



**NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES**  
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# Critical Security Studies in the Digital Age

Social Media and Security

Joseph Downing

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# New Security Challenges

Series Editor

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The last decade has demonstrated that threats to security vary greatly in their causes and manifestations and that they invite interest and demand responses from the social sciences, civil society, and a very broad policy community. In the past, the avoidance of war was the primary objective, but with the end of the Cold War the retention of military defence as the centrepiece of international security agenda became untenable. There has been, therefore, a significant shift in emphasis away from traditional approaches to security to a new agenda that talks of the softer side of security, in terms of human security, economic security, and environmental security. The topical New Security Challenges series reflects this pressing political and research agenda.

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Age

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# Introduction to Social Media and Critical Security Studies in the Digital Age

## 1.1 INTRODUCING SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRITICAL SECURITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Social media has become one of the key components of the contemporary global political landscape. From the circulation of horrific ISIS recruitment videos to the will they/won't they/oh they have de-platforming debate about the Twitter account of the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, "social media" is never far from the political headlines. However, the headlines, as always, can be simplistic, sensationalist and essentialising of "social media". Is it really true that jokes, spread online, won the 2017 presidential election for Donald Trump? (Nussbaum, 2017). Giving primacy to the role of "digital" social media narratives above and beyond the archaic "analogue", structural and social factors seems to have become quite a trend. If we are to interrogate such claims with scholarly rigour, a set of questions, some even beyond the scope of this book raise their head. To what extent is social media "new" or simply an extension of, or means of articulating, old social cleavages and grievances? Is social media really the driving force behind a populist social movement, rooted in rising inequality and the de-alignment of voters from traditional left-wing parties that become increasingly concerned with middle-class (Thomas, 2022), young (Rosentiel, 2008), urban (Thompson, 2019) voters at the expense of their traditional power bases? Clearly, social media needs to be situated with

the much broader social context in which it is only one part of the much larger political jigsaw of the early twenty-first century.

However, essentialisation of social media does not stop at discussions of its posited unstoppable capacity for social and political transformation. Rather, “social media” is used unproblematically as if it describes a unitary entity with clear and unidirectional implications. However, this catch all term homogenises an incredibly bewildering array of technologies, platforms and communication technologies with significantly varying and multifaceted possibilities for human use, interaction and subversion. Indeed, there is a lot to be said for abandoning the term “social media” as essentialising and homogenising to the point of uselessness. For example, to lumber telegram, a smart phone app used for private communication under the same umbrella term as YouTube and Twitter seems extremely reductionist.

Another common folie in the discussion of communications technologies is presenting them in ahistorical terms. The communications “revolution” of social media, opening up new avenues for those at the “bottom” to contest the political agenda of those at the “top” is arguably not as new, or as revolutionary as it seems. Indeed, the possibilities afforded by technology for challenging those in authority was not something lost on those seeking to disrupt political, religious and social order since with technology since antiquity (Reuter, 2019).

However analogue this may sound, the “digitalisation” of communication technologies and how these have sent ripples through the political and social order is also something not unique to the adoption of the smart phone. Indeed, there is a much longer historical relationship between media, security and international relations. The revolutionary Islamist messages carried on the cassette tapes of the Iranian revolution, Algerian FLN and Egyptian Muslim brotherhood changed the political field of North Africa and the Middle East, ushering in a dark and sinister era of conspiratorial anti-systemic politics that shook the foundations of authoritarian regimes long before anyone could conceive the possibilities of tweeting about the Arab spring. Indeed, the deposed Shah of Iran and the bloodied and battered regime of ex-freedom fighters in Algiers saw first-hand the devastating consequences of how long-neglected structural social grievances could be given new life and meanings through communications technologies.

