



[The Digital Future](#)

Of Facebook Revolutions and Twitter Presidents

How Digitalisation Changes Political Decision-Making

Torben Stephan

In 2010, the internet was thought to be an instrument of global democratisation. But with the onset of the “Arab winter”, that hope has given way to severe disappointment. Now, the internet is even blamed for the increasing populism. An attempt at a sober assessment.

There are said to be children in the Arab world who are named Facebook. So closely have their parents seemingly connected the “Arab Spring” with that internet platform. Let us set aside for the moment the fact that this spring did not last very long, thereby abruptly ending the legend of the Facebook revolution. This upheaval and the recent movement in Iran show that the internet can support an existing democratisation movement. There are several reasons for this.

Cheap, Fast, and Far-Reaching

The internet is comparatively cheap. Today, anyone can communicate with the entire world without much in the way of financial resources. A user might become a respected author, political analyst, or even a leader. All he or she needs is a smartphone, a couple of free social media accounts, and, of course, talent. Thus equipped, the user can distribute text, audio, and video formats cheaply all over the world – from the living room, at home, or on the move.

For comparison, we recall Paul Sethe’s famous quote. The founding editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote to *Der Spiegel* in 1965: “Freedom of the press is the freedom of 200 rich people to spread their opinions.”¹ This is a not insignificant reason why, as early as the German Empire, the Social Democratic Party had already begun to establish newspapers and is still in possession of a proud media empire today.² As the internet spreads, money is no longer the deciding factor. This is undoubtedly a gain for our democracy.

But the internet has also extended our reach. Social media are the main contributors to this development. So-called influencers, that is,

people with a particularly large internet following, can reach several million people within minutes with their posts. According to official figures, the daily print run of the world’s largest daily newspaper, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Japan), amounts to over nine million.³ For comparison, US President Trump’s personal – and feared – Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) has over 45 million followers by itself. Add the official accounts of the President (@POTUS) and the White House (@WhiteHouse), and the total is currently 83 million followers (admitting significant overlaps among the three accounts).

Another advantage of the internet is its speed. Information travels around the world within seconds. Today, holiday-goers no longer need the local paper sent by mail, arriving two days late. They can read it in real time on their smartphones while keeping up with radio and TV programs. Twitter is usually faster than the news agencies’ breaking stories. YouTube, Facebook and Periscope give every smartphone owner the capability of streaming live events taking place on his or her doorstep.

Beauty Tips and Monitoring

Its range and low production costs have given the internet a sharp focus on target groups. Blogs and podcasts tend to cater to specialised interests. Few media newcomers can compete with a traditional medium such as newspaper, radio, or TV. So the bloggers, podcasters, and YouTubers have looked for niches in which to become successful. For example, *Netzpolitik.org*, a blog, is dedicated exclusively to the issues of network policy and digitalisation and their effects on society. Nerdzoom is a regular podcast for computer enthusiasts. And Bibi, a

YouTube, gives make-up and hair styling tips to almost five million subscribers. Specialised interests which were previously served by public television at one o'clock in the morning (if at all) can now be called up on demand.

But there is a downside to these developments: One would expect that the ability to get in touch and exchange ideas with people all over the world would contribute to international understanding. What we are currently experiencing, however, is more like the opposite: isolation, nationalism, and xenophobia.

This is not what the internet enthusiasts who watched the “Arab Spring” with such euphoria were expecting. It is extremely naive to think that the internet promotes only the good; and in turn, “good” is a matter of definition. The German Internet expert Sascha Lobo expressed the problem in a guest commentary for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2014: “The internet isn’t what I had long thought it to be. I thought it was the perfect medium of democracy and self-liberation. The spy scandal and the corporations’ mania for control have changed everything.”⁴ This finding is particularly amusing because the internet – much like the Global Positioning System (GPS), with which every smartphone is equipped – was originally developed from a US Defense Department project (Arpanet). It had little to do with the spread of democratic values. Lobo’s disappointment also reveals how much he overestimated the internet and his own expertise. The recognition that the internet is uncharted territory for him, too, was a brutal one.

