THESIS

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The effects of social media on elections, overall politics and the quality of democracy

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INTRODUCTION

I have a feeling, most people might think this all the time, but I do think we are living historic times. At the beginning of the 1990s, the world seemed „set”, it was the end of the Soviet era, a lot of new, independent countries emerged, liberal democracy seemed the way to go. In his infamous essay, Francis Fukuyama was even talking about the End of History: it seemed democracy will triumph on all other forms of governance, it was only a matter of time before most countries will apply democracy. (Fukuyama, 1989) The countries followed suit, and relatively quickly, by the new millennium, half of the world was living in democracy. (Luce, 2017) This made it easier for globalism to spread and expand too.

To be honest, for months, I was struggling to pick a topic for my thesis. However, after reading an article about neuroscience, it became so evident to me what I’m going to write about. The article was very relevant at the time when I first read it, a few months after the Cambridge Analytica scandal had broken out. It was the article of Elizabeth Svoboda, a Californian science writer, and she was writing about neuroscientists, whose job is to establish a connection between observed facial expressions and people’s political preference. They use so-called biodata to track down possible voting outcomes. Moreover, according to the article, nowadays “neuropolitical” consultants work together with political actors, in order to identify voter sentiment by observing their spontaneous responses: “an electrical impulse from a key brain region, a split-second grimace, or a moment’s hesitation as they ponder a question.” (Svoboda, 2018)

It was intense to read about the possible far-reaching consequences of this area of science. “The results from experiments on small neuro-focus groups can be used to influence voters who aren’t being sampled themselves. If, for example, biodata reveals that liberal women over 50 are fearful when they see an ad about illegal immigration, campaigns that want to stoke such fear can broadcast that same message to millions of people with similar demographic and social profiles.” (Svoboda, 2018)

Based on the article, it is not only what people think is what matters, but also how quickly they come to that decision. In one experiment, the participants were shown images of politicians, and they had to decide whether the attributes (like trustworthy, well-known, shares the participant’s values etc.) displayed next to the image is applicable to the candidate or not. The participant had to tap yes or no to react. What’s interesting is according to the study, if they are hesitant in their decision, they are not entirely convinced
with the particular statement, and later they can be easily manipulated to think the opposite.

Rafal Ohme, a Polish psychologist whose firm Neurohm advised in political campaigns both in Europe and in the United States, said in the interview: “I measure hesitation. I can change your mind only if you hesitate. If you are a firm believer, I cannot change anything. […] If you’re scared to be manipulated, learn. The more you learn, the more firm and stable your attitudes are, and the more difficult it is for someone to convince you otherwise.” (Svoboda, 2018)

Learning about the techniques of manipulation is exactly what I want to do with my thesis. I’m curious of how political preference can be measured and changed in our digital era.

I think the topic’s relevance today is undeniable. Globalism and the spread of democracy was at its peak at the end of the 2000s. The global financial and economic crisis caused a disruption in the course of events. In the last decade, politics changed. The everyman started to be fed up with the traditional political elite, irresponsible, greedy global economic actors, big banks, multinational companies and started to demand the power to be shifted from the left to the right. Populism is on the rise, in Europe and in the Americas. Some even like to draw a parallel between recent trends to what was going around in the 1920s and 1930s. It would be very scary if that parallel turned out to be accurate.

We are more connected than ever. Nowadays, 80% of the Hungarian population is considered to be internet users, and on average, 85% of the European Union population is using the internet. (Stats, 2019) Our daily lives involve social media more than ever. The big portion of users does not even check news websites anymore, and they only read news that comes up in their newsfeed. This utter reliance on social media has its dangers and downturns too. Many of us now understand that everything we see on social media is a curated version of our acquaintances’ life. Can the same be true in case of news?

Fake news has been a big topic in the last few years, especially with the emergence of Donald Trump, the term has been popularized to a never-before-seen level. Fake news can even be the next big threat humanity will need to face. Media literacy is going to be essential if one wants to be credibly informed. Of course, already in the analogue era, opinions presented as truth or deliberately misleading data or analysis could have been already present. Without the internet, counter-checking facts was even more difficult. However, in the digital era, especially since the advent of social media, everybody has
the opportunity to create content, not just consume it. The people generating content now aren’t restrained by the rules of journalism. They do not have to be accurate, impartial or objective. Accountability is going to be more and more difficult to deal with, because, what we read is just an opinion, right?

HYPOTHESIS

Throughout my research, I will explore the role of new media, particularly social media in political life. My key question is how social media influences elections, and politics overall and how this affects the quality of democracy.

My hypothesis is that the usage of social media in relation to be informed about politics and political news has a negative effect on being well-informed, therefore, it has a negative effect on the quality of democracy. I base this assumption on the observance that on social media platforms, users tend to follow topics they are familiar with and they are interested in. Consequently, users not interested in politics will be less likely to come across news relating to politics. Those users however, who are interested in the topic, would be more likely to follow information sources who would provide content in this matter. However, they probably already have existing presumptions about the credibility of a news based on the sources it comes from. We already know that people tend to think that a piece of information is truthful if it is in line with their already existing presumptions – this is called confirmation bias. Therefore, simplified, on the social media platforms, we only believe not what we see, but what we think is corresponding to our opinion, so consuming news relating to politics online does not contribute to being objectively well-informed, and this information dissonance makes the decision-making process of the voter base faulty. Hence, it has a negative effect on the quality of democracy.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The outline of the thesis is the following. I will make an examination on the academic literature within the topic, then through the examples of 3 case studies I will attempt to make general conclusions for my thesis.

First, I will assess the importance of media, especially its role in a political context. Then, I will take a look at previous technological developments throughout history, and how it changed the political sphere. A century ago, democracy was rare and
politicians mostly communicated with their constituency via news outlets, also, this communication was rather one-sided. Radio was a huge invention, and politicians could finally literally speak to the voters. A few decades later television revolutionized political debates: no matter how well-written the speech was, bad body language or even the physical appearance of a candidate itself could divert potential voters from casting their vote in favor of the candidate. In the 1990s, it was the internet which changed the political landscape, and in the last 10 years, it is social media which is shaping it the most. I will describe notable examples how the technological advancement changed the game for politics and will establish the new trends to watch out for in our digital era.

After describing the general context of my thesis as detailed above, I will recount the many important notions I came across my research. Focusing on social media, I will explain what echo chambers are, similarly, what are filter bubbles and why are they dangerous especially when it comes to politics. I will discuss what the role of the media is in these new platforms, and also will shed some light on why it is dangerous and incorrect to think there is something as “The Media”: it is certainly not one unitary actor trying to influence us into one direction. I will speak of viral news and cyberecascades and what importance they hold. It is inevitable to bring the notion of fake news into discussion: what are those, what’s their role, what can be done with them and most importantly why it is crucial to talk about them in relations to politics? Loosely relating to this topic, I will talk about the age-old debate between free speech and hate speech, which is again something that is coming up frequently in discussions on social media and how opinions are or should be displayed on these platforms. Broadening the topic, I would like to bring the digital divide into consideration, and how media literacy can be the key to being well-informed. Later, I will introduce “deepfake” as a potential threat to credible information-sharing and even to our valuable governing form, democracy.

After introducing and explaining these important notions relating to the topic of this thesis, I will turn to some recent political turns and evaluate the new elements they added to the flow of politics. I will look at the United Kingdom’s (still ongoing) Brexit debate, the 2016 United States presidential campaign which saw a rookie politician, Donald Trump to be elected and the Hungarian general elections of 2018. I will study these cases one-by-one and look for elements that changed or potentially change political norms all from the viewpoint of technology and technological development. Is it true that it was Facebook and Twitter that won the elections for Trump? Were the British lied to? Can fear win elections?
After presenting the case studies, I will take a look at the possibilities of what can happen if someone exclusively gathers information relating to politics on the internet. Does this hold potential threat to being well-informed and does it have a negative effect on the quality of democracy? Is there a social media platform which is “safe” and remains truthful, or we should assume that all social media is vulnerable to falsehoods? Is there a platform which is particularly prone to spread falsehoods? And what can we do if we’re to be well-informed in the digital era? How can we avoid being misled by half-truths and biased framings?

After trying to answer all these questions and more, I will make my final observation about the topic and draw the conclusions of my research. I will evaluate whether my hypothesis that social media has a negative effect on being well-informed, therefore on the quality of democracy, stands its ground or not.