It is important to note that these are only a few selected examples of a wide range of questions that one could pose about the relationship between social media, politics and security more generally. Thus, grafting this confounding array of technological possibilities to a body of theoretical and conceptual work as diverse critical security studies is no straightforward task. Once again one needs to beg the question if the elite-centric, discursively pre-occupied Copenhagen school (Buzan et al., 1997) should or can be considered under the same rubric as Critical Terrorism Studies (Breen Smyth et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2007) or the emergent vernacular security studies. Also, to what extent do ongoing debates about the intersecting questions of gender, race and ethnicity in the security field (inter alia Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020) undermine the validity of the CSS endeavour entirely? Opening up these twin Pandora's boxes could be seen to set up this book to fail miserably in its primary purpose to give answers to the desperately needed discussion of how the CSS needs to reconsider its key conceptual underpinnings in the wake of a sea change in communications and discourse because there are too many "critical security studies" and "social medias" to enable a modest work of circa 80,000 words to make any significant headway. Indeed, this is a discussion that has, and is, going to take up volumes of work in the field in the coming decades as these two hydras will only grow more and more heads, and become ever more intertwined in an awkward and at times combative embrace. It is better than to consider this book a starting point for some of these discussions and a point of departure rather than a point of arrival. Reminiscent of a joke I share frequently during research design seminars with my students, it is always wise for an academic to recommend the need for further research in the field not only for instrumental reasons of future utility and employment, but because the process of intellectual enquiry into the social world around us is never-ending.

## 1.2 CHALLENGES AND LIMITS TO INVESTIGATING SOCIAL MEDIA AND SECURITY

It is also important to set the limits of this book before we go on to offer insights into what it seeks to address. The first important point to note is the empirical limits of this book from a number of perspectives. It is important to foreground that there are indeed several "missing chapters" that would warrant significant engagement and discussion. These include

empirical areas such as environmentalism, gender and state-based violence as areas where social media has important intersection with them. Indeed, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has thrown up an array of questions for scholars of technology and conflict, and more specifically the use of social media by the open-source intelligence community and the geolocation of targets from social media pictures are likely going to be important points of enquiry for years to come. Conceptually, the decolonial turn in social theory has received some attention from critical security scholars (Adamson, 2020) and could have easily been a chapter in its own right as these debates rage on social media. Additionally, there could have also been a far wider range of empirical contexts included in this book as the engagement between critical security studies and social media “in the wild” knows no geographical, linguistic or platform-based boundaries. Thus while acknowledging the well-documented Western bias in security studies (Bilgin, 2010) more generally, this book acknowledges its Western case study bias. Additionally, it is important to remain critical of critical security studies throughout, as this is a field of theory that has numerous issues. An important and difficult one to square here has been the focus of much of critical security studies on “emancipation” (Aradau, 2004; Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Wyn Jones, 1999) which while admirable, has been often poorly defined and operationalised in the literature. That said, perhaps in a thin sense, social media offers at the bare minimum a sort of discursive emancipation where some previously excluded voices find a place to articulate narratives of security.

### 1.3 TAKE HOME MESSAGES

It is also important to offer some key, if brief, summaries of the “take home” messages from the enquiries undertaken in this book.

#### 1.3.1 *The Need to Shatter Disciplinary Boundaries in the Digital Age*

The first of these relates to how attempting to understand the myriad ways that social media relates to security requires the shattering of disciplinary boundaries. This is a core commitment of critical security studies (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Jarvis, 2019), and scholars have gone as far as to argue that boundary nationalism plays a role in “Hiding the struggles and hierarchies inside these discursive activities” (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018, p. 5).

As such, the early critical work done in the discursive turn by the Copenhagen school (Buzan et al., 1997) which broke open the security studies discipline has been widely critiqued for a poorly defined sense of interdisciplinarity and a “methodological elitism” (Stanley & Jackson, 2016) that focuses too much on the speech of dominant actors (McDonald, 2008, p. 563). An important intervention here can be found in the calls to include a range of disciplinary approaches into security studies, such as the tools of sociology and criminology (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). Perhaps the most extreme articulation of this has been found in the vernacular school of security studies which advocates a theoretical “emptiness” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 110) which “allows for greater fidelity to the diversity of everyday stories” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 110). However, while this is important, it is not only in the everyday that this finds resonance, but in a range of contexts. This leads onto the second key take home message of this book.

### *1.3.2 Empirical Security Paradoxes: Expecting the Unexpected on Social Media*

The second take home message from this book in examining social media from the perspective of critical security studies is that it is important to remember to “expect the unexpected”. When examining social media empirics, security can pop up in the most unusual places, articulated by those without any previous security pedigree, with users becoming influential in social media debates on security who again have no previous security credentials. This comes hand in hand with opening up security studies to a range of disciplinary perspectives. As mentioned, in the most “extreme” form of this, the theoretical “emptiness” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 110) of the vernacular school opens up security in significant ways. However, this relies a lot on the view of the observer of security, and begs the important questions are we prepared to see constructions of security in unexpected places? In scholarship on critical terrorism studies, we can see a turn to examining questions of how terror becomes embedded in popular culture such as TV shows (Erickson, 2008; Holland, 2011) and comic books (Veloso & Bateman, 2013). This demands that scholars and observers take seriously that security is increasingly found in unexpected places, articulated in unexpected ways. Social media offers users numerous, if not endless, opportunities for users to articulate themselves however they like. Put simply, one needs to be prepared to not only see



