

**Martin A. M. Gansinger  
Ayman Kole (Eds.)**

# **Vortex of the Web**

Potentials of the  
online environment



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*Dedicated to Loubna, Ahmed-Nouri and Jul and Atil*

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Dr. Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger (born 1979 in Austria) studied Communication Science and Political Science at the University of Vienna and passed both with distinction. His Master's thesis discusses recursive patterns of cultural, social, and political resistance in various forms of Black American musical expression and the potential of Hip Hop as an alternative communication-structure for the compensation of dysfunctional representation through mainstream-media. He furthermore analyzed the conditions of communication and interaction in regard to the practice of collective improvisation as a musical method and its correspondence to the concept of the Ideal Speech Situation as introduced by Habermas – as well as its efficiency in the context of Intercultural Communication – to attain a Doctor's degree in Communication Science. Next to being an editor and journalist for *jazzzeit* magazine and Vienna-based radio station orange 94.0 from 2005-2009 he has been working as a PR-coordinator for the internationally awarded, independent label JazzWerkstatt Records. Martin A. M. Gansinger conducted several long-term field studies abroad, receiving financial funding through the University of Vienna's research scholarship. He spent a year in Ghana in coordination with the Vienna Institute for Development and Cooperation and Prof. John Collins from the University of Ghana/Accra, researching Intercultural Communication processes in the context of transfusional West African music styles – including an extended stay at the local compound of the Jamaica-based Bobo Shanti Mansion, one of the strictest subdivisions of the Rastafarian faith, and allowance to their communal Nyahbinghi ceremonies. Further field research aiming at extemporaneous communication techniques and its use in traditional knowledge systems has been done in Fez/Morocco and the convent of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Lefke/Cyprus where he is working and residing since 2009. He is currently holding the position of an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communication at Girne American University, teaching Undergraduate-, Master-, and PhD-classes as well as appointed Head of Department of Public Relations. In 2018, Martin A. M. Gansinger received invitations to present his work at Freiburg University and the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Dr. Ayman Kole (born 1980, Sydney, Australia) completed an experience course at the prestigious Australian, Film, TV and Radio school whilst still a student studying in



High School in 1996. He studied intensively at the University of Sydney, completing a BA in Arts with triple majors: English, Performance Studies and Studies in Religion in 2002. He also finished a scriptwriting course at the same University. He worked as a High School English Teacher before completing his MA in English at the University of Sydney in 2006. During his studies in the Masters Degree program, he wrote the short story 'The Mirror' which was selected as the Phoenix Journal finalist and published by Sydney University Press. He later was successfully accepted as a PhD student at Charles Sturt University to commence work on his thesis encompassing Literature, History and Creative Writing. His objective was to explore the historical, cultural and social landscape of Eastern Europe and the Middle East with a focus on the 17<sup>th</sup> century and he spent time in Turkey and Cyprus conducting thorough historical research. In his work, Ayman investigated how people can be manipulated and just how quickly firmly held beliefs can be either modified or replaced in light of effectively staged performances. Furthermore, his thesis aimed to alert inquisitive minds to the cons and trickery of harmful or pretentious movements and this message can be applied to the realm of religion and politics today. One of Ayman's strengths in writing is his richly detailed research and his ability to create a fascinating narrative not from only one cultural perspective, but from many competing social groups of the selected era. Indeed, his profound insightfulness of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, illustrating the differences and commonalities between the major religions of the area are just as relevant today as they were in the past. His novel 'Mark of the Crescent' was published in Australia. He currently he holds an academic position at Cyprus Science University.

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## ***Introduction***

*Technology is not civilization, civilization ain't about the tools that you're making...<sup>i</sup>*

It has been a stranger than fiction type of journey, and one that continues to be so. With the initiary enthusiasm about the collective migration into the webspace during the early 2000s slowly fading, more and more people seem to realize it might as well turn out to be a proverbial Box of Pandora. Coming as a surprise to some, the content that is being placed online is not free from many other connotations attached to it. The impact of social media upon private, political and business is beyond words and the dangers are not without consequences. Manipulation of the public agenda and other likewise schemes have already become part of an industry of tools specifically designed for the internet and targeting internet-users on a daily basis. On the verge to industry 4.0 and the internet of things, this book attempts to broadly discuss the risks and chances dwelling in our ever-present virtual environment from various perspectives, such as politics, philosophy, marketing, education and media.