ARGUMENTS

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN POLITICS: WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Why is media so important, especially when it comes to politics? McNair reminds us that Edmund Burke named the media the “fourth estate” already some 150 years ago. The first three estates were of course the executive, the legislative and the judiciary arms of the state. (McNair, 2011) So how come media has so much power? It is because it is the link between the political actors and the audience, therefore it is in the best interest of every political actor to understand how media works, so that they can achieve their communication objectives through the media. (McNair, 2011, p. 43)

When we are talking about media and politics, it is inevitable to put them in the context of political communication for a deeper understanding. Political communication has three main actors: political organizations, citizens, and media. (McNair, 2011) Political organizations include parties, political organizations, pressure groups, terrorist organizations, and the government inter alia. Citizens cannot be considered a unitary actor, it is just the composition of individuals of the state, some of them with more interest towards politics, some of them with less interest. Nevertheless, it is through the third factor, through media that the political organizations reach their target audience, i.e. the citizens. McNair in his model further details the means through which the communication takes place: media, as an intermediary provides reportages, editorials, commentary and analysis to both political organizations and citizens. Political organizations provide
appeals, programs, advertising and public relations, citizens in turn communicate via opinions polls, letters, blogs and citizen journalism. Media, standing in between, connects the two sides. (McNair, 2011, pp. 5-6)

McNair also distinguishes four different functions of the media. (McNair, 2011, pp. 18-19) Its first function is the so-called “surveillance” or “monitoring” functions of the media, so they provide information to the citizens. The second one is media’s effort to educate as to the meaning and significance of the “facts”. It is interesting for me that he was careful enough not to write media has to provide the public with facts, as we will later see, facts are difficult to define, especially in our age of “alternative facts”. Third, media should function as a platform for discussion and debate, and has a role in shaping the “public opinion” – the usage of quotation marks here tells me McNair tries to foreshadow that public opinion as such does not exists, it is the summary of multiple views, but there are certainly some that deviates from it. The fourth function, and probably the most known is the “watchdog role”, which ensures that governments and political institutions get publicity. Other scholars have emphasized different aspects of the functions of media, but Habermas stresses accessibility to the public as key feature of the public sphere (McNair, 2011), therefore we can say media can only be useful if the public is able to reach it.

We can approach why politics and media are interconnected from a different angle, too. In the late 60s through observations on the 1968 presidential elections Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw established their theory of “agenda-setting” which “focuses its explanation on how news content in the media shapes the public’s belief about what is important in the society.” The essence of the theory is that the salience of issues in the media (meaning the frequency the problem is presented) affects how saliently the issue is featured in a campaign. This is the first level of agenda-setting. Over time, McCombs and Shaw distinguished a second level to agenda-setting, after realizing that the media through coverage oftentimes affects what issues become interesting for the public. “This second-level agenda-setting research has found that media messages do not just emphasize issues but they present informational elements about those issues, and those informational elements tell us what to think about the issue.” (Potter, 2012, pp. 74-75)

In short, media influences what we think about, even how we think about it. Therefore, exposure to content has a great importance, especially when we are talking in a political context. Shanto Iyengar, McCombs and Shaw at the beginning of the 90s
concluded that “…this [...] effect has been found to be especially strong on people who expose themselves to media messages more often and when that exposure is to the same kind of media messages. [...] Also, people who regularly follow the mainstream news in major newspapers and network television programs are likely to have the same beliefs about what is important. This is because all of these news outlets socialize their journalists with the same news values and use the same news services; therefore, most news vehicles in the media cover the same stories and present those stories in the same ways.” (Potter, 2012, p. 154)

There is a certain danger in being exposed to the same issues over and over again, as well as being exposed to a very limited number of outlets. “For example, people who see a lot of news coverage about environmental issues will come to believe that the environment is an important issue.” (Potter, 2012, p. 154) This in itself is not a problem, but only focusing on one single topic or one source of information all the time can lead to misinformation (inaccurate information spread on its own) and/or disinformation (deliberately spread inaccurate information).

Media can be also a means of influencing and controlling the public opinion. Today, a few companies own a bulk of news outlets, and they have a diverse portfolio. McPhail writes that “…the increasing power of communication industries is further enhanced by mergers and consolidation, such as the takeover of the Wall Street Journal by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation in 2008. The few giants that remain in control of global media will produce media product in line with their culturally determined – capitalist and free trade – values. The primary concern of any corporation is market share and increased profits. In such pursuits, communication corporations develop and promote those information technologies that support their global goals. They employ new communication technologies in a manner to increase market share and ultimately earn more money.” (McPhail, 2009, p. 25) This parallel of fewer groups owning more and more outlets can be observed in Hungary too, in the extreme especially since the founding of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which later was bought by Mediaworks Hungary Corp. The parent company now owns hundreds of news products in Hungary. (Kovács, 2019)

However, as Meyer reminds us, it would be a great mistake to think audiences of media equals “the public”. (Meyer, 2002, p. VIII) Nevertheless, election campaigns are much more sophisticated than ever, because it is becoming easier to follow the opinion of the public. “An election campaign is increasingly seen by those in charge as an exercise
in marketing and many of the skills of selling goods and services to customers are now applied to the electorate. These developments have given greater scope to experts in opinion polling, advertising and public relations, and sometimes lead to tensions with the politicians and party offices.” (McNair, 2011, p. 35) Needless to say, it is easy to exploit the sentiment of the electorate if you know what they want to hear.

Looking back at previous technological changes: mass media

Media and public communication have always been closely related, even if observing the connection between the two only recently became a scientific field of its own. However, it seems evident, that mass media (newspapers, radio, TV etc.) in their own ways have all influenced politics and thus affected the public. (Meyer, 2002, p. VII) The earliest scholars to observe mass communication was Walter Lippmann and Harold D. Lasswell. They laid foundation to political communication as such, but in the 1930s, mass communication was researched under the term “public opinion and propaganda (or approximately similar names)”. (Kaid, 2004, p. 4)

Mass media is not easy to even define. W. James Potter dedicated a 30-page essay trying to come up with a perfect definition. In his complex, 10-element definition, he separates 3 areas that contains sub-elements, and for him all 10 are necessary elements, and none is sufficient (Potter, 2013, p. 16) See in the Appendix the elements that altogether define mass media according to Potter’s assessment.

Other definitions are not as meticulous as this one, and they usually contain print, radio, television, and nowadays the Internet (and some forms of art like books, music recording and cinema). Print had been dominating as the number one source of public information for several hundreds of years, until the early 20th century, when radio, an invention by Italian Guglielmo Marconi dethroned print. (Kurin, 2017) With this new piece of technology, news could travel much faster than previously. It was not long before political actors discovered the power it can have in reaching the masses. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first US president who really understood the essence of the device and could garner political capital from it. He reportedly had the ability to make the audience feel that he was talking personally to them. (Kurin, 2017)

A few decades later a new device was beginning to shape everyday lives of Americans, and later the rest of the world. While in 1946 only 6000 households owned a (black and white) television, a decade later more almost half of all domestic households
had one. One of the biggest early milestones in the intertwined life of politics and television was the famous 1960 presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. The legend says those who listened to the debate via radio, thought Nixon had performed better, but those who watched the TV said Kennedy was the one who did the better job. (Law, 2019)

In this era, most people got their information from the same sources of news. Sunstein calls them general interest intermediaries, because they serve public interest. “They promote shared experiences; they expose people to information and views that would not have been selected in advance.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 44)

In the next decades, televised news was reporting on the most important political events. However, near the end of the 20th century the dynamics started to change. With constant and immediate reporting, it seems correct to say that media somewhat has become one of the influential actors of politics. For example, the CNN effect theory says the lively and shocking images the network displays during its reports of sudden events and humanitarian crises even has an effect on how the US foreign policy is conducted. Today, it is not only CNN that is using interesting and sometimes even disturbing images or footage in an effort to try to spiral up ratings, what’s more, with today’s abundance of sources of information it is a common technique to present news in the most shocking ways to make sure content is viewed by the largest audience possible.