security where they don't expect, for example in a meme, or on YouTube, but also to see it articulated and constructed in ways we don't expect—for example through adapted football slogans as seen in later chapters of this book. As such, important opportunities to study security on social media can come from anywhere, and can take the most unexpected and counterintuitive directions. A valuable observation has been made in relation to identifying methods and methodologies in security studies that “Both method and methodology are instrumental in identifying *what counts* for research” (Aradau, Coward et al., 2015, p. 59). This shows that there is still significant debate about what “counts” as worthy of attention. Social media, and the analysis to come in this book, demonstrates that not only do the disciplinary boundaries of security studies need to be broadened by social media, but that the empirical boundaries of security studies need to also be dramatically revised if we are to get to grips with social media.

### 1.3.3 *The Temperamental Topography of Social Media: The Rise, Rise and Fall of Platforms, Data and Methods*

As we begin to think about how method and methodology can help us to consider what “counts for research” (Aradau, Coward et al., 2015, p. 59) when it comes to engaging with social media, we need to move beyond the ongoing debates about the diversification of international relations. This is because as much as debates in international relations are dynamic and fluid, the social media landscapes move just as fast. For example, in 2022 Facebook loosed overall users' figures for the first time in its history (Dwoskin et al., 2022). While this does not mean the giant will close anytime soon, it does demonstrate how the landscape can dramatically shift. This is also true for the tools and data access questions that are central to social media analysis. This is well-illustrated by a particularly valuable resource that was one of the first I consulted when considering a pivot into social media research which was a blog piece on “Using Twitter as a data source” (Ahmed, 2021). This resource is referred to as a “long running series” having been published initially in 2015, then re-published in 2017, 2019 and then 2021 (Ahmed, 2021), rather than a fixed point blog entry. Indeed, the 2021 edition was necessitated by a sea change in social media research—Twitter's release of an “academic research product track” offering academics free access to its data (Ahmed, 2021). This demonstrates something important—the rapid, unpredictable and enormous change that the tools and data of social media analysis

go through constantly. This is only part of the story as new platforms emerge, become popular, and indeed less popular over time. Thus, there is no easy answer here, and the most important take home from these issues and changes for aspiring scholars of social media and security is to be extremely flexible and open to new tools as well as new social media platforms. An example of adaptability here in this book is the application of netnographic methods to the app Snapchat in part to overcome the “self-destructing” (Bayer et al., 2016) ephemeral nature of its data which means it is neither kept on the company’s servers, nor is it downloadable for off-line analysis as Twitter data is. These data access issues clearly don’t make the platform less important for analysis—and indeed they may actually render it even more important given that users can be sure that their data will disappear, but it did require some imaginative methodological thinking.

### *1.3.4 The Unrealised Promises of Critical Theory: Social Media and Discursive Emancipation*

The emancipatory burden weighs extremely heavily on critical theory, and thus by extension it places an equally important burden on critical security studies. Indeed, some have argued that that without the emancipatory dimension, critical security studies should not be referred to as critical (Hynek & Chandler, 2013). The rationale goes that the horizons have been lowered to such an extent that it undermines the very normative impulse that is a key underpinning of the project more broadly (Hynek & Chandler, 2013). A range of critical security scholars have attempted to promote this commitment to emancipation, from the Welsh school (Wyn Jones, 1999) to the Paris school (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). In particular, the Welsh school changes the nature of the world and emancipates individuals from both the physical and mental constraints that they may even be unaware of (Wyn Jones, 1995).

However, this is not a burden that critical security studies has shouldered well. The Copenhagen school, who kicked out the discursive, and to a certain extent, the critical turn in security studies (Buzan et al., 1997) has received critique for lacking a clear normative commitment to an emancipatory agenda (Filimon, 2016), focusing more on security elites. This is set against a broader, and indeed troubling, observation that theory has failed to bring better societies into existence (Wyn Jones, 1999, p. 21). In particular, the lack of concrete examples of “what types of

institutions and relationships might characterise a more emancipated society” and “the commitment of critical theorists to emancipation became merely metaphysical in character” (Wyn Jones, 1999, p. 35). While critical security scholars have attempted to theorise emancipatory alternatives (Aradau, 2004), this is still an area in which the theory is found lacking.