The first chapter discusses the question of whether or not these newly developing techniques that have become the paramount source of information for online users worldwide prove to be compatible with democratic principles. Addressing key events – such as the 2018 Facebook data-breach or the new form of message control established by political actors like Trump, Macron or Austria's Sebastian Kurz – the potential danger of an emerging industry aiming at deceiving consumers and voters is being stressed. Following is a more general discussion concerning juxtaposition effects of online communication on the social environment that mainly points out aspects of gender discrimination and political opinion. Another crucial happening, the US-recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, forms the base for considerations about how Turkish politician's efficiently instrumentalize social media channels for their purposes and agendas, explored in Chapter Three. The hijacking of non-political platforms such as Instagram by political movements like Black Lives Matter is outlined by a respective case study along the lines of racism and stereotyping in Chapter Four of this book. The

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<sup>i</sup> KRS ONE (2006). I'm On The Mic. On *LIFE*. New York: Antagonist Records.

following chapter explores the impact of online pornography on the academic performance of university student's based on a research conducted at the European University of Lefke/Cyprus. Focusing on the role of online tools in the process of relaunching dormant shadow brands, a case study of Nigerian Airtel is being presented in Chapter Six. After a short account on the role of social media in the opinion formation during the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, the book closes with a comparative study on the depiction of popular political documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *American Zeitgeist* in Western and Russian media – using Van Dijk's Semantic Macroproposition and the concept of the Ideological Square.

With this book we hope to present possible areas of future research that further investigate the potential of the web to improve or threaten the condition of mankind and society on its various levels. However, as with every other aspect of human inventions and technological achievements – and in slight amendment to another line of the above quoted KRS ONE – *it is the consciousness behind the screen that determines if the net is positive or negative.*

Martin A. M. Gansinger & Ayman Kole, June 2018

## **clicktatorship and democrazy: Social media and political campaigning**

**Abstract:** This chapter aims to direct attention to the political dimension of the social media age. Although current events like the Cambridge Analytica data breach managed to raise awareness for the issue, the systematically organized and orchestrated mechanisms at play still remain oblivious to most. Next to dangerous monopoly-tendencies among the powerful players on the market, reliance on automated algorithms in dealing with content seems to enable large-scale manipulation that is applied for economical and political purposes alike. The successful replacement of traditional parties by movements based on personality cults around marketable young faces like Emmanuel Macron or Austria's Sebastian Kurz is strongly linked to products and services offered by an industry that simply provides likes and followers for cash. Inspired by Trump's monopolization of the Twitter-channel, these new political actors use the potential of social media for effective message control, allowing them to avoid confrontations with professional journalists. In addition, an extremely active minority of organized agitators relies on the viral potential of the web to strongly influence and dictate public discourse – suggesting a shift from the *Spiral of Silence* to the dangerous illusion of a *Nexus of Noise*.

**Key Words:** *Social Media, Democracy, Political Campaigning, Public Opinion, Big Data, Micro-Targeting*

## *Stranger than fiction?*

The question of social media, secrets and targeted discreditation has featured in countless productions in the film industry, more so of late. For instance, Oliver Stone's *Snowden* (Borman & Stone, 2016) draws its story from the real-life whistleblowing activities of Edward Snowden and sets out to highlight the drama and intrigues associated with the main character's leaking of NSA surveillance procedures. In fact, as noted by Michelle Singletary's (2013) *Washington Post* article titled *Edward Snowden – The Price of Being a 'Whistleblower'*, the real Snowden is on record for declaring 'I can't in good conscience allow the U.S. government, to destroy privacy, internet freedom and basic liberties for people around the world with this massive surveillance machine they are building' from a Hong Kong hotel where he was hiding.

Furthermore, conspiracy-laden films have always been steadily churned out by Hollywood executives, offering intriguing storylines that play on the paranoias of the media at the time. One must only recall the classic *The Manchurian Candidate* (Axelrod & Frankenheimer, 1962) starring Frank Sinatra in the role of a Korean War veteran who is brainwashed by the communists to engage in harmful activities against his own country, the United States. Years later, some producers must have felt that this controversial premise warranted an update as the film was remade (Demme, 2004) with Denzel Washington re-inventing the role as a Gulf War veteran instead. Interestingly, the communist threat was replaced by sinister Global corporations in the new version.

It appears that computers and top-secret government programs are not really a new thing in film, as even a cursory glance reveals such genre efforts like *WarGames* (Schneider & Badham, 1983). The plot concerns a young hacker who breaks into the military computer system via a telephone modem to play a video game, unaware that the game is a program containing actual missile launch codes that could trigger nuclear war between the US and the Soviets. The film plays on the Cold War paranoias, coupled with computer glitches in the defense systems and identity theft.

Moreover, *Hackers* (Peysner & Softly, 1995) made when the internet was still somewhat new and not so widespread, tried to take advantage of the cyberpunk culture that was considered hip among teens, and had its main characters using online handles such as

*Acid Burn* and *Crash Override*, as well as its villain using the internet alias *The Plague*. Indeed, the cyber culture was taken further with the futuristic *Johnny Mnemonic* (Carmody & Longo, 1995) which had a young Keanu Reeves playing a courier who delivers illegal or secret data directly downloaded into a microchip-implant in his brain. Furthermore, the iconic science-fiction thriller *The Matrix* (Silver & The Wachowski Brothers, 1999) also starred Keanu Reeves as a computer hacker who discovers he has a larger role as savior to mankind after he bands together with a group of techno-rebels.