Since politics is regularly followed and presented in mass media outlets, a bigger and a more polarized audience is getting information. Meyer says the consequences of this is that “…concerning the relation between media and political reality, research has been undertaken to understand the diverse patterns of the former in constructing the latter. These analyses have shown more and more clearly how the mass media do not just mirror political life, but generate a political “reality” that is tailored to their own requirements. The construction of reality by the mass media is a complex social process and all reports about political reality are inevitably affected by the criteria the media apply in selecting and presenting material, ones designed to secure maximum public response.” (Meyer, 2002, p. VIII) Therefore, information is presented in such fashion that first, it somewhat fits to the expectation to the audiences, and second, is presented in a way that aims at spiraling up views. It seems only normal, since most outlets are profit oriented, but can and should the quality of information be sacrificed on the altar of profit? Is this a natural development of modern democracy or something that in the long term erodes democratic procedures?
**THE IMPORTANCE OF TELEVISION IN POLITICS**

During my research, it seemed to me television has a special status amongst the other types of mass media. Diana Mutz concludes why television has a bigger effect than newspapers in the following way: “We can read what politicians said in the newspaper, but watching them on the screen and hearing them say things themselves produce a much closer approximation of the stimuli we process in the non-mediated world.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 20)

Television intertwined with politics from early on. The US was once again, a leading force when it comes to politics. After the World War II, the United States became one of the most developed countries – if not the most developed one. When television services started to spread across the states, they were offering very few channels. J. Fred MacDonald, Michael T. Marsden and Christopher D. Geist say that in this period, TV as well as radio “was a non-distinctive media during this period”, because the audience was “uniform”, unlike today’s views, as everybody can seek the channels and programs that are after their tastes. Paul Hirsch even compared the audience to an “undifferentiated horde”. They point out in their study in the early days of television, messages were transmitted “from point A to point B with minimum distortion or noise”, that is the information that the audience received was quite one-sided. This could mean for example, that incumbent powers got a considerable advantage through television, as opposing views could be silenced, i.e. they might not get airtime at all. (MacDonald, Marsden, & Geist, 1980, p. 301)

Theorists and researchers from various scientific fields have long been observing and conceiving the possible effects television could have on the society. One of the most famous theories when it comes to this issue had been “videomalaise”. “In the 1970s, Robinson popularized the term videomalaise to refer to the negative public attitudes that resulted from watching television news. (Robinson, 1976) Evidence in support of the original videomalaise claim was based on a quasi-experimental study of effects from viewing one particular television program. In a subsequent study, content analyses of the three major network news programs showed that negative coverage predominated. Although evidence of effects from this content remained thin thereinafter, an overview of research on television and politics in the early 1980s echoed the popularity of this thesis, concluding that political television “has altered the culture significantly by intensifying ordinary Americans’ traditional low opinion of politics and politicians, by exacerbating
the decline in their trust and confidence in their government and its institutions.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 74)

As foreshadowed before, researchers do not agree on whether videomalaise exist at all, or whether political coverage on TV really has a negative effect on society. “The research on the effects of mass media has borne fruit in the form of theories concerning “videomalaise” and the “knowledge gap”. The [studies] suspected causal connections between frequent TV consumption and political alienation, but have not reached consensual conclusions. Whereas, e.g., [Thomas E.] Patterson argued that news media have grown more negative and more cynical and thereby produced growing popular distrust of politicians and government, and even a general disengagement from civic life, [Pippa] Norris in a more recent comparative study insist that the general videomalaise argument has little empirical support. The issue remains controversial. Surprisingly, the “knowledge gap” research has revealed that the spread of television consumption to more and more people involving larger segments of their time does no equalize the stock of politically relevant knowledge among subgroups of society, but instead widens such gaps between them. Accordingly, the chances that equal rights to democratic participation can be secured through the spread and intensification of mass media communication have grown slimmer.” (Meyer, 2002, p. IX)

My observation is that people tend to think politics are “dirty” today. Long gone are the days when politicians were honorable, noble men sworn in to serve public (or was it ever true?): nowadays it feels like a dirty game. Diana Mutz gives more credit to the viewers. According to her, “...when politicians [...] scream and yell at one another, [...] viewers know it is all for show. Campaigns are made-for-TV affairs these days, so the kinds of social norms violations that we commonly see may not be particularly consequential for how we process information or think about political actors.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 20) To me, she seems to somewhat contradict herself when she says that “...[people] are responding to audiovisual media not as if they were a portrayal of the real world, but as if people or objects were immediately present in their environments. Instead, what this research suggests is that people’s brains to some extent respond to the portrayal of people and events as if they were responding to the presence of the same things in real life.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 21)

As just about everything else when it comes to technology, the US was a trailblazer is politics, but also in the development of political communication as a scientific discipline. Although the political history of the US may be rather an exception,
not the rule, a large proportion of studies are focused on the United States, therefore it is convenient to look at it apart from other countries. The lack of observed data from other countries makes it hard to compare it with other states, but at the same time, since it is frequently in the middle of focus, other countries sometimes follow suit. Electronic colonialism theory “refers to the reliance, created by mostly American communication technologies, which subsequently impact global markets and cultures. [It is] about the spread of popular culture and media systems around the globe by mostly US corporations. Media imperialism concerns itself specifically with the domination of the media by a select few groups and the impact it has on weaker factions.” (McPhail, 2009, p. 26) In consequence, the rest of the world adapts the communication techniques of American outlets and political actors. American elections have long seemed like a reality show arena, and slowly other countries began to apply this type of sensationalist approach in their elections.

On the changing of media Mutz quotes James Q. Wilson: as Wilson notes, “Once the media talked to us; now they shout at us.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 28) Another researcher, (Eric M.) Uslaner “has suggested that members of the Congress are increasingly likely to violate norms of politeness in their discourse, and (Deborah) Tannen characterizes the contemporary United States as “a culture of argument” that encourages “a pervasive warlike atmosphere”. (Mutz, 2015, p. 29)

Mutz says incivility (which in a political context mean that people observe that contemporary politics seem to be dirtier and out of control than before) affects trust in politics and government, because it suppresses truth. “However, [...] civility does not have a symmetric counter-effect, the possibility of increasing levels of trust in government and politics via civil discourse seems thin.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 89) Could this mean that it is proven that political decency is just not feasible and it is better to take the position of the bad guy?

Nowadays, with the advent of streaming services, television habits are changing. But Mutz says they are not fading out, just moving to other platforms. This is called “media convergence” and it means that content will be available from multiple sources. (Mutz, 2015, p. 170) “The content may reach our homes via streaming Internet, but the content is largely the same. Indeed, news content is increasingly similar across print, television, and Internet platforms” – she adds. (Mutz, 2015, p. 170)

This tendency has other consequences. Television as a mass medium was already more liberated from the classical requirements of journalism than print media, but “the
unlimited time and space online has encouraged less gatekeeping, opening the doors to still more incivility.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 172) This closely relates to the central question of my thesis research: whether or not technological advances have a negative effect on elections and politics overall. Can it even affect society as a whole? I will be circling around this issue later on in more detail.

However, even from the beginning of my research, it seems to me that the observations me and other contemporary witnesses may make about the quality of politics nowadays overestimate the importance and the novelty of recent developments. During my research I stumbled upon on Desmond Forristal’s words from the 1960s. In this brief quote I was reminded that the power of media has long been observed, and the potential threats it poses are not unknown to observant people. “Everywhere the immense influence of television over the minds of men is recognized and used to the full. And everywhere, it seems, it is used to ignoble ends, to peddle with politics or to sell soap. Dictators on the right and left alike find invaluable for the indoctrination of its subjects.” (Forristal, 1961, pp. 740-741)

But as the saying goes, every joke is funny to a newborn.

However, we have to admit that in our contemporary reality, things are changing more rapidly. That’s why Meyer says, it is harder to point out the future consequences of today’s events. “Detailed studies on the effects of mass media present a wealth of confusing and contradictory data that seem to get fuzzier as the research methodology becomes more precise. In any case, one has the impression that media studies are becoming so specialized that they can no longer be readily synthetized into a coherent picture.” (Meyer, 2002, p. VIII)

At the beginning of the 2000s, Robert D. Putnam’s famous essay stated that the citizens of the United States have undergone a negative process in the previous decades. They became “less civic, less politically engaged, less socially connected, less trusting, and less committed to the common good.” He partly blames the decline of social capital on television. (Putnam, 2001, p. 135)

Newton wrote in 1999 that “…news is a perishable commodity; yesterday’s events are washed over by today’s headlines, as the media pursue new news in the race to break a fresh story.” (Newton, 1999, p. 578) 20 years later, we do not even have to wait one day for news to be obsolete. We are constantly bombarded with news in the digital era. Let us see how politics and new media affect each other and our daily lives.
NEW MEDIA: WHAT THE INTERNET HAS CHANGED FOR POLITICS

The newest platform of communication, the internet has changed a considerable area of our life, and politics is not an exception of this. Chadwick says with the advent of new media, a hybrid media system emerged, where “new (or better to say newer) and old (older) media forms interact, compete and mingle with each other, resulting in a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation.” (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 131)

In the era of mass communication, the media was an intermediary between politicians and the citizens. Journalists had a role what we call “gatekeeping”: they influenced the first and second level of agenda setting and framing, therefore they tailored news for their audiences. Johansson and Nozewski say that instead of the old, top-down, one-way form of communication, new media heads for a horizontal, two-ways form one. As they say, “...participants are now free to choose partners, time, place and topic of conversation and can interact with each other directly, bypassing a center or intermediary. It increases interactivity and feedback potential.” (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 133) As a consequence, the role of traditional media lessens. Castells calls this new form of communication “mass self-communication – a self-generated, self-directed, and self-selected model lying between interpersonal and traditional mass communications.”