Add to this, despite early optimism that social media would be an “emancipatory” technology, a much more complex picture has emerged. Social media has been conceptualised as locked in a complex struggle between emancipation and control (Dencik & Leistert, 2015), where causes can use social media for emancipatory projects, but thus open themselves up to new forms of censorship, surveillance and control (Dencik & Leistert, 2015). Added to this are the many questions of the commodification of social media (Allmer, 2015), and how it is being dominated by commercial interests, and indeed commercial interests that are at times diametrically opposed to emancipatory causes. Add to this, the observation that a significant digital divide exists, where global inequalities exclude many from the ownership of the devices, and the fast data connectivity required, and indeed even the literacy to be able to compose a tweet (Ali, 2011). This is also not just a simple global north/south divide, as this divide can exist within national, regional and even local contexts (Cullen, 2001; van Dijk, 2006).

This leaves us at quite a pessimistic juncture, where critical theory, critical security studies and social media all fail at providing viable recipes for global emancipation. This is without even begging the question as to whether or not the “powerless” even see themselves as such, nor want to seek emancipation through the dismantling of global capitalism at all, and who may instead prefer to take their chances under capitalism than to either wage an uncertain class struggle or wait to be emancipated by theorists at universities thousands of miles away.

However, perhaps all is not lost when we consider questions of discourse and voice on social media. Scholars that have argued that a central tenant of critical approaches to social media needs to include an emancipatory component (Allmer, 2015) perhaps offer an insight. This has taken the form of advocating “a normative and partial approach giving voice to the voiceless and supporting the oppressed classes of society” (Allmer, 2015, p. 7). Here, despite a digital divide, the failures of emancipatory theory and the control and commodification of social media output, there is a glimmer of hope that communications technologies

can at least give a voice to the voiceless, a sort of “discursive emancipation”. Here, from a critical security perspective and highlighted by some examples provided in this book, individuals who would not have previously been able to articulate security narratives, and how actually may have become influential in security debates, have been significantly aided in this by social media technologies. This dovetails well with the “vernacular security studies” literature that seeks to highlight the importance of everyday voices and how they construct security from a range of perspectives (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis, 2019) and it is likely that for a number of years to come, a range of synergies between vernacular security studies and social media data will become ever more apparent.

#### 1.4 CHARTING THE ROAD AHEAD: CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE SOCIAL MEDIA SECURITYSCAPE

Indeed, it is examining a range of theoretical observations and their synergies with social media that begins this book. Security studies has been on a journey in the past century. From post-World War II realism (inter alia Gorski, 2013; Huysmans, 1998) to the “critical turn” of the Copenhagen, Welsh and Paris schools (inter alia Buzan et al., 1997; Didier Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Floyd, 2007), the field has developed in tandem with, and in opposition to a range of political and social developments and events as well as technologies. However, an important caveat of this is to not fall into the trap of seeing these theories as discrete and separate. It is important, as many have argued (Floyd, 2007) not to see various “schools” of CTS as discreet and isolated entities—they owe each other and a far broader range of social theory considerable intellectual debts. Thus, it is vital to consider the synergies and contradictions between them, for example in the “hierarchical” understandings of security speak in the Copenhagen school (Buzan et al., 1997) and the “flat” understanding of security speak in vernacular security studies (Jarvis & Lister, 2012). This sets the ground for an informed understanding of how these bodies of work can, or cannot, account for the disruptive potential of social media.

Chapter 2 of this book seeks to highlight key aspects of these theories that are important for the coming discussion of how critical security studies informs social media. The discursive turn, marked by the Copenhagen school’s schema of (de)securitisation (Buzan et al., 1997) was a significant shift in security studies. Here, the Copenhagen school had

“established itself—for European scholars at least—as the canon and indispensable reference point for students of security” (McSweeney, 1996). An important take-home for this book that emerges from the Copenhagen school can be seen in the ability to see security as a construct—i.e. the material realities of security only go so far in deciding if a particular situation is threatening. Thus we must also examine the way that actors, in this case security elites “speak” threats into existence, and on what grounds they make claims about particular situations requiring particular responses. Clearly for an understanding of social media, this ability to examine narrations of security, and to consider that security is not simply an objective material reality, but part of a political process of threat construction is valuable. However, the elite-centric notion articulated by the Copenhagen school, that elites speak security and the audience listens, is very much complicated by changes in communications technologies and struggles to consider the disruptive potential of social media. This is not the only critique of the Copenhagen school, as it has been argued to be thin on emancipatory commitments (Filimon, 2016; Hynek & Chandler, 2013) and lacking in considering the racialised dynamics of global and domestic security situations (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020). It also does not have the monopoly on critical understandings of security and while laying some crucial groundwork for critical takes on security problems, we are necessitated to delve further into the murky depths of the theoretical pond.