We should have realised by now that there are two sides to every new technology. Hardly anyone in their right mind would accuse the German public service broadcasting of today of engaging in propaganda activities. We have established broadcasting councils and a brace of broadcasting laws to ensure that radio offerings are diverse and balanced. Violations are punished. The Germans have also learned how to use the medium. Whereas in 1933, radio technology was new, unregulated, and the *Volksempfänger*

encountered an audience who had not yet learned how to use the new technology.

The internet is not an instrument for improving our society. It can support movements because it makes many things cheaper, faster, and bigger. But it does not distinguish between good and bad movements, between social engagement or pure commerce. The internet itself is value-free. It is we who feed our values into it.

Debates in the Filter Bubble

One thing is already clear today. The Internet is disruptive. It changes our economic system, our communication, and, of course, our society. Amazon has changed the retail trade, PayPal the payment system. We no longer buy our music in shops; instead, we stream it on Spotify. Uber is shaking up the taxi industry. And, of course, the internet is also influencing our democracy.

The new capabilities have not really improved the culture of political debate. People seem to pay more attention to inflammatory posts than to hard facts. Few online debates have anything like a competition of ideas. They more closely resemble ideological positional warfare. Comments quickly become personal.

This is mainly due to algorithms – computer program codes that are used by Internet search engines (such as Google) and social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). These algorithms have considerable influence on our perception. They decide what information we receive and what information we do not. In addition, social network algorithms suggest friends and groups that fit our behaviour to date. If a user likes the Facebook page of the *Borussia Mönchengladbach* football club, people in his area who are also *Borussia* fans are suggested to him as friends. In addition, he receives more and more posts about the club, even if they come from people he does not know. Or he may receive a suggestion to join the fan club’s Facebook group. This puts the user in a filter bubble which restricts his information flow largely to topics related to this club or to football.





The Selfie Generation: Topics such as data security and privacy are often not the main concerns for adolescents.
Source: © Peter Power, Reuters.

But it also works with views, parties, or other political groups. What may be innocuous in the context of a football club, may well become problematic in a political filter bubble. The information Google has already collected about a certain person determines the results of that person's searches. Internet activist Eli Pariser made this discovery "when he had two friends enter the keyword 'BP' into Google's search bar shortly after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. One of them received investment tips for the oil industry, while the other received reports on destruction of the environment."⁵

"Filter Bubble" is what he called the phenomenon in his book of the same name.

The filter bubble phenomenon is not new. People used to choose their daily newspapers according to their political convictions. To put it simply, conservative readers tended to favour the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, while liberals tended to opt for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

However, even a newspaper with a political leaning will usually publish various positions.

That is part of the journalistic trade. Even groups of regulars at bars are seldom unanimous in their opinions. But the social network algorithms ensure that increasingly like-minded people get together.

Since 2016, many journalists have tested this out for themselves. They have created second identities on Facebook and liked some radical right-wing pages. The effect was always the same: The algorithm recommended other pages, groups, and users with the right-wing views. They were pulled into a filter bubble of supposedly like-minded people and henceforth received only right-wing hate messages targeting foreigners, the federal government, the lying media, and conspiracy theories of all kinds.

The phenomenon is problematic for our political decision-making, especially because we tend to trust information that we expect. This is the psychological phenomenon of selective perception. In extreme cases, it can lead to people finding false reports of crimes committed by migrants, for example, more credible than fact-based research in their daily newspapers.

Ideological Fight Using Fake News

One outgrowth of the filter bubble phenomenon is digital “echo chambers”. If the above-mentioned football fan joins the *Borussia* group, he will scarcely be able to announce that he also has a soft spot for FC Bayern Munich. That’s how the group suppresses deviating opinions. The conviction that there can be only one *Borussia*, on the other hand, is encouraged by the group. In extreme cases, this leads to us vs. them thinking. Transferring this behaviour to the political arena quickly leads to extreme groupings that are incrementally moving away from the fundamental principles of our democracy.

