups together to discuss issues, they gradually become more hostile and polarised toward each other (Myers, 1975). The application of this phenomenon on a scale of billions is in fact how we have found ourselves steering toward the iceberg.

The new global order and the role of internet intermediaries

The trajectory of liberal democracy

Human progress over the past 300 years has been impressive (Pinker, 2018). Enlightenment ideals of reason have spread across the globe, creating more electoral democracies in more advanced, educated, healthy and, ultimately, happier societies. As Barack Obama famously pointed out (2016), 'if you had to choose a moment in history to be born … you'd choose now'. Within numerous liberal democracies created over this space of time, the growth in equal rights across the spectrum of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation has truly been remarkable. Despite these achievements, liberalism as we know it today, one of tolerance and universality, has had to fight off the assault of several regimes. As the liberal order spread in the twentieth century, it found itself having to fend off Communism, Nazism and, later on, Islamic fundamentalism. Nonetheless, its

perseverance led to its most fundamental moment – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantlement of the USSR. Liberal democracy has since spread across the globe at an extremely fast rate, offering hope of what a fair and tolerant world could look like. Freedom House noted (2019: 1),

> Between 1988 and 2005, the percentage of countries ranked Not Free in Freedom in the World dropped by almost 14 points (from 37 to 23 percent), while the share of Free countries grew (from 36 to 46 percent).

The 2008 global financial crisis and the rising inequality it has resulted in have allowed today's authoritarian, dogmatic regimes to rear their ugly heads and has brought democracies a step closer to resembling them. This is because as liberal democracies have become contaminated by neoliberal versions of itself, tolerance and universalism have ironically exposed their weaknesses. 'If liberalism is tolerant of divergences of opinion', asks Turner (2003: 6), 'how does it deal with opinions that abhor tolerance? To what extent can liberal regimes tolerate enemies from within, such as parties that reject the liberal rules of the game, the conventions of discussion that make persuasion possible?' Such a critical dilemma becomes a catalytically component of why polarisation and populism have grown, since the question asked by Turner is in fact embedded within the core of the liberal order. Neoliberal proceedings have exacerbated the conditions of the poorer classes and squeezed those in the middle.

As a result, social and political life is in a state of flux. Nations are turning inward to protect themselves from what they see as highly uncertain times. As populism continues to grow, it has given an opportunity to sovereign, inward-thinking leaders to strike a chord with many voters who feel let down by both the left and the right. Donald Trump's rise to political power in the US and the UK's Brexit vote took many by surprise. Yet for a few others (for example Fukuyama, 2018), the two events, and others like it, have been consequences rather than determinants of liberalism's breakdown, arguing that its demise has been grounded in the growth of identity politics that have shifted alliances away from bipartisan associations to socio-economic tribal ones (ibid.). This trajectory, warns Gessen (2020), is the first step towards autocracy.

Authoritarian regimes

The decline in liberal democracies in the West has prompted existing global authoritarian regimes to expand; the aforementioned Freedom House report notes (2019: 1) that,

> Between 2005 and 2018, the share of Not Free countries rose to 26 percent, while the share of Free countries declined to 44 percent.

The growth of these regimes has coincided with numerous jailing and killing of opposition leaders and journalists. The alleged murder of Saudi Arabian

journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey is a case in point and was vastly covered in international news outlets as he wrote for *The Washington Post* and was a long-time critic of Saudi Arabia's prince, Mohammad bin Salman (Woolley, 2020: 9). Reports of journalist imprisonments in China, Iran, Russia, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine during this fickle period have no doubt contributed to the backsliding of global democracy. The control over media freedoms in authoritarian regimes has ominously resulted in the dispensing of the rules concerning government leadership terms. As a consequence, authoritarian rulers can remain in power for longer terms. It has been one of the main reasons as to why such leaders have managed to consolidate their power. Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation analysed in detail in Chapter Six, has secured his political leadership status until 2036 if he so wishes by holding a controversial referendum in 2020 that saw little media criticism and even less resistance from opposing leaders (Bodner, 2020). The same can be said for Xi Jinping in China, whose term limits of the presidency was abolished in 2018.