Bigger on emancipatory commitments is the Welsh school of security studies (Wyn Jones, 1995). The Welsh school, like much of critical security studies, emerges in the wake of the end of the Cold War. This was buoyed by the optimism of the end of the bi-polar conflict and the new possibilities this could bring, and the developing “interregnum” of this old system of states and an emerging borderless world community (Wyn Jones, 1995). The Welsh school committed to the idea of bringing about change and aiding in the production of a new world that would emancipate individuals from both the physical and mental constraints that they may even be unaware of (Wyn Jones, 1995). This “emancipation” has some significant rhetorical synergies with some narrations about the possibilities of social media to bring voice to the masses, especially in the early, more positive, days when it was seen that social media could spark a wave of democratisation, peace and stability (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Clearly both ideas, that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of social media would bring about a utopian state of emancipation, have proved

somewhat naïve. However, in approaching social media, it is important to consider how an albeit thin notion of discursive emancipation might be possible to a certain extent on social media, as it undeniably does give “voices to the voiceless” and enables a range of actors to construct security narratives that would have previously been excluded from doing so.

However, to understand the range and scope of these new security narratives, we need to go further as the tools of international relations are not sufficient to do this. One key take-home of the Paris school can be seen in its rallying cry to smash disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018). This in fact proves to be a sage and highly insightful observation in the context of critical security studies and social media because precisely the broadening of the narrative security landscape on social media requires new tools to understand how individuals subvert, contest and contort security in tandem with a range of sociological, criminological and anthropological means. If it seems superfluous for the Paris school to deny a geographical label and to instead propose to be known as the “Political Anthropological Research for International Sociology” (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018), then the anthropological and sociological parts are spot on.

The journey does not stop here, however, as the field of critical security studies remains in constant flux, responding as it does to the flux of the global system. Two exciting developments in the last two decades have been the more recent additions to the landscape of critical security studies in “Vernacular” security studies (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis & Lister, 2012) and critical terrorism studies (Richard Jackson, 2007). Given that social media gives the audience the ability to “speak” security and become an important part of the security discussion, vernacular security studies has an important part to play in conceptualising how binary, hierarchical understandings of relationships of the “audience” and the “elite” central to critical security studies (Buzan et al., 1997) begins to break down on social media. However, it is not as simple as embracing a completely “flat” conception of security speak on social media, as metrics such as influence enable a small number of non-security elite users to reach large audiences in sometimes ephemeral ways. Critical terrorism studies fits in here as it seeks to apply the critical, constructivist perspective to the sub-field of terrorism (Richard Jackson, 2007). Rather than narrowing the focus, it also seeks to broaden the discussion of terrorism away from problem-solving perspectives so beloved of security elites, but to understand the

much broader context in which terrorism is constructed. This has even gone as far as to include how terrorism infiltrates into, and is constructed by, popular culture (Holland, 2011), an observation that validates the vital importance of bringing in disciplinary approaches such as sociology, cultural studies and anthropology into the security discussion.

However, just because there is some novelty in bringing social media into greater dialogue with critical security studies, this does not mean we are the first to produce scholarship on social media. In fact, far from it as social media, and indeed more broadly questions of technology in politics and security are well advanced fields in many ways, and one that can give insights into the discursive, emancipatory and interdisciplinary positions of security that critical approaches offer. Additionally, the synergies between technology, politics and IR are nothing new and have a history almost as long as humanity itself (Reuter et al., 2019). It is important here to consider the literatures on critical approaches to social media to get a better handle on the difficult relationship between critical theory and social media technologies. For example, while early theory highlighted the emancipatory potential of new media technologies, the picture has become far more complex (Dencik & Leistert, 2015). This is because not only are social media companies' capitalist entities and thus commodify social media output (Allmer, 2015), they can also be monitored by governments and give new opportunities for authoritarian governments to surveil and control their populations (Dencik & Leistert, 2015).