Traditionally, media played an intermediary role between politicians and the public. Journalists acted as gatekeepers and decided agenda setting and framing matters. (Castells, 2011, p. 779) We now shift to an era where almost everybody can be a source of information. On new media platforms like social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr, 4chan and Instagram, to name a few) any registered users (i.e. not only journalists) can create content and later it can spread via shares. Hence, even mere opinions can make it to headlines nowadays.

Mutz says that even though we are much connected via portable devices and wireless internet, checking out news on smaller screen do not “create the same sense of immersion as large screens. Not surprisingly, the sensation of being involved in the action one is viewing is reduced with portable consoles.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 176)

Content from new media can pose a greater threat to our information culture. With so many sources available, it is harder to keep track which ones can be considered trusted sources, and which ones pose opinions as facts. Concerning this topic, Greg Sargent gives three important definitions to phenomena which I will regularly examine in my thesis. He phrases misinformation as “unintentionally false or inaccurate information” and
disinformation as “intentionally false information deliberately crafted and spread to mislead.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 123) Furthermore, he defines fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 125)

Fake news was an expression that quickly became popular when then presidential-candidate Donald Trump started to use it regularly. I believe his presidential campaign was the first which drew worldwide attention to the fact that incorrect/untrue information can spread so easily and quickly through the internet. Sargent claims that during the 2016 presidential election campaign “fake news traveled faster than real ones did.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 127)

“During the 2016 campaign, bots disguised as personal accounts of what turned out to be imaginary individuals were heavily involved in spreading fake news, since actual humans regularly retweeted fake news stories posted by con artist software, meaning humans are, in a way, subject to manipulation through the use of bots.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 126)

Nowadays, Twitter and Facebook (and other platforms) potentially has tens of millions of fake accounts each, this is why they are “faced withering criticism since the election for failing to police such malicious activity.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 127)

So, what is the relevance of this to politics and why is it a potential threat to the ideal of a well-informed public? Because in the end, it can cause a split political reality. In a divided country like the United States, partyism is quite strong, and citizens might believe or refuse to believe a piece of information solely based on the source (and this is something which I think we can observe in contemporary Hungary, too). In the virtual world, people also follow the outlets which reinforce their already existing views and can be aligned with their thinking. This further shrinks their willingness to take a look at or consider information (and their sources) which contradicts their thinking. “What we ended up with was a filter bubble election. The decline of shared news, the echo chambers of partisan media, and the algorithms that serve confirmation biases coalesce in frightening ways for the future of the republic.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 124)

New media also has an effect on traditional ones: tabloidization, for one. Mass media sources, in order to keep up with the more entertaining types of media, emphasize scandals and sensationalism. (Sargent, 2018, p. 223)

Sunstein summarizes so well the threats we face when we en masse let our emotions and prejudices take over the need to be well-informed. “Increasingly impoverished political debate is yet another cost of our current cultural trajectory.
Complex modern societies generate complex economic and social problems, and the task of choosing the best course is difficult under the best of circumstances. And yet, as in-depth analysis and commentary give way to sound bites in which rival journalists and politicians mercilessly ravage on one another, we become an increasingly ill-informed and ill-tempered electorate.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 224)

**HOW (SOCIAL) MEDIA AFFECTS POLITICS AND ELECTIONS**

The Internet has become a game changer when it comes to the connection to media and politics. Researchers differentiate two kinds of “webs”: Web 1.0 are the traditional web pages, and Web 2.0 are blogs and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Whatsapp, Wechat, 4chan, YouTube etc.) “For every election cycle, more people turn to the Internet for information about politics and society, and for every election cycle, political parties and campaigns focus more on web campaigning.” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122) According to Jesper Strömbäck and Spiro Kiousis even though the Internet is so important a platform rather than a challenger to traditional media in terms of audience competition, because those on the Internet usually check online versions of other traditional media outlets, and do not seek out completely new sources. Therefore, they say it is misleading to say that the Internet poses a threat to traditional media. (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122)

Cass R. Sunstein defines social media as “Internet based platforms that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, usually using either mobile or web-based technologies.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 22)

Why is social media important in a political context? Sunstein mentions that people do not get political information on the streets anymore, the public forums are moving to the Internet nowadays. “To an increasing degree, the more significant interchanges of ideas and shaping of public consciousness occur in mass and electronic media.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 37)

Sunstein says “Twitter and Facebook challenge but do not endanger democracy; on balance, they are good for it, and we should not wish them away.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 213) Let us see what advantages and disadvantages we can identify in relations to social media and how we can put them on scale to see which side weighs more.

Certain things definitely changed in politics since the internet and social media became so easily available for the masses. For example, back in the day news cycles were
approx. a day, especially in the era of print media. This time shortened with 24-hour television coverages of news channels, but in our contemporary life we can say there is hardly a news cycle, everything is instant. Another change is that now journalist do not even have to attend personally political events to be able to write a detailed coverage of a happening. They can gather information from the instantly available content on the internet. As my political communication teacher, Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska said, “social media killed the boys in the bus”, referring to the journalists who used to follow presidential candidates to be able to cover for their news outlets.

Ekman and Widholm introduced the concept of “mediatized interdependency”, a form of interaction where journalists and politicians on Twitter have become both actors and sources and reliant on each other to get their work done properly. (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 137) Twitter is an important platform for both of them to share their original content. What’s more, sometimes their tweets become sources for traditional media. Also, according to Ekman and Widholm, “politicians’ communication on Twitter contributes to increasingly de-politicizing politics and personalization (“celebritization”) in political journalism.” (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 137)

Van Dijck and Poell introduces a concept called “social media logic” to describe a crucial element of the connection between social media and communication. (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 136) They define it as “the processes, principles, and practices through which new media platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally, how they channel social traffic”. (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 136) The concept has four basic elements as follows: popularity, connectivity, datafication, and programmability. These elements define how traffic is on the sites. Algorithms also have a significant role in shaping what content is available to whom on a given platform. This means that traditional gatekeeping as such is much less significant or detectable in case of social media than in case of traditional mass media. Johansson and Nozewski add that based on these we can see that “the link between the activity of Twitter and Facebook users, mainstream media, and offline political events is clear.” (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 136)

Klinger and Svenson observe similarly that on Web 2.0 “popularity among like-minded users, not professional gatekeepers, decides whether information is relevant and passed on.” (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018, p. 4)

The consequence of this is that people see different sets of perspectives of political reality. They do not get the same general information, but they see them through the lenses
of those users or outlets they follow or they are connected with. Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck’s study says that like this, “social media users are nested in personalized, issue-specific, and network-dependent streams of news.” (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018, p. 5)

The connections between users create clusters, where “information flows freely but it is restricted by the limited connectivity across clusters.” (Johansson & Nozewski, 2018, p. 139)

Not only users are affecting each other’s feed, but their significance can be measured based on the effects they have on traditional mass media. Increased audience fragmentation prompt news outlets and political actors to attract attention from the public in different ways. “For campaigns, this means that it has become more difficult to reach out to groups that are less interested, either in politics in general or in what particular campaigns have to say. This holds particularly true with respect to the Internet.” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122)

Consequently, in order to draw the public’s attention, political actors and media both have to microtarget small audiences, exactly because like-minded people are concentrated to clusters. “The logic of microtargeting is to identify as many voter segments as possible that can be distinguished from other voter segments and that internally are as homogenous as possible.” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122)

Microtargeting is getting more and more common and sophisticated. Parties can use segmentation “based on demographics, geography, lifestyles, attitudes and opinions, and behaviors have become increasingly common, particularly in countries that allow parties to buy and collect all kinds of individual data and store them in consumer or voter databases” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122) such as the United States, where all kinds of data are stored on registered voters. These make them a relatively easy target for campaigners.

