Does the Internet Deliver?

Eight Values as a Yardstick for the Production, Moderation and Regulation of Public Communication on the Internet

4

Power Levelling or Power Concentration?

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IN SHORT

The Internet is leading to a shift in the location of power over public opinion. What is new, in particular, is that non-journalistic actors and intermediaries can also have considerable power. There are a number of novel persuasive techniques available on the web to influence public opinion formation. The loss of their monopoly as gatekeepers, on the other hand, tends to cause traditional media providers to lose power over public opinion. Hopes for a broader distribution of such power, however, have not been fulfilled.

Here, power is understood as the potential to influence other actors´ actions and thus enforce one's own intentions, even against resistance.[1] Forms of power include the use of violence, threats and promises, persuasion, which aims at a voluntary readiness to follow, as well as the selective imparting of knowledge; through which the subjective perception of the action situation is influenced. Power mediated via communication is regarded as *soft power*.[2]

Power itself is of no intrinsic value. In principle, an unequal distribution and concentration of power is viewed critically. What is decisive for the assessment, however, is how power is legitimised and what it is used for, e. g. whether it is used to achieve or diminish values, such as freedom and diversity. In a democracy, political power must be legitimised by the people, which is why the aim is also to form public opinion "from the bottom up", i. e. starting from the citizens.

Power over Public Opinion of Non-Journalistic Actors

Which actors enjoy power on the Internet? In the traditional mass media, only journalistic media providers wield power over public opinion, because they have the gatekeeper role in which they can decide what they do and do not publish. On the Internet, on the other hand, non-journalistic providers can also gain power over public opinion.[3] Here, especially with the help of social media, they can bypass professional journalism (disintermediation). Parties, politicians and other actors wanting to exert influence can exploit this opportunity.[4] But citizens can also collectively build countervailing power (*counter-power*[5]) through mobilisation and protest on the Internet.[6] In an *optimistic* view, this leads to a shift in power away from traditional mass media and from the state to a broader distribution of power, in which citizens also have stronger participation.[7] On the other hand, a *pessimistic* view also assumes a shift, but this time a concentration of power over public opinion in different places. How much power non-journalistic providers enjoy can provisionally be estimated by their reach and credibility (as an indicator of the audience´s receptivity).[8]

Yet, if power over public opinion is to be measured, it must also be checked whether intended effects are being (or can potentially be) achieved. Such power is therefore based on the ability to successfully use persuasive techniques.

Power over Public Opinion Through Persuasive Techniques

A whole arsenal of persuasive techniques is available on the Internet for cyberpropaganda.[9] All techniques whose use is non-transparent, which are intended to deceive the audience about their truthfulness and origin or which in some other way clearly deviate from the ideal of a deliberative discourse are problematic. These include fake news,[10] strategic narratives,[11] fake videos,[12] conspiracy theories,[13] factitious informational blends,[14] false flags and cloaked websites,[15] tainted leaks,[16] revelations intended to direct opinion formation in a specific direction,[17] hate comments against users and journalists,[18] hacker attacks and the mass, algorithmically controlled dissemination (by social bots) of false information, and information with false indications of origin, which can also serve to simulate a false distribution of opinion (*astroturfing*) or to denigrate individuals.[19] In the course of the US presidential election campaign in 2016 and the German parliamentary election campaign in 2017, there were indications of the use of such techniques, especially social bots.[20] Today, there is a general expectation of manipulation attempts during election campaigns.[21]

In both cases, the issues have not yet been fully clarified. These persuasive techniques can also be attributed to the strong criticism of political institutions, insofar as it is unjustified and aims to reduce trust in them (e. g. in the "lying press" criticism). It is controversial to what extent the mass collection and analysis of personal data (big data) can today already increase the individual calculability and controllability of human behaviour (*micro targeting, dark ads*). Examples of this are to influence voting or consumer behaviour.[22] However, there are indeed considerable concerns about the use of such monitoring and control technologies by governments and companies.[23] Their commitment and mode of operation have yet to be sufficiently elucidated in order to assess their potential for exercising power. Their authors are hard to spot. Russian disinformation is suspected not only in the 2016 US presidential election campaign, but also in other election campaigns and in violent conflicts, e. g. in Ukraine and Syria.[24]

Power of Intermediaries

A shift in power is also taking place on the Internet in favour of intermediaries such as Facebook and Google.[25] Internet companies have three sources of power: economic power, the power over data and infrastructural and regulatory power, with which they structure the actions of other actors.[26] The production and dissemination of articles on socially relevant topics and their orientation have made the question of their power over public opinion,[27] social responsibility and possibly necessary regulation more urgently topical.[28] Social media have become far more important for political information and news, especially among young age groups. Search engines such as Google have also become important for access to news.[29] The relevance of intermediaries to opinion formation, i. e. their ability to influence individual and public opinion formation, not only depends on their reach.[30]

So far, however, only a few impact studies have been conducted that facilitate an empirically-based assessment of the extent to which they possess this ability. Intermediaries can gain power over public opinion if they *manipulate* the content presented *internally*. Whether and how this happens is difficult for external observers to understand. Epstein/Robertson (2015) have carried out experiments to demonstrate the influence of politically biased search engine results on the electoral preferences of undecided voters when researching candidates. Although only a marginal effect was identified, it could still be decisive in the event of a close

outcome to the election. Such internal manipulation would be difficult to detect.[31] Two Facebook experiments – criticised for ethical research reasons – have also proven the possibility of intended influence. During an experiment, Adam D.I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory and Jeffrey T. Hancock showed that positive and negative moods in newsfeeds on Facebook are contagious.[32] The frequent or infrequent use of positive expressions influenced the further communication of Facebook users in the appropriate direction. Robert M. Bond and his colleagues proved that the "I Voted" button, which signals participation in the election to friends on Facebook, does motivate non-voters to vote.[33]