Building on these observations, Chapter 3 of this book examines the important questions of method and methodology. This is because social media presents an enormous, diverse and ever-changing cornucopia of "data" and opportunities for study that can be quite frankly bewildering and intimidating. Access costs, and indeed whether it is possible to access data at all, change constantly between and within platforms. However, "data" questions are only one part of a much larger discussion about approaching social media that is required here. Critical security studies has done a lot in the past decade to both broaden and deepen the method and methodological approaches that the field offers, resulting in the production of some excellent tomes containing important insights (inter alia Aradau, Huysmans et al., 2015; Salter & Mutlu, 2013). This demonstrates both that solid foundations have been laid in considering the vital question of exactly what critical in critical security studies actually means from a method's perspective (Salter & Mutlu, 2013). This is

important because this sets the scene for a larger discussion, and theme within this book, about the diversity of social media platforms and the need to nuance what constitutes “social media” in any given context that we are analysing. Indeed, a key insight is that “both method and methodology are instrumental in identifying *what counts* for research” (Aradau, Coward et al., 2015, p. 59) and it is important to make a case as to why social media deserves greater attention from critical security scholars. Indeed, “doing it right” in terms of research ethics in social media is far from settled and straightforward and how we both sample and analyse social media for insights into security requires reflection.

It is important to consider the limitations of social media research, especially in light of some of the key commitments of critical security studies. If we are to make even the thinnest claim about discursive emancipation, it is important to understand how the demographics of social media are extremely skewed and unrepresentative. The digital divide both between the global North and South, and indeed even within particular societies, massively complicates notions that the globally “oppressed” can use digital media as a liberation technology because frankly they often do not have access to it.

This chapter then moves on to offer some initial reflections on operationalising methods for social media research in terms of some methodological notes on approaches used to produce some of the conclusions to come in later chapters of this book. This includes some reflections on social network analysis, netnography and aspects of discursive methods that not only can be used by security researchers when considering questions of social media, but also inform the empirical chapters to come.

Chapter 4 forms the first chapter that seeks to bring in specific empirics into questions of critical security and social media through questions of terrorism. “Terrorism” and indeed the post-9/11 “war on terror” have been key features of the post-Cold War security landscape (Council of Councils, 2021). More recently, the emergence of ISIS and the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan concert hall attacks in Paris have once again catapulted “terrorism” into the public eye (Titley et al., 2017). Critical terrorism studies has emerged into this context to bring the constructivist orientation offered by critical security studies to understand how terrorism is not only a set of objective security occurrences, but also a social construct that should be studied away from the “problem-solving” concerns of classical terrorism studies (Herring, 2008; Jackson et al., 2007; Richard Jackson, 2007). This opens up not only the ability to



investigate terrorism without foregrounding the need to “solve it” as a problem, and thus look into the broader dynamics of terrorism, but also to see on what terms it is constructed as a meaning-making exercise. These are both vital observations for considering how communications technologies and terrorism can be seen to relate to each other, and indeed how this relationship changes. Indeed, while “the 9/11 spectacle of terror was a global media event” (Kellner, 2007, p. 123) projected into the living rooms of people the world over, 14 years later the emergence of #JeSuisCharlie enabled one to dialogue with, and re-construct terrorism from their smartphone (An et al., 2016; Tittley et al., 2017). While critical terrorism studies has found application in a range of contexts, such as the UK prevent strategy (Qurashi, 2018) and social media as a place of communication by extremists and a place for possible recruitment (Davey & Weinberg, 2021; Laytous, 2021; Prothero, 2019), there has been little application of critical terrorism studies to social media. This chapter seeks to offer two examples that demonstrate two aspects of the way that terrorism is discussed and constructed on social media to establish the unexpected symbolic and discursive repertoires that users use of social media to discuss terrorism. This is tackled thematically, looking at the Twitter responses to both a threat made against France by ISIS and the response to the Manchester bombing in the UK. Both of these examples demonstrate the importance of the disciplinary plurality of critical security studies because it allows us to conceive of local identity structures, such as crime, violence and football, and how these become important in constructions of terrorism. Dialoguing with the literature that examines the broader culture context in which terrorism is constructed, this example demonstrates that when examining social media, instead of bringing terrorism into culture, bring culture into the construction of terrorism.