Internet intermediaries

At the centre of the shifting global order are the internet intermediaries. They become the subject of our analysis in Chapter Three. As political and social polarisation have widened across liberal democracies, discussions online happening on the platforms owned by internet intermediaries have become more hostile and partisan. In turn, this has further led to increased emotional narratives often disregarding reputable media outlets and the scientific community despite its painstaking methods of reaching consensus, a consensus borne from systematic debate, discussion, experimentation and peer-reviewed filtering. For many, experts have become the vilified elite (Turner, 2003; D'Ancona, 2017). Because of the ruptures across online ecosystems, different groups have sought to exploit the situation by identifying opportunities to trick gullible users who are more than eager to confirm their biases by consuming and sharing online content. They consist of disinformation agents and trolls working to either destabilise democracies or generate profits. We return to analyse disinformation agents in Chapter Five.

At the same time, we have seen a rise in computational communication professionals who data-mine the harvested social media data of users to then target them through ambiguous approaches. According to various studies and reports (notably the UK's *Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sports report on Disinformation and Fake News* (DCMSC, 2019)), *Facebook* began harvesting personal information from its users unbeknownst to them – particularly after the company became a publicly traded entity. The harvested data could be used by application developers on *Facebook* (for a price), which in turn allowed companies such as *Cambridge Analytica/SCL* and their clients to send customised advertising messages based on profiling (Rosenberg et al., 2018). As described in the UK's

DCMSC report (2019: 41), Ashkan Soltani, former chief technologist to the US Federal Trade Commission, noted,

> it is either free – there is an exchange of information that is non-monetary – or it is an exchange of personal information that is given to the platform, mined, and then resold to or reused by third-party developers to develop apps, or resold to advertisers.

Computational communication professionals took advantage of tribal divisions spread across social media platforms by micro-targeting them and catering content that fit their belief systems. The effects have been devastatingly powerful. *Cambridge Analytica/SCL* analysed data (in breach of numerous terms of service that included those of *Facebook*), to accumulate and categorise between 50 and 80 million unsuspicious online users through psychographic profiling. Once grouped, the company was able to send specific political advertising messages customised to the desire of each user. If voters supported the US Second Amendment (the right to bear and hold arms), the advertising message could be tailored to them. Or, if a user continuously expressed their hostile views over migration on *Facebook*, they might then be profiled in a certain category and consequently shown advertisements by political parties on the threats of migrants stealing jobs or initiating crimes. Such questionable tactics helped the campaigns of Ted Cruz, the Republican Senator who defied the odds to end up the Republican Party runner up who faced Donald Trump in 2016. These same tactics also helped Donald Trump, who acquired the services of *Cambridge Analytica/SCL* during the presidential elections of 2016, as did the UK's Brexit campaigners. All three examples left many startled by their electoral success (see Rathi, 2018).

Across authoritarian regimes, social media platforms have been used somewhat differently. They have particularly come to the fore during attempted uprisings from around the world. The 2011 Arab Spring is remembered as a Twitter revolution, one that has led to genuine political change (Rosen, 2011; Wael Ghonim, 2012). So too the revolutions of 2004 and 2014 in Ukraine described in Chapter Seven of this volume. More recently, Russia in 2019 and China in 2019 and 2020 have sought to crack down on freedoms of expression and protests initiated or using social media. Yet while these regimes have censored and controlled social media platforms within their own borders, such as the examples analysed in Chapter Six on Russia, they have simultaneously used them to interfere in liberal democracies, attempting to destabilise the liberal order by identifying weaknesses and subtly manipulating narratives. When two-thirds of online users receive their information over social media platforms, it makes sense for foreign interference agents to use them to encourage conflict over heated topics (Summers, 2018). Therefore, the platforms have been used by foreign disinformation agents to organise activist campaigns, to portray legitimate news media outlets, to stage flash mobs and to stir racial

tensions. Working alongside already existing tensions in liberal democracies, the fallouts from the above issues have led to an era of confusion, doubt, disorder and mistrust. The rise of mistrust is of growing concern in the business, political and social spheres. The 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, identified 'trust deficit' as a barrier to economic growth, digital innovation and social cohesion. Trust, argues McDermott (2019), is 'the ultimate human currency'.