Moreover, society is increasingly splitting up into different camps. The Filipino publisher and publicist Maria Ressa has vividly illustrated this. As early as 2011, she was already using Twitter search terms (so-called hashtags) and Twitter user profiles to make political groupings visible

on social networks. Two clearly recognisable camps (pro/con) were tweeting with the hashtag #GOP (Grand Old Party, the nickname for the US Republican Party). The two camps were connected by only a few people. This means that the way the US was beginning to split into political camps that live as though they were in different worlds was already obvious in 2011.⁶

In the 2016 US election campaign, it became clear how irreconcilable these camps were. There are no more debates. Unpleasant facts are dismissed as fake news or opinion. Climate change? Just an opinion. The theory of evolution? A matter of faith. Reports that the president’s campaign team cooperated with the Russians? Fake news.

It usually takes only a few minutes for the media to inform their viewers, listeners, and readers about current events. Decisions by parliaments and governments are also much more transparent today than they were only a few years ago. The new capabilities should mean that citizens are always well informed. Instead, inaccurate reporting, rumours or malicious slander are on the rise. They quickly spread through the internet and are difficult to counter.

The phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers is problematic for the political decision-making process.

Nor is the phenomenon of inaccurate reporting new. Inaccurate stories may appear in any newspaper. However, there is a trend on the internet towards *intentionally* spreading half-truths or even lies in order to exert political influence. Since the algorithms of social media are designed to prefer frequently read texts, sensational news travels at breakneck speed.

What is surprising is how uncritically many responsible citizens deal with the information they receive via social media. Facebook, Twitter,

and the rest have so far made little effort to verify the veracity of their users' claims. It is therefore the responsibility of each individual to critically examine the accuracy of a report before sharing it further. Of course, this responsibility overwhelms many people. Until now, the proper use of the new medium has been taught in very few schools.

The refugee crisis has shown that false information can be a serious threat. In October 2017, the German Foreign Office was forced to launch the Rumours About Germany information page (rumoursaboutgermany.info), which lists the “seven big lies of traffickers”. Previously, masses of false reports were spread via social media. In these posts, potential refugees were promised welcome money of several thousand euros, real estate gifts, or lucrative jobs if they made it to Germany. Millions of refugees have set out, believing the false promises. Many have lost their lives as a result. And for those who did make it to Germany, a bitter disappointment was in store.

Social media are a playground for the beneficiaries of disinformation: security agencies, conspiracy theorists, profiteers.

The Populist Algorithm

Politicians have quickly learned to adapt to the new technologies. They have always favoured new players, while the established parties have struggled. This is mainly due to the fact that the internet rewards pointed statements, sarcastic or derisive criticism of government officials, and taboo-breaking populist parties. That is because they generate more reactions. Even all the well-meant counter-arguments to populist tweets contribute to the dissemination and popularity of those very tweets.

The Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, or AfD, an anti-immigrant party) began 2018 by breaking a taboo. AfD delegate Jens Maier called the son of tennis legend Boris Becker and his ex-wife Barbara a “Halbneger” (an impolitic word for “mulatto”) on Twitter.⁷

The German Association of Judges (Maier is a judge by profession) saw this as a “calculated provocation”. In Germany, Becker’s name still guarantees the highest level of attention. The message, however, is directed only at Maier’s (potential) voters.

Most populists take just this line. It is a tactic. The media excitement and the many reactions harness the logic of the algorithm to maximise the exposure of the posts. This allows populists to reach those on the fringes who want a new style of politics. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, US President Donald Trump, and the AfD in Germany were able to convince their voters that they would change the “decaying political system”. Thanks largely to social media, this message reached an outsized audience. It is striking that both the two presidents and the AfD have pushed forward very purposefully into the echo chambers which were favourably disposed towards them. They managed to meet these discontented people where they were and get them to vote.

In Search of the Gatekeeper

In his first press conference as US president, Donald Trump changed the prevailing media system with a single sentence. By telling an antagonistic CNN reporter, “I’m not going to give you a question. You are fake news”, Trump made it clear that he is no longer dependent on traditional media.⁸ Let us remember that, at the beginning of the 21st century, if a politician wanted to promote his policies, he first had to court the journalists. Ideally, these gatekeepers would then gather other opinions and write an article comparing the views. Then along came Facebook. And, in Trump’s case, Twitter.