Chapter 5 continues this dialogue with questions of social media and critical security studies by specifically considering in more depth the recent, exciting, vernacular turn in security studies. This is aided greatly by vernacular security studies overt theoretical position of “theoretical emptiness” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 110). This “allows for greater fidelity to the diversity of everyday stories” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 110). This is important when considering a key mission of the critical turn in security studies is to increase the range of “what counts for research” (Aradau, Coward et al., 2015). Thus rather than schools of critical security thought such as the Copenhagen school which begin with the assumption of the primacy of

elite discourses of security (Buzan et al., 1997), this approach enables a far greater range of security speech to be captured and analysed. A caveat, however, is to remember that the social media landscape is not completely democratic nor “flat”, as we have seen the issues with access and control that social media presents (Dencik & Leister, 2015).

This said, the vernacular turn does enable us to consider important security questions as will be examined through the two examples included in this chapter. The first example examines YouTube as a site of the construction of vernacular security debates by offering an in-depth examination of a video uploaded by a football YouTuber that responds to ISIS terrorism in France. This demonstrates the importance of local, and at times offensive and profane, discourses in further pushing the boundaries of how vernacular security studies relate to social media technologies. The second example pushes vernacular security studies research further by flipping one of its key themes. It has to date championed how individuals from below contest and re-construct security imposed from above in local idioms (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis & Lister, 2012). However, the example of a netnography conducted on the application Snapchat analyses how those seeking to foster insecurity from below discuss this insecurity in their own local idioms. This demonstrates the importance of both the methodological innovation of examining apps with ephemeral data (Bayer et al., 2016) in security studies, but also highlights the way that users go to great efforts to “brand” their insecurity in specific ways. This draws on the sociological and criminological literature on deviance, space and place.

Chapter 6 shifts gears from examining social media and security from below, to considering the intersection of social media, security and the political system “from above” in terms of constructions of democracy. Both the increases in polarisation in advanced democracies, and the radical transformation of the media landscape has once again thrust threats to democracy into the headlines. It has long been argued that a key aspect of democracies have been free and independent media outlets (Baker, 2001). However, social media radically alters this idea, which formed in the context of free and fair “old” media outlets. While this book refutes simplistic arguments about social media and democracy, for example that memes won Trump the US presidential election (Nussbaum, 2017), it is clear that the rise of social media has important implications not only for democracy more broadly, but also more specifically for questions of democracy and security. This is because the new social media

online landscape presents significant security questions to the practice of democracy. The second round of the French 2017 presidential election offers two examples through two very different hashtag campaigns with quite different implications for democracy. The first is within the context of a “hack and leak” operation of data from Emmanuel Macron’s campaign team (Vilmer, 2019). It is argued here that rather than just looking at the hack and leak part of this, it is also important to examine the broader context of social media discourses that relate to it under the rise of the hashtag #MacronLeaks to understand which kinds of discourses about democracy emerge. The coverage on Twitter is dominated by anti-Macron sentiment that delve into anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, connect Macron to terrorism and the “Islamisation” of France and refute Russian involvement in the leak. This demonstrates that the critical discursive turn in the security studies enables us to go further in examining how the social media environment can construct democracies, and indeed direct threats to them, in connection with other key themes in contemporary security and politics, like conspiracy theories and terrorism. The second example examines abstention under #SansMoi7Mai that highlights how political distrust is constructed on social media shines a light on something quite different in terms of security and democracy. This is through a hashtag that promotes voter abstention. This highlights how social media discourses of abstention are centred on themes of political distrust. Trust in institutions has been conceptualised as an important part of feeling “ontologically” secure (Perry, 2021; van der Does, 2018). However, this becomes problematic in light of contemporary trends in political distrust away from distrust in particular politicians to the entire system itself (Bertsou, 2019). Within the discussion of non-participation under the hashtag #SansMoi7Mai distrust in the French media and in the broader political system as at the service of the oligarchy are important themes which emerge. This highlights how discussions of political distrust on social media share common features with a range of conspiracy theories that separate the world into an honest “us” exploited by “them” the corrupt political elite (Oliver & Wood, 2014).

Chapter 7 intervenes in examining questions of identity on social media. Identity emerges as important in critical security studies in the context of the end of the Cold War, and how identity concerns emerged as key security concerns in conflicts such as the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. Identity concerns have retained their centrality to questions of security in a range of contemporary arenas, which have catapulted