Narrowcasting is the technique parties can use at times of campaigns to reach a fragmented audience. The paths to reach citizens are getting more sophisticated, since the media environment is expanding and becoming more diverse. Before, audiences were reached via a few channels, and they more or less received the same messages (through television or print media). Now, if campaigners have data gathered to rely on, it is easy to reach them via targeted messages. (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 122) A few years ago, this manifested in the Facebook scandal in the US, where it became evident that
users’ data was used to manipulate them into voting for the Republican side. I will observe this closer in the case study on the 2016 US Presidential Election.

This new type of information gathering (tailored to the person via social media) raises the question whether we can remain well-informed if we ignore the traditional media outlets and only seek out information from our feeds. Jesper Strömbäck examined this in his study. “Taken together, the findings suggest that using social media to follow news about politics and current affairs does not compensate for not using traditional news media in terms of learning a diverse and broad set of general political news.” (Strömbäck, 2018)

Further to this, Bode argues that the online media “presents a potential solution to the knowledge gap” as it lowers barriers for accessing political news (Bode, 2016, p. 28) and at the same time Valeriani & Vaccari says the popularity of social media may compensate for shrinking use of traditional news media. (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016)

There are other aspects we can observe to the domination of online media. Those who are not interested in politics, have the opportunity to completely shut out news relating to politics, because they have the option to personalize their feed. With this, they become less and less informed about this topic. Whether this is desirable for parties can be debated, because some parties may benefit from inactive voters, but others lose potential voters as well. However, for the quality of democracy, I would say it is desirable to have well-informed citizens. Sunstein says “information is a public good in the sense that if one person knows something, other people are likely to benefit as well.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 57)

Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck observe two very important aspects of new media relating to politics. “First, although social media such as Facebook were already widely used in 2014, the increase in “frequent” use of social media as a source of political news – from 22% to 32% between 2014 and 2016 – is remarkable. Second, among traditional news media, only print newspapers are losing ground among the public. Television remains the most important source of political news, even showing signs of a slight increase. Thus, although social media are rapidly gaining ground as a source of political news among citizens, this does not seem to be at the expense of traditional news media such as television and radio. (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018, p. 9)

They further observe that even though some traditional media is losing ground and parallel to this, social media is expanding, their findings suggest that new media does not threaten, but rather complement traditional media. “Although frequent social media
users are less frequent users of traditional news media, suggesting some displacement effects, most still use traditional news media and they are also more inclined to follow politics through news websites than people in general. The fact that the results are consistent across two panel surveys, covering different time periods and contexts, significantly strengthens our confidence in the findings.” (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018, p. 9)

The concept which suggest that modern media is having a negative effect on democracy is called “mediamalaise”, and it is not a recent one. It came to life in the early days of the internet in the 90s. Researchers backing this theory say that modern media is prompting citizens for inaction, and keep them in a state of political apathy, whereas traditional media have the power to mobilize masses. Newton for example examined this in his study, but found little evidence to the existence of mediamalaise. I also believe that social media has enormous mobilizing effect, and we are now just beginning to witness to great lengths they can go in mobilizing masses – climate activism, for example is more widespread than ever, thanks to the mobilizing ability of users of social media like Facebook and Instagram. Newton concludes that “it seems to be the content of the media, rather than its form which is important.” (Newton, 1999, p. 577)

Sunstein says that “...in a well-functioning democracy, people do not live in echo chambers or information cocoons.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. IX) However, what we see on social media is people turning away from multiple views, and they are feeding themselves with information from sources they find reliable. This is the evolved situation on social media now, but already in 1995, MIT technology specialist Nicolas Negroponte predicted the advent of “the Daily Me”. He meant that through the Daily Me, the people seeking out information can bypass the traditional sources of information and can design a communications package meant only for them, based on their interests. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 1) Negroponte’s vision became real, this is what’s happening on Facebook feeds for example, because Facebook has become so central in how people experience their surroundings. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 2)

Furthermore, we now have a considerable number of examples where we can say Facebook contributed to the course of history. For example, in 2016, certain elements of the Turkish army attempted a coup to overthrow president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They managed to take over the country’s biggest television network, however, they didn’t succeed in taking over social media. Erdoğan in the meantime organized resistance from his followers – he even started a live video to talk to his audience – so with his exercise
of influence loyalists manage to stop the coup from succeeding. This event was unprecedented and hard to grasp in this new era of technology.

Sunstein also says that people are living in different political universes. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 3) This is not just an eloquent phrase to use in our digital era, but the truth. “As it turns out, you do not need to create the Daily Me. Others are creating it for you right now (and you may have no idea that they’re doing it). Facebook itself does some curating, and so does Google. We live in the age of the algorithm, and the algorithm knows a lot.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 3)

Apart from algorithms, hashtags can be a method of organizing content on social media. Originally, the sign # was used by IT specialists to organize between chats in the early days of the internet. It became widely used when a – now very influential platform – Twitter started to use it to track topics on the site. Chris Messina, a Twitter user proposed in a tweet for the current usage of hashtags in 2007, and his proposal is now widely used all over the world on various platforms. His aim was to “…[improve] contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity within Twitter.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 79) Hashtags can be used for exploratory serendipity, which is when a user checks what other users think about a given topic based on the content they produce on the platform. Users can create hashtags themselves to start a conversation about something they are interested in. “Many people act as hashtag entrepreneurs; they create or spread hashtags as a way of promoting ideas, perspectives, products, persons, supposed facts, and eventually actions.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 4)

Sunstein goes further and says exploratory serendipity is not enough to keep users well informed, because then they would mostly encounter with opinions or sources of information, they are interested in in the first place. He says we need architectural serendipity – when a user is bound to see information outside of their filter bubble – “for the sake of individual lives, group behavior, innovation, and democracy itself. Self-insulation and personalization are solutions to some genuine problems, but they also spread falsehoods, and promote polarization and fragmentation. An architecture of serendipity counteracts homophily, and promoted both self-government and individual liberty.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 5)

Denying opposing content to the view a person presumably has (which platforms can track based on the users’ online activity) is like censoring other viewpoints, and this keeps the user in a filter bubble created by themselves with the help of the platform. Sunstein says censorship is the biggest threat to freedom and democracy, and a system of
free expression must have two requirements to function well. “First, people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance. Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 6) “Second, many or most citizens should have a wide range of common experiences. Without shared experiences, a heterogeneous society will have a much more difficult time addressing social problems.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 7) Unplanned and/or unanticipated encounters broaden our horizon, and shared experiences decrease the likelihood of social fragmentation. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 7)

There are many notions that are in connection with the mentioned social fragmentation “designed” by social media. Filter bubbles and echo chambers refer to the observation that people are locked to their own perception of reality and they identify that as the objective reality. This is undesirable for many reasons. First of all, as already mentioned, well-informed people are a necessity to a democracy of quality. Second, we know since the groupthink theory that it questionable if a decision is good if out of conformity to the opinion of others, the individual turns their thinking around what they observe without seeking other possibilities. Filter bubbles and echo chambers also increase partyism, which means, people become fragmented on their political views. Sunstein suggests the current media trends are contributing to this trend.

If being well-informed is getting harder in the online space, are we vulnerable to manipulation? Would we even notice if we were manipulated? Should we be alarmed of fake news?

The term fake news is used to describe observed falsehoods spreading quickly. This is a double-edged sword, because it may be used to raise awareness and concern in relation to statements that are not truthful. However, it can also be used to discredit a statement that otherwise would be observing reality, in order to avoid loss of prestige or credibility.