The response by the West has been to defend itself through numerous measures we unpack in Chapter Four. These include detection mechanisms such as fact-checking and news literacy to empower people to think critically about the content they consume. Response mechanisms also involve strategic communication efforts and technological advancements consisting of machine learning and blockchains. While the responses of the West have been promising, one wonders how deviant agents will counter. If, for example, innovations are applied to identify the linguistic cues of computational propaganda used by foreign agents (content created by artificial intelligence [AI]), they might respond with more advanced and untraceable AI. Such an outcome will ultimately lead to a social and technological arms race, fighting fire with fire and hence creating a zero-sum game. Possibly more dangerous, it can be asked how human-generated threats, such as those created by thousands of Chinese or Russian disinformation agents, are countered (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017).

Truth and lies in the digital age

In the 1996 James Halperin science-fiction novel *The Truth Machine* (Halperin, 1996), Randall Peterson, the genius protagonist of the book, invents a device that changes the world forever – this machine is an infallible lie detector that creates a world without lies. As the truth machine becomes more widespread, all facets of life gradually transform. Initially, divorce rates go up as couples are exposed to each other's adulteries and lies, tensions across nations surge and courtrooms are filled with cases of previously undetected deceit. But as people adapt to telling the truth, things begin to change for the better. There is a steady fall in break-ups, wars become extinct and judicial systems – courtrooms, lawyers and judges – are made redundant. While fictional, Halperin offers an insightful account of a world without lies. *The Truth Machine*, alas, is not real. Since the beginning of humanity, people have lied to each other, and will continue to do so, since to lie is very much a natural component of communication processes (Ricoeur, 2007). But as Sissela Bok's seminal work on the ethical considerations of truth and lies suggests, most people will tell the truth most of the time, and it is within this 'principle of veracity' that people feel they benefit from each other and therefore continue telling the truth (Bok, 1978). Yet as we have illustrated, the current digital landscape has created a world shrouded in contradiction, dispute and lies. Ominous rifts are now more apparent and dangerous because they are so easily amplified, manipulated and, worryingly, spread across the internet to millions of

online users in a matter of moments. At the heart of this schism lies a networked ecosystem swaying opinions one way or another.

We have described how the priority of today's social media platforms is to keep users engaged for longer periods of time so as to be sold as commodities to advertisers. As a consequence, social media algorithms feed users with a personalised experience. Unless so marked, they do not distinguish good content from bad. Herein lies a deep concern in controlling digital disinformation, since the internet intermediaries are not willing to take responsibility for deciding what is true and what is not and are therefore reluctant to take action on censoring content. For example, by means of the company's formal announcements via its press room and through various senior employees, *Facebook* has pronounced its unwillingness to be seen as an *arbiter of truth* (Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2020). Clearly, the technology giant would rather avoid the responsibility of being identified as a content creator. In doing so, two overlapping assumptions can be underlined. First, *Facebook* is distancing itself from the rigorous censorship and regulatory measures associated with news media. Throughout its existence, the company has justified its proclamation to be seen as a technology platform on account of a US legislation implemented in 1996 known as Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Specifically, the legislation states: 'No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider'. The law has effectively become a shield for *Facebook*, and other large internet intermediaries, by giving them immunity when it comes to political discourse on their platforms (Timmer, 2017). Second, social media are further asserting, in their reluctance to become embroiled in what is truthful and what is not, strong supporters of the *marketplace of ideas*. This concept has its origins in John Stuart Mill's On Liberty 'a philosophical essay originally published in 1859'. Mill used the metaphor of a market to discuss the spread of intellectual life, but the metaphor is used today mainly in the US as a strong complementary element to the First Amendment. It implies that there is no such thing as too much information, further supporting the notion that citizens are more than capable of distinguishing good information from bad (Napoli, 2019: 84). For *Facebook*, it rests on the notion of *buyer beware* – that its platforms can be used by whoever has a profile to disseminate ideas, and that networked citizens are more than capable of spotting deceitful information when they see it. We can conclude therefore that unlike non-technological communication, where telling the truth is at an advantage due to a 'principle of veracity', over the internet, truth and lies exist on a level playing field. For this reason, a growing group of internet activists are advocating the use of public interest algorithms as well as other open source technologies that are more capable of protecting citizens. These will allow for more control for users and greater transparency as to how data is used. These concerns and the policy mechanisms that revolve around them are the subjects of Chapter Three and Chapter Five, respectively.