Today, Trump can communicate directly with his target groups: voters, donors, and other politicians. He no longer needs the traditional media. They have lost their gatekeeper function. While it is much more democratic for a head of government to be able to communicate with a citizenry unfiltered, the Trump case shows that it does not necessarily improve quality.

The question is, who is the gatekeeper now? Because it is quite obvious that not everything can be published on social networks. First of all, there are laws that limit even freedom of expression. Personal defamation, threats of violence, and denial of the Holocaust are all crimes in Germany. A discussion on this score has been in full swing at least since Minister of Justice Heiko Maas introduced the Network Enforcement Act (*NetzDG*) to the Bundestag. At its core, the *NetzDG* provides for severe fines for Facebook and other social media networks if they do not delete hate posts within 24 hours. Interest groups, civil rights activists, lawyers, and data protectors are up in arms about the law. Some fear that Facebook will delete too much (censorship) when threatened with horrendous punishment. The others do not think that a listed company should be assuming sovereign functions of the state.

The traditional media have lost their gatekeeper function.

NetzDG may seem like a snapshot. However, even traditional media publishers must, on a daily basis, weigh what they will publish on their websites and what they will not. They are responsible for claims that their publications make, offline and online. Responsible parties are mentioned in the site legal information, which is a mandatory part of a website, at least in Germany. Large publishers – especially the tabloid media – employ entire legal departments to examine critical articles.

So the question of why a commercial website operator such as Facebook should not be held responsible for what is published on its website is only fair. Facebook's important role in shaping political opinion is undisputed, as is its role as gatekeeper. This is because Facebook actively deletes posts – at least those that violate the company's own "community standards". And these standards are not always identical with laws and practices outside the United States.

Espen Egil Hansen, editor-in-chief of the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten*, wrote in an open letter to Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg, "You are the world's most powerful editor" and "I think you are abusing your power".⁹ What had happened? The reason for Hansen's annoyance was an *Aftenposten* article which was also published on Facebook with the Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of the naked "Napalm girl", Kim Phuc, from the Vietnam War. Facebook classified the post as "pornographic" and deleted it. Hansen felt Facebook had restricted him in his "editorial responsibility".

Interestingly, the BBC had revealed just a few months earlier that Facebook had declined to delete images of scantily clad children in obvious groups such as "We love schoolgirlz" because they did not violate Facebook community standards.¹⁰

So it is clear that Facebook is already actively intervening in publications. It decides what may and may not be published according to its self-defined rules. It has appropriated the role of gatekeeper for itself. It also controls the algorithm that decides what users get to read – and, above all, what they do not. This is the classical task of the editor.

The Clash of Cultures 2.0

The world is currently experiencing very disruptive technological progress. The internet and smartphones are in the process of profoundly and permanently changing our economic and social conditions and the way we work and live. It is not for nothing that what has just happened is often compared to the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, which, thanks to mechanisation, electricity, and the invention of mass production, led to greater relative prosperity. On the other hand, however, social ills also increased: The rural population shrank because people moved to work in the cities. The working conditions were poor, and the work was often monotonous. The late effects of industrialisation, such as global warming, are now being noticed.