“A [...] harmful example is the set of falsehoods that helped produce the vote in favor of “Brexit” (the exodus of the United Kingdom from the European Union) in 2016. Even if Brexit was a good idea (and it wasn’t), the vote in its favor was made possible, in part, by uses of social media that badly misled the people of the United Kingdom. In the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, falsehoods spread like wildfire on Facebook. Fake news is everywhere. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 11)

Fake news are arguably bad for the quality of politics and democracy, because they challenge being well-informed. There’s a more neutral notion though, which
describes the spread of a news very quickly in the online space, it is called “cybercascade”. However, they also contribute to audience fragmentation, because they are spread by people who are interested in the topic and mostly agree with the news or statements (because we tend to share what we agree with more than those things we do not agree with). “Indeed, cybercascades are frequently a prime source of fragmentation – and of belief in falsehoods.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 57)

If this wasn’t scary enough, let us look at how things are spiraling towards more fragmentation. In 2016, Facebook announced that they are further fine-tune feeds on the platform, to build “a Better News Feed for You.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 14) Previously, Facebook was accused of allegation of political bias, because they allegedly tend to suppress conservative news sources. Another factor to the update was the consideration of profit and the interest of shareholders, because an improved newsfeed supposedly generates more traffic, more clicks, hence more revenue. Thirdly, the reduction in original content and increase of ads made Facebook less interesting for the users, so they wanted to compensate in this way. Sunstein speculates the third reason is the most important. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 15)

It is hard to overestimate Facebook’s impact on our lives. Recently a study conducted by Cornell University proved that sad images on the feed affected participants mood, and prompted them to post more sad content. So not only content seen online affects what we think, but also how we feel. (Sunstein, 2017, pp. 16-17) It is disturbing to think about how this can be used against users of social media, especially in a political context.

Sunstein talks a lot about how “general-interest intermediaries” such as newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters create shared experiences for audiences because these give them “exposure to material and topics that they did not seek out in advance.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 18)

“Some people believe that the mass media are dying-that the whole idea of general-interest intermediaries, providing shared experiences and exposure to diverse topics and ideas for millions, was a short episode in the history of human communication. As a prediction, this view seems wrong; even on the Internet, the mass media continue to play a large role. But certainly, their significance has been falling over time.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 19)

He says that instead of general-interest intermediaries, people seek out information from “special-interest intermediaries”. “Instead of serving as broad sources
of information that cover a variety of topics, online news outlets often take the form of specialized “verticals” that focus on narrower subjects, such as sports, technology, or politics, or use specialized methodologies of interest to niche markets, whether large or small…” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 20)

Why is it particularly important in a political context? Because consumers of different sources with time can get to a state where they perceive a completely different reality than consumers of other sources. He brings an example of prominent television channels in the United States. “In 2000 and 2004, a typical Democrat was no more likely than a typical Republican to watch MSNBC. By 2008, a typical Democrat was 20 percentage points more likely to watch MSNBC. In 2004, a Republican was only 11 points more likely than a Democrat to watch Fox. By 2008, the gap had widened to more than 30 points.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 61)

“These are disturbingly big numbers. Fox News and MSNBC do not merely attract like-minded. They also heighten divisions among voters, contributing to political polarization – and they affect people’s ultimate votes. We’re speaking here of television rather than websites or social media, but the phenomenon is quite general.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 62) The phenomenon can lead to group polarization, which also creates a kind of echo chamber, were the same opinions and arguments are repeated until the group conforms to one narrative only. In the online space, we can call it “cyberpolarization”. “With respect to the Internet and social media, the implication is that groups of like-minded people, engaged in discussion with one another, will typically end up thinking the same thing that they thought before – but in a more extreme form.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 68)

“In general, it is precisely the people most likely to filter out opposing views who most need to hear them. Social media make it easier for people to surround themselves (virtually) with the opinions of like-minded others and insulate themselves from competing views. For this reason alone, they are a breeding ground for polarization, and potentially dangerous for both democracy and social peace.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 71)

Another danger with regards to the new political opportunities with regards to social media is that in the online space, it is hard to tell what is true and what’s a falsehood. Even worse, with paid ads or just suggestions based on our or our friends’ online activity, content from politicians blend into the content of our friends or followers. This can have far-reaching consequences on our political thinking, because we might not consciously realize that we are being targeted by a political actor.
On the other hand, users can exploit the opportunities these new types of connectedness can offer. “Tweeting [...] about the Egyptian revolution [of 2011], American author Jared Cohen cited one Egyptian activist summing up activist media use as follows: “Facebook used to set the date, Twitter used to share logistics, YouTube to show the world, all to connect people.” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 3) Some movements like #Occupy Wall Street explicitly used social media platforms to organize protests in the real, and this technique is catching on all over the world.

However, not only ordinary citizens trying to enforce their rights to protest can take advantage of the opportunities of the online world. It is common knowledge, that terrorists are also frequently recruiting on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, 4chan or even YouTube. In March 2019, an extreme example was set to terrorism. In Christchurch, New Zealand, a terrorist Facebook-lived a massacre he executed, after publishing his intentions on the social media platform 8chan. World leaders like Jacinda Ardern and Emmanuel Macron stepped up in an effort to try to tackle online extremism and terrorism. The plan is called the Christchurch Call; however, its elements are not of enforcement nature, it is up to companies and individuals to follow the guidelines set out in the plan. (Roy, 2019) This initiative, however ambitious, won't be able to stop online extremism and violence following altogether.

A more recent threat to a well-informed audience is deepfake. It is the manipulation of audio and video for malicious purposes, which in a political context it can be a matter of life and death. Imagine a deepfake of world leaders inciting to violence against a certain group of people. Buzzfeed actually made a “disclaimer” video on the dangers of deepfake using Barack Obama’s appearance. (BuzzFeed, 2018) There can come a time when even amateurs can fake whatever content they want using specialized apps and tools. In a disastrous scenario this can lead to violence, even to war.

However, it is hard to say with absolute certainty, whether new media is advantageous or disadvantageous for the quality of democracy or politics overall. Mostly because there is a “lack of longitudinal and comparative research, which partly follows from the lack of specified and standardized independent and dependent variables. Only with a comprehensive theoretical framework and clearly specified and standardized independent and dependent variables can comparative research flourish.” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014, p. 110)

In conclusion, after examining the possible negative implications of new media in political life, he still believes that this technological development what we have is good.
“With respect to communications, the past was hardly idyllic. Compared to any other period in human history, we are in the midst of many extraordinary gains, not least from the standpoint of democracy itself. For us, nostalgia is not only unproductive but also senseless. Things are getting better, not worse.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 8) I would like to hope I can still agree with this after going through with my full research on the topic.

**CASE STUDY: THE 2016 EU REFERENDUM LEADING TO BREXIT**

The first case study I’m going to present is about the United Kingdom’s 2016 so-called Brexit referendum, which posed the question to the nation whether or not they should stay part of the European Union. There are some elements in the UK that has been notoriously sceptic about the EU membership for decades. (The UK joined the European Union in 1973, but refused to fully conform to Union standards in some matters, for example, they opted out from introducing the common currency, the euro.)

The outcome of the referendum I assume is well-known. Leave votes won by a very narrow margin, they constituted to 51.9% of the total votes, while remain votes to 48.1% of the total votes. The vote count difference came down to 1,269,501 votes in an electorate of 46,501,241. (BBC, 2016c) As it turns out, the (still uncertain) outcome of the fateful referendum was largely decided by the small percentage of persuadable voters, who did not have an explicit, strong preference of leave or remain. I will recount the secretive moves that lead to the targeted online bombardment of this small portion of the population and what consequences it may have in our future and daily lives.

Carol Cadwalladr, a Welsh journalist for The Observer and The Guardian was and still is a leading figure in unfolding the Brexit-mystery. Her articles have been shedding light on the events that lead to the leave outcome of the referendum for the last 3 years. She managed to uncover connections between the surprising result of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the USA – because there are serious overlaps between the most surprising political events of the Western world of the 2010s. I will strongly rely on her articles while trying to build a case study for the connections between Brexit and social media.

The scandalous referendum somehow twisted together with the company called Cambridge Analytica. What used to be a little know small enterprise a few years ago, became very much the center of attention when its alleged involvement with the Brexit results turned out.
Damian Tambini, director of the media policy project at the London School of Economics says “There is a real danger we are heading down the US route where whoever spends the most money is most likely to win. That’s why we’ve always controlled spending in this country. But these controls are no longer working.” (Cadwalladr, 2017a) What’s the US route and what controls are failing when it comes to elections and political information-gathering?

Brexit was a shocking event for many of the observants, but the road leading to it was also winding. Former Prime Minister David Cameron called for the referendum in a quasi-bluff, because he didn’t expect that the leave side will prevail. In the weeks preceding the vote, he campaigned for remain, ultimately in vain, and he resigned soon after the vote. Then became the political roller-coaster which has been in the center of European politics for the last 3 and a half years, and as of November 2019, it is still unsure when exactly and under what conditions will the United Kingdom leave the European Union (at the end of October the British membership was further “flextended” until the 31 January 2019).