Zuboff (2019) has labelled contemporary society 'surveillance capitalism' on account of the panoptic mechanisms of large technology companies. Taken as a

whole, our everyday online behaviours are harvested, data mined and analysed by big data approaches in order to predict behaviours and trends. We are being watched without being able to see back. In that there is power that allows the technology companies to continue to grow. In highlighting her thesis, Zuboff reminds us of the free nature of online ecosystems. In order that online technology companies are endorsed to create such powerful systems of control, they must remain free. Free access of the internet over its burgeoning information platforms has allowed it to become a technological tool we often forget is there. As a result, we become inclined to let our guard down, forgetting the possible repercussions.

The illusion of free access and tacit technology use has, on the one hand, empowered citizens to actively take part in online public spheres, but on the other, it has devalued our online engagement. It is as though we are casually chatting in the street with an acquaintance or arguing with someone who cuts us off at an intersection. But in fact, online networks amplify issues and have therefore coincided with the erosion of news media (Picard and Pickard, 2017) as well as with the demise of liberal democracies throughout the world (Beaufort, 2018). Reflecting the negative turn in both democratic and information processes, Morozov coined the term 'net delusion' (2012) regarding earlier views technology optimists had of the internet's ability to liberate societies. As the internet has grown, its communication processes have become multifaceted. In describing these complexities, Marshall (2017: 17), echoing Morozov, suggests, 'it is in flux, like every other complex system, composed of other complex systems, which may not mesh well'. Disinformation, Marshall goes on, is endemic to information society and therefore contemporary society emerges into a 'disinformation society'.

In order to protect liberal democracy, it is becoming evident that some of its most cherished principles will need to be placed under examination. For some (for example, Napoli, 2018), the solution might be to tighten our freedom-of-expression policies since they are at the centre of the policy challenges facing regulators of digital disinformation. A functioning balance between governing the internet and safeguarding freedom of expression is not currently in place, Napoli argues. Others support the breakup of internet intermediaries as they have built powerful monopoly positions, therefore making it harder for new entrants to become established entities (Wu, 2018). In doing so, they can manipulate or lobby policies against them and consolidate their positions even further. Still others look at our current democratic crisis as a moral panic and therefore as an opportunity for news media to regain legitimacy and establish an equilibrium that can be used as a check on democracy that will once again strengthen it (Carlson, 2018). In the seven chapters that follow, we attempt to strike these issues at the root and conceptualise both the theoretical frameworks and policy initiatives in fighting digital disinformation.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into three sections. Section I consists of two chapters that review market trends, internet intermediaries and theories pertaining to

digital democracy. Chapter Two specifically focuses on the public sphere and the growth of networked citizens expanding over social media. Chapter Three shifts its attention to populism within a digital democratic framework and introduces the concepts of post-truth, regulatory action and self-regulation.

Section II consists of two chapters and addresses the current state of the art of digital disinformation. Chapter Four analyses contemporary thoughts on digital disinformation. It breaks down the motives behind disinformation agents and examines what approaches are being used to combat the deviant behaviour. Chapter Five describes current policy measures on countering disinformation in the European Union, considered by many as the world's watchdog in digital technologies.

Section III sets the stage for deeper investigation by analysing two country cases, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. In each case, we explore the emergence, scale and scope of digital disinformation. Chapter Six deconstructs the Russian Federation's role in digital disinformation. In order to do so, it analyses its internal policy measures before turning attention to its interference strategies across the Western world. Chapter Seven examines Ukraine's facilitation of digital disinformation. Many consider the country the capital of computational propaganda and digital disinformation (Woolley, 2020). As such, the Ukrainian case concentrates on the Orange Revolution of 2004 and Euromaidan in 2014 to comprehend the state of the country and its associations with digital disinformation.

Finally, Chapter Eight brings together our insights from the previous seven chapters and offers our concluding thoughts. It asks readers to analyse regions separately but draw conclusions of digital disinformation holistically and globally. It further offers future directions for digital disinformation studies, freedom of expression and platform governance.