The internet took another sinister turn in *The Net* (Cowan & Winkler, 1995) with Sandra Bullock's character in peril, facing identity theft. These films and similar themed productions demonstrated that society was on the brink of a major change in the way we dealt with banking, private emails, and the overall handling of our personal information. Although, it cannot be denied that the internet has changed our world and the way we interact and conduct business, it has also vastly impacted the film industry as well. Once, especially during the films of the 1990s, the internet was seen as a sinister threat that heroes and heroines had to combat to save the day, but now, the internet has evolved in such a great capacity, that the film industry itself has finally met its challenge. Indeed, the internet has affected how a film is now marketed. More films are released on streaming networks instead of cinema theatres, and in some cases, films are being made directly for the streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime.

Facebook and social media platforms are also playing a central role in creating awareness for a new film. Thus, marketing for the film is fast evolving: the traditional methods of television trailers, home-video (VHS) and cinema previews have now been replaced by YouTube trailer uploads, Facebook pages, its multiple shares and sponsored advertising. As a matter of fact, in his article titled *The Internet Totally Freaked Out Over The Star Wars Trailer* for wired.com, Jordan Crucciola relayed that the trailer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was able to reach over 1 million clicks and views in just 23 minutes via this method on social media, thus proving that the power of social network could – together with its many commenters – not only reach large numbers in a short amount of time, but could too influence perceptions on what can be deemed good, bad or interesting.

## ***Reality strikes***

In May 2017, the Austrian Green Party won a significant court case that forced Facebook to worldwide remove postings that fulfill the subject of ‘hate speech’ (APA, 2017a). A similar claim has been expressed by former German Minister of Justice, Heiko Maas, who wanted to legally oblige the social media platform to scan their network for respective content and remove it. Facebook, however, strongly rejected the foreseen practice of self-censorship and sees the responsibility for regulating the issue on the side of the state and respective governmental measurements – preferably on a European level (Etzold, 2017). The announcement of Theresa May to set up a new national security unit dedicated to the preservation of truthful news content raises a whole lot of questions in the context of democracy and freedom of speech on its own (Walker, 2018). Nevertheless, the controversial social network had to face increased criticism since being accused to provide a platform for ‘fake news’ and hate postings during the US-election campaign in 2016 (Oates & Moe, 2016; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), in a quick reaction suggesting the establishment of fact checking units for uploaded content on their own behalf back then. Former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern – in his keynote speech at the European Newspaper Congress – openly urged Facebook to disclose the algorithms that are used to match users and targeted advertising and demanded the company to be subjected to common media law in order to balance the distorted means of competition between social media content and professional communicators (APA, 2017b). It goes without saying that these algorithms are to remain the company’s best kept secret, since it can be considered the very core of their business model.

As long as internal guidelines for the removal of explicit content are not bound to the limitations of the same regulations that media professionals have to consider for their work, they gain a clear advantage against institutionalized media outlets. Although former Chancellor Christian Kern criticized the role of institutionalized media in general in forming a ‘spiral of populism’ with attention-seeking political actors deliberately delivering the punchlines that sell copies, media monopolies that enable the glorification of violence tend to be even more endangering for social and democratic co-existence. Kern further pointed out the problematic condition of a newsmaking industry



that is primarily aiming at the generation of clicks, leaving journalistic decisions overruled by a fully quantified, algorithm-oriented perspective by stating that information is subsequently reduced to a product being purchased with data – equivalent to gold in the digital era (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013).

According to Hindman (2008) and Wilson (2008), the relationship between digital communication and democracy is a rather problematic one anyway. Several authors have looked into the role of internet and social media in the process of political participation and direct democracy (Aitamurto, 2012; Lim, 2012; Loader & Mercea 2012; Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2013). Being one of the first to discuss the impact of technological developments and reshaped means of capitalization on democratic societies, Dean's (2002) early critical account on the issue can be found echoing in a growing number of like-minded studies in the recent past. While Kang and McAllister (2011) had already focused on the capitalization of Google users, Marichal (2012) directly explored the issue of online exposure – and self-exposure – on social media channels as a factor for re-shaping concepts of democracy and public life. Helbing et al. (2017) even suggested a major re-organization of society due to a techno-economical Pandora's Box that has been opened by the inherent logics of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data. The case of a considerably large group of Macedonian teenagers from the sleepy village of Veles that launched a big number of websites filled with manipulated or made-up news content oriented towards Trump-supporters as an audience – cashing big money from ad revenues – is but one demonstration of the undesirable effects of such a constellation (Ladurner, 2016; Miller, 2016).

Qualman (2010) already dealt with the impact of social media on modern life and business practices, attesting the biggest success rate to those applications that would allow users either self-portrayal, competition or a chance to take on a role as an esteemed opinion leader (2010, p. 117). Socio-economist Tilman Santarius further pointed out that consumer-friendly flatrates or cost-free streaming offers are generally purchased by rather expensive exchange of sensitive private data and demanded political measurements to avoid unrestricted profitization of personal information (Laufer, 2017). However, another serious and problematic aspect of the personalized web is the creation of effectively constructed filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Nguyen, Hui,