During the campaign, there were 3 main parties who were setting the course of social discourse about the membership in the European Union. (BBC, 2016b) The official remain campaign was called “Britain Stronger in Europe”, spearheaded by Lord Stuart Rose, British businessman in the retail industry. The official remain campaign was “Vote Leave”, spearheaded by Boris Johnson, former mayor of London and Michael Gove, Conservative politician and old ally of Johnson (at the time). There was a third campaign, “Grassroots Out”, spearheaded by Nigel Farage, UKIP-leader, a Eurosceptic party, and sponsored by Arron Banks, millionaire businessman, but Grassroots Out later was called by the web domain Leave.EU affiliated with the campaign. The three parties emphasized different effects of the loss of membership to the European Union: BSIE emphasized the loss of jobs and economic security should the UK leave the EU, Vote Leave claimed that the UK sends £350m a week to the EU which could be spent on the national healthcare system, NHS, and Leave.EU warned against the swarm of migrants the UK will have to manage if they remain part of the EU, especially after Turkey will join the Union.

The official campaigns respectively were allowed to spend a maximum of £7m, get a free mailshot, TV broadcasts and £600,000 public funds. “Grassroots Out founder, Tory MP Peter Bone, said his campaign would continue, but with a spending limit of £700,000, as he attempted to draw a line under the bitter war of words between his group and Vote Leave.” (BBC, 2016b) Interestingly, apart from Grassroots Out, other parties,
like “The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition also applied for designation as the official Leave campaign, claiming left-wing anti-EU views were not being properly represented, but its application was also rejected by the Electoral Commission.” (BBC, 2016b)

From this group of three, the involvement of Leave.eu is the most interesting from a political and ethical perspective. It is no secret now, thanks to the investigative journalism of Carol Cadwalladr and others that their operation throughout this campaign is at best morally questionable and they have broken UK laws more than once. Leave.EU’s operation was greatly influenced by a consulting company they worked together: Cambridge Analytica. The company was called SCL Elections and has been operative preceding the Brexit referendum. What’s more, the Observer claimed it had “30 years of experience in working for governments and militaries around the world”, specializing in “psychological operations”. At the time of the referendum, the Observer has learned, Bannon was the head of it.” (Cadwalladr, 2017c)

„SCL, the parent company of Cambridge Analytica, entered into a commercial arrangement with a company called Global Science Research (GSR), owned by Cambridge-based academic Aleksandr Kogan, specifically premised on the harvesting and processing of Facebook data, so that it could be matched to personality traits and voter rolls.” (Cadwalladr, 2018a)

An anonymous former employee called “Paul” interviewed by Cadwalladr said at that time “...[they] we were still just a psychological warfare firm.” (Cadwalladr, 2018a) After billionaire businessman and media magnate Robert Mercer bought the company, it was renamed to Cambridge Analytica because they began operating under professor Kogan.

Much of Cadwalladr’s investigation has been backed up by Canadian whistle-blower Christopher Wiley’s statements. He says Cambridge Analytica was the result of a brainstorm between him, Steve Bannon, the executive chairman of the (alt-right) news network Breitbart (and later, a campaign advisor to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign) and billionaire Robert Mercer. They wanted to merge big data and social media with “…an established military methodology – “information operations” – then turn it on the US electorate.” (Cadwalladr, 2018a)

As it turns out, Steve Bannon was on good terms with Nigel Farage - so much so that Bannon set up a London branch to Breitbart so he could support Farage “in his mission to take Britain out of the European Union.” (Cadwalladr, 2017b) Bannon wanted to change culture through politics, and he thought it is easier to accomplish in Britain
first, that’s why “...the idea of Brexit was hugely symbolically important to him.” (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

Cambridge Analytica however, is not the only company tied to the Brexit scandal, albeit it is the infamous one. AggregateIQ, a company registered in Canada, can be also tied to Brexit. Vote Leave campaign director Dominic Cummings says they just stumbled upon AIQ on the Internet, however, as confirmed by Cadwalladr, with date filtering to early 2016, there is nothing about AIQ online - therefore they couldn’t just find it on the net. (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

“But what is an actual fact is that [Mark] Gettleson and [Thomas] Borwick, both previously consultants for SCL and Cambridge Analytica, were both core members of the Vote Leave team. They’re both in the official Vote Leave documents lodged with the Electoral Commission, though they coyly describe their previous work for SCL/Cambridge Analytica as “micrortargeting in Antigua and Trinidad” and “direct communications for several PACs, Senate and Governor campaigns. And Borwick wasn’t just any member of the team. He was Vote Leave’s chief technology officer.” (Cadwalladr, 2017b) She adds although back at the time AggregateIQ and Cambridge Analytica couldn’t be tied to each other, it was AIQ who build the platform and database Cambridge Analytica was using. (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

The Vote Leave campaign’s most important move was when a few days prior to the referendum, they bombarded the persuadable voters with more than a billion (!) online ads. (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

“On the surface, the two main campaigns, Leave.EU and Vote Leave, hated one other. Their leading lights, Farage and Boris Johnson, were sworn enemies for the duration of the referendum. The two campaigns bitterly refused even to share a platform.” (Cadwalladr, 2017c) But as it turns out, Vote Leave hired AggregateIQ (Canadian firm based in Canada) and Leave.eu worked with Cambridge Analytica (American firm based in London). (Cadwalladr, 2017c) The Observer got hold of a document which proves that even though they publicly, the two companies have no connections, they have an “exclusive” “worldwide” agreement “in perpetuity” for all of AggregateIQ’s intellectual property to be used by SCL Elections - later Cambridge Analytica. (Cadwalladr, 2017c)

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1Do So campaign in Trinidad and Tobago: Cambridge Analytica’s online activity aimed to falsely empower the youngsters of black origin by saying no to casting a vote in the elections, while the part of the youth with Indian roots casted their votes, partly because of parental and cultural pressure to do so. Inactivity from the black population contributed to the victory of the Indian parties and candidates, including the prime minister. (Amer & Noujaim, 2019)
The two companies have been working together not just on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, but they also used the same database while working on then Republican frontrunner Ted Cruz in his presidential election campaign. (Cadwalladr, 2017c)

“In fact, AggregateIQ had a non-compete clause. Leave.EU announced in November 2015 it was working with Cambridge Analytica which means that AggregateIQ must have had explicit permission to work with Vote Leave.” (Cadwalladr, 2017c) Andy Wigmore, Leave.EU’s communications director, said that the Leave campaign was a “petri dish” for the Trump campaign and that “We shared a lot of information [with the Americans] because what they were trying to do and what we were trying to do had massive parallels.” (Cadwalladr, 2017c)

It just feels inherently wrong to collude in an election-campaign based on data-backed evidence of public sentiment, but why does this scandal have further-reaching consequences than any “average” election scandal? Why has this case special importance to our political culture, maybe even our daily lives?

The former employee of Cambridge Analytica under the pseudonym Paul told Cadwalladr that what they were doing was “psyops” – psychological operations. It is essentially “...the same methods the military use to effect mass sentiment change. It is what they mean by winning “hearts and minds”. We were just doing it to win elections in the kind of developing countries that do not have many rules.” (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

For example, IOTA Global, another company under the SCL umbrella, delivers training to counter Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe and they are “...conducting research on target audience analysis.” (Briant, 2018)

Another former employee of Cambridge Analytica, Brittany Kaiser, who used to be Business Development Manager, came forward and also claimed the company’s political methods are the same social scientific research and data science techniques as are used for defense: “This was most often actually used in defense. We work for the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies in counter-terrorism operations with this exact same similar methodology. And now we decided to start building up a database to work in politics” Kaiser said. (Briant, 2018)

Knowing all this, let us look at how campaign funds were spent on leave side and why they are problematic from a legal point of view. Vote Leave, being the official leave campaign spent £3.9m out official £7m campaign budget on services from AggregateIQ. Other leave campaigns, BeLeave (campaign aimed at British youth), Veterans for Britain and the Democratic Unionist party spent a total £757,750 together with AggregateIQ.
Since they were using data provided by the same company, with similar methods, suspicion of coordination would be reasonable. Coordination however, is illegal under UK electoral law, unless the campaign expenditure is declared jointly by the campaigns, but in this case, it wasn’t. Vote Leave said the Electoral Commission “looked into this and gave it a clean bill of health”. (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

The United Kingdom and the United States of America wasn’t the only two countries where the SCL Group operated during national elections in the last two-three decades. According to the documentary that revolves around Brittny Kaiser, former Business Development Manager of Cambridge Analytica, in the following countries the group has operated to some extent, so they probably have some effect on how local politics have been conducted there: Lithuania, Romania, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Argentina, Thailand, India, Malaysia, Italy, Columbia, South Africa, Antigua, Indonesia, St Kitts and Nevis, Ukraine, Iraq, and Trinidad and Tobago for example. In some cases, Cambridge Analytica employees can be linked with Russian entities (Cadwalladr, 2017b), although in some cases the SCL Group has a contract to counter Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe.