Here the concern is that the button could be specifically used to benefit a particular political direction (*digital gerrymandering*).[34] Time and again, the rules by which Facebook blocks content have been criticised.[35] In 2016, Facebook was accused of suppressing conservative articles and opinions when selecting news trends.[36] The arbitrary blocking of videos on YouTube has also been subject to criticism.[37]

Intermediaries can also increase their power through the *growing dependence* of journalists and other content providers:[38] symbiotic relationships between journalism and intermediaries exist when editorial offices look at sources (research) and audiences (monitoring), in social media or with the help of search engines. In the case of integration, professional journalism makes social media its own: editors set up their own accounts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or Instagram under their brand name in order to distribute their own content, promote themselves or interact with the audience on these external platforms. Social network sites, search engines and news aggregators direct a lot of user traffic to professional journalistic websites.[39] The editorial offices tend to cede control over the distribution of their news and the relationship with their audience to the platform operators as a result of these various interrelationships.[40] Individual contents and functionalities of intermediaries can also be integrated into third-party websites (*widgets*), e. g. YouTube videos or the Like button on Facebook, which increases the influence of the intermediaries beyond their own website.[41]

However, unlike professional journalists, intermediaries do not have complete control over the content they offer. They can be *externally manipulated*, as in the case of *search engine optimisation* (SEO), which influences rankings in result lists, or in the case of political campaigns that run through social media.[42] Intermediaries can thus be instrumentalised from the outside by social forces which thereby gain power over public opinion.

1 On the definition of "power" see Nye (2011: 5–18); Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 19–24).

2 Nye (2011: 90–100) divides "soft power" into agenda-setting, which influences what is discussed, and changing preferences through attraction (charisma, beauty, competence, etc.) and rational or emotional persuasiveness. These means of power can be directed directly at the elite, or – especially in the case of soft power – they can work indirectly through moods and public opinion. On forms of power see also Garton Ash (2017: 24–26).

3 Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 79–83).

4 Broersma/Graham (2016: 100–101); Gerbaudo (2019).

5 Castells (2007: 248–252, 2009: 47–50); Nye (2011: xv-xvii).

6 Bennett/Segerberg (2013).

7 Castells (2007: 257); Nye (2011: 113–151).

8 Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 71–73); Newman et al. (2019: 20–21, 56).

9 As an overview see Benkler/Faris/Roberts (2018); Woolley/Howard (2019). See also the reports from "The Computational Propaganda Projects at the Oxford Internet Institute (https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk) and a study commissioned by the European Parliament (2019). The report "Freedom on the network 2017" by Freedom House (2017) distinguishes a multitude of such technologies and describes their use in 65 countries.

10 On the reach and influence of fake news in the US (Barthel/Mitchell/Holcomb 2016; Silverman 2016; Allcott/Gentzkow 2017) and Germany (Sängerlaub 2017).

11 Khaldarova/Pantti (2016).

12 Van de Weghe (2019).

13 Zubiaga et al. (2016).

14 Rojecki/Meraz (2016).

15 Farkas/Schou/Neumayer (2018).

16 Greenberg (2017); Hulcoop et al. (2017).

17 Beuth et al. (2017).

18 Reporters Without Borders (2018).

19 Ferrara et al. (2016); Guilbeault/Woolley (2016).

20 Brachten et al. (2017); Neudert/Kollanyi/Howard (2017); Sängerlaub (2017). On the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (2016) see Howard/Kollanyi (2016).

21 Hoffmann/Taylor/Bradshaw (2019).

22 Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2017).

23 On government surveillance in China see Strittmatter (2019).

24 Khaldarova/Pantti (2016); The Syria Campaign (2017); Helmus et al. (2018); Snyder (2018).

25 Dolata (2017); Schmidt et al. (2017: 32–33). As critics see Haucap/Heimeshoff (2014).

26 Dolata (2018: 123–126). Zuboff (2015, 2019) sees Google and other intermediaries at the heart of surveillance capitalism: the ability to fully monitor data in real time and the ability to continuously experiment to optimise the impact of personalised messages leads to a significant gain in power. According to Milberry/Anderson (2009), although intermediaries do not control access to the medium as gatekeepers, they do control the powerful transmission nodes and direct user flows through them because they continuously bind the attention of users.

27 Machill/Beiler (2007); Paal (2012).

28 For Germany see BLK (2016: 31–39); Schulz/Dankert (2016).

29 For Germany see Die Medienanstalten (2016a: 30, 35, 2016b: 30, 35).

30 Schmidt et al. (2017: 14–19, 20–33).

31 As documentation of the interventions of Google in search results: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship_by_Google

32 Kramer/Guillory/Hancock (2014).

33 Bond et al. (2012). Haenschen (2016) comes to similar conclusions. A field experiment by Matz et al. (2017) showed that personalising Facebook advertising with regard to the personality traits extraversion and openness-to-experience can significantly increase advertising success.

34 Zittrain (2014).

35 Hurtz/Munzinger (2017).

36 Spiegel Online (2016).

37 Garton Ash (2017: 64–72).

38 For empirical findings see Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 76–77).

39 VanNest (2016); Newman et al. (2019: 13–14).

40 This is Bell's thesis (2016) under the heading "Facebook is eating the world". Publications must adapt if changes in the algorithm affect their success (Tandoc/Maitra 2017).

41 Helmond (2015: 6).

42 Mitchell/Holcomb/Weisel (2016).

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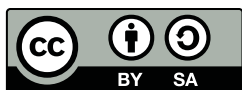
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