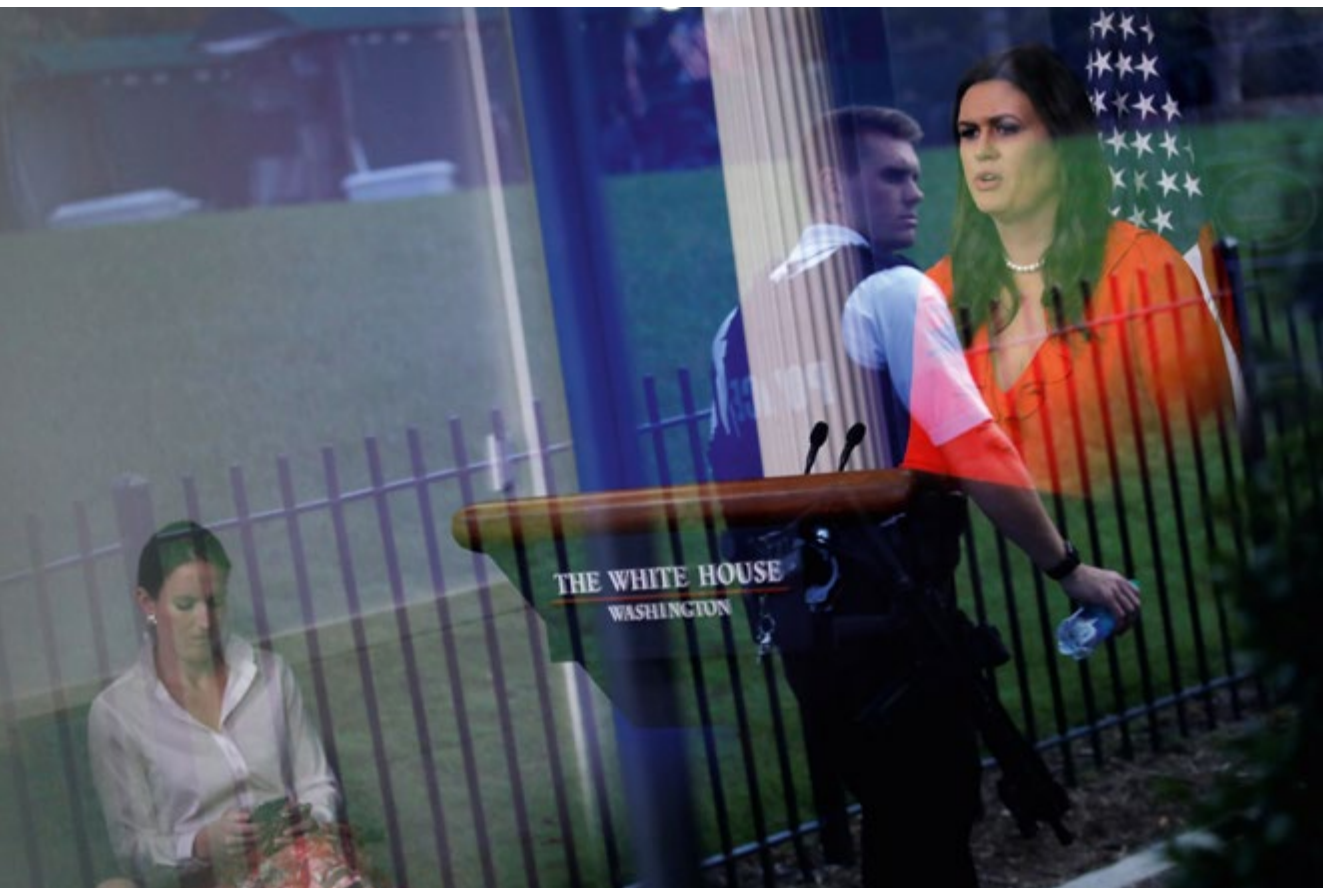
It took several legal and cultural adjustments to mitigate the negative consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Labour laws were amended to improve working conditions. Otto von Bismarck introduced social legislation. Urban infrastructure was modernised. Even the 2015 Paris climate accord can be added to these measures.

The legislators must react to the changes brought on by the digital revolution.

It is therefore impossible to foresee the consequences of the digital revolution for us today.

It is certain, however, that it is already time to react with legislation to the changes we do know about and which have been described above. Countries all over the world are trying to do this in one way or another.

Many are finding it difficult to translate their existing standards to the digital age. The German *NetzDG* is one example of this. A panel discussion during the annual Network Research Conference in Hamburg in 2017 clearly showed why. There, the chief German lobbyist for Facebook encountered the State Secretary from the Ministry of Justice. Two worlds collided. While State Secretary Gerd Billen criticised Facebook's lack of transparency and unwillingness to cooperate, lobbyist Eva-Maria Kirschsieper railed against state censorship.



Old news: The traditional press conference has become less important during Donald Trump's first mandate. Instead, the "Twitter President" prefers to communicate directly via smartphone. Source: © Carlos Barria, Reuters.

The cultural struggle for online sovereignty between the American internet company and the German government became exceedingly obvious. For while the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries took place within the framework of nation states, allowing laws to be adapted at the national level, the changes brought about by the internet have global impact. The Facebook terms of service are derived from a system of American laws and values. The handling of the photo of the Napalm girl illustrates this. Nudity is more taboo there than in Europe. Nazi symbols, on the other hand, are no problem. So how does Germany ensure that German laws are respected on Facebook, an American platform, and that American values are not imposed on us?

The Chinese have found a simple solution. Facebook, Google, YouTube, and many other platforms are not available in the People's Republic – at least not without technical tricks and considerable loss of speed. The software blocking access is nicknamed the Great Firewall of China. In place of these platforms, Chinese internet companies offer services that are in some cases even superior to those in the West. For example, the smartphone messenger service WeChat already offers functions that make it possible to pay by smartphone not only throughout China, but also in popular Chinese travel destinations such as Switzerland. However, such services also have a major disadvantage for users: They are completely monitored and censored.

However, surveillance and censorship are not the only reasons for the Chinese solution. Economics also plays an important role. Approximately 30 per cent of each Uber trip ends up at the parent company in the US. With Uber's competitor, *Didi Chuxing*, this money stays in the country. Tencent, the company behind the WeChat messenger service, had over 19 billion euros in sales in 2016 – with a sharply upward trend. The Chinese are very successful at protecting their internet market and its approximately 700 million users.

Another good reason is probably security policy. It has been clear since the revelations by Edward Snowden, the former NSA agent, that US security agencies are making intensive use of internet technology to spy on people from other countries.¹¹ It is also known that American software and internet companies are willing to cooperate with the US security agencies.¹²

Questions of data protection, surveillance, human rights, national laws, and cyber security have become closely intertwined.

China is also closing itself off vigorously in similar areas: In 2014, the Chinese government announced that it would upgrade about 200 million government computers from Windows XP to *Kylin OS*, a version of Linux adapted to Chinese needs. The professed aim was to become more independent of foreign suppliers. Authorities refused to allow a transition to Windows 8. A spokesman for the authorities confirmed that China intended to develop its own operating system based on Linux.¹³ The fact that the project is based at the Chinese National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) is a clear indication that the concern being addressed is cybersecurity. The Chinese Ministry for Industry and Information Technology funded the project.¹⁴

The issues of data protection, surveillance, human rights, national laws, and cybersecurity will occupy the world for a long time to come. This is because the world is now not only globalised, but also closely networked. Anyone who does not have the desire (and, above all, the ability) to isolate themselves from the internet, as China has, will have to make compromises. This is also true of the European Union, which is currently focusing its debate on data protection. Negotiations on the EU-US data Privacy Shield protection agreement are increasingly becoming a tug-of-war. The agreement is not static.

“We will review it every year, and should problems arise, we will immediately begin work to address them,” says EU Digital Commissioner Andrus Ansip.¹⁵ According to the new EU Data Protection Ordinance, European citizens’ personal data may no longer be stored on servers outside the EU without further legal ramifications. This shows that there are intense efforts in Europe to assert the continent’s own interests.

However, the German *NetzDG* also needs revision. In its present form, it is all too often cited as a precedent by undemocratic regimes. Such citations generally overlook the fact that in Germany, the deletion of any post can be appealed – on the basis of freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the law damages the Federal Republic of Germany’s reputation because it was not thought through to the end.

This cultural struggle will occupy several generations. These are ethical, legal, economic, and, of course, political issues. These questions cannot be answered nationally because the internet does not recognise borders. And in any case, they must not be answered nationally. Otherwise, the consequences could be isolation, protectionism and, in the worst case, isolationism. Ultimately, people determine whether the Internet will strengthen or weaken democracy. We cannot shift this responsibility onto a piece of technology.

– translated from German –

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