Techniques used by Cambridge Analytica/Leave.EU campaign amongst others was spreading “Islamophobic and false narratives” (Briant, 2018) which had a considerable advantage from the campaign’s perspective: it helped spread xenophobia, which was one of the main points of Leave.EU’s campaign. This same method was used during the American presidential elections, and benefited Donald Trump’s campaign, who also worked with Cambridge Analytica. Not only is this technique harmful for social fabric and public sentiment, but it is most importantly illegal to be used on civilian population. This has been implied by Brittny Kaiser’s on her hearing during the Fake News Inquiry (conducted in Britain for over a year as a result of many irregularities during the EU referendum campaigns, but was extended to the phenomenon of “fake news”) in 2018. She stated the following: “I found documents from Nigel Oakes, the co-founder of the SCL Group, who was in charge of our defense division, stating that the target audience analysis methodology, TAA, used to be export controlled by the British Government. That would mean that the methodology was considered a weapon – weapons grade communications tactics – which means that we had to tell the British Government if that was going to be deployed in another country outside the United Kingdom. Further to this, Kaiser stated that the first stage of the work involved interviewing “close to half a million Britons”. To put this in context, typical polling samples conducted by firms such as
YouGov are of about 1,200 people. Research on this scale and magnitude would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, say experts – though nothing has been declared or accounted for by any campaign. Any donation of services by Cambridge Analytica or Mercer would be “impermissible” under UK law. (Cadwalladr, 2017c) It is not hard to see how problematic this massive propaganda is from a free and fair decision’s perspective.

Besides the Fake News Inquiry, which was not a criminal proceeding, there has been other investigations regarding the company, for example one by the Information Commissioner’s Office about possible illegal use of data or one by the Electoral Commission. Since Cambridge Analytica was a US firm, and its main investor Robert Mercer is a US citizen it would be impermissible to accept foreign donations as a means to influence the outcome of national elections British law, naturally, to avoid foreign interference in national elections. “The commission is also looking into the “help” that Goddard Gunster, an American lobbying firm gave the campaign. It was not declared in Leave.EU’s spending returns and if donated, it would also be impermissible. Gavin Millar QC, an expert in electoral law, says it raises questions of the utmost importance about the influence of an American citizen in a UK election. […] Coordination between campaigns destroys the “level playing field” on which UK electoral law is based. It creates an unfair advantage.” (Cadwalladr, 2017c)

Although many irregularities have been pointed out publicly, no prosecution has been run against any of the suspected accessories. Many of the actors are also giving contradictory statement. Arron Banks, in his memoir, The Bad Boys of Brexit wrote that in October 2015 they hired Cambridge Analytica, an American company that uses “big data and advanced psychographics” to influence people’s thinking, hence their electoral behavior. (Cadwalladr, 2017c) Later in 2017, he denied working with the company, even though Brittany Kaiser personally appeared in one of Leave.EU’s press conferences. Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica also was vocal in February 2016 about their cooperation with Leave.EU, but later denied it. With regards to AggregateIQ, Dominic Cummings, Vote Leave’s campaign manager said that much of their success can be owed to AggregateIQ, and this quote was featured on AggregateIQ’s website, since denies any involvement with the company.

As of 2019, Metropolitan Police Service (also known as Scotland Yard) say they “won’t be taking any further action against the Leave.EU campaign over technical breaches of electoral law as there is “insufficient evidence” to justify any further criminal
investigation into the (Leave.EU) campaign. [...] Leave.EU was fined £70,000 by the Electoral Commission in May last year for offences committed under electoral law, following the regulator’s investigation into group’s funding and spending during the EU referendum.” (Hockaday, 2019) Which means the campaign was fined for a negligible sum for budget-related irregularities, but potential data breach claims cannot be proceeded to criminal investigation.

“David Miller, a professor of sociology at Bath University and an authority in psyops and propaganda, said “It should be clear to voters where information is coming from, and if it is not transparent or open where it is coming from, it raises the question of whether we are actually living in a democracy or not.” (Cadwalladr, 2017b)

After Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ became trigger words for the public, Facebook tried to distance itself from both companies. They suspended cooperation with both company and quickly it became a who-did-what game. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was invited to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s Fake News Inquiry but declined to appear for a hearing.

In 2017, Arron Banks tweeted in response to concerns in connection with Cambridge Analytica: “Interesting, since we deployed this technology in leave.eu we got unprecedented levels of engagement. 1 video, 13m views. AI won it for leave.”

**CASE STUDY: THE 2016 AMERICAN ELECTIONS**

The second case study I’m going to evaluate is the 2016 U.S. elections won by Donald Trump. In both of his election campaign, Barack Obama already relied heavily on social media to reach out to voters. The 2016 elections took social media usage to a new level.

American elections have been trendsetters for the rest of the world with regards to political communication for long decades now. It is especially true in the last 30 years, with the appearance of Web 1.0 and 2.0 (the internet and social media). In the 1990s, Bill Clinton’s campaigns were the first ones to heavily rely on the internet as a tool to reach (potential) voters. Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign raised the bar and applied social media on a never-before-seen level with success. The same recipe was used in 2012 and he managed to be reelected.

With respect to the 2016 presidential elections, John Allen Hendricks and Dan Shill thinks social media was the primary communication channel of the elections,
moreover, the campaign changed the way social media will be used the future. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017)

They observed that social media play such vital role in contemporary American politics that by now all political campaigns have become social media campaigns. A candidate has no way of effectively communicating with the voters unless they reach them via social media too. Michael Slaby, President Obama’s Chief Integration and Innovation Officer for the 2012 campaign said “the 2016 cycle has been categorized by unprecedented unpredictability, not as much from the perspective of technology disruption, but a whole-scale shift in the norms of campaign communications.” (Hendricks & Schill, 2017, p. 122) How? Scholar Michael X. Delli Carpini summarized the changes in two notions, multiaxiality and hyperreality: “This emerging media regime blurs traditional distinctions between fact and opinion, news and entertainment, information producers and consumers, and mass mediated and interpersonal communication, creating a political landscape that is both “multiaxial” (i.e., in which control of the public agenda emerges from multiple, shifting, and previously invisible or less powerful actors) and “hyperreal” (i.e., in which the mediated representation of reality becomes more important than the facts underlying it).” (Hendricks & Schill, 2017, p. 122)

Barack Obama (and his experts and activists) managed to exploit the opportunities of social media far better, than his opponent, John McCain (and his team). While Obama had 2 million Facebook followers, McCain only had 600,000. On Twitter, he had 112,000 followers, compared to McCain’s 4,600. He had more content on YouTube with a 4-to-1 ratio. Obama probably didn’t come up with all his strategy alone: he hired early Facebook-investor and tech-entrepreneur Chris Hughes. In the end, in the 2008 campaign Obama managed to get the support of a stunning 70 percent of the age group of 18-25-year-old voters. Hence, Obama used social media strategy successfully to create group polarization in the target group. His 2012 campaign largely copied the strategy that let him prevail four years before, again with success. Only, his margin of victory was even greater: after spending ten times more on digital advertising than his opponent, Mitt Romney ($47 million versus $4.7 million), he got twice as many Facebook followers, and his tweets were retweeted 20-times as much as Romney’s. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017) Although, we can’t say constant and visible online presence alone leads to success, it seems it is an important piece of the puzzle. So, the Obama-campaigns were trailblazers at the time, and set the course to an even elevated online presence in the 2016 presidential election campaign.
Learning from the massive success Obama achieved by cleverly exploiting the advantages new media can offer, candidates of the 2016 presidential elections tried to copy this technique in a new way. Not only did they hire experts with experience with presidential elections, but they also hired data experts so that they could be ahead of their opponents, just like Obama campaign did.

It was no secret in 2015 that potential Republican presidential nominee and Texas senator Ted Cruz hired then little-known Cambridge Analytica to boost his chances of being elected. An article from 2015 already mentions how they teamed up with professors at Cambridge University to harvest data from Facebook by a personality quiz that uses participants’ data to create their “psychographic” profile. How the company was backed up by frequent Republican donor, billionaire Robert Mercer was also already known at the time. The article also mentions that some of the people who’ve taken the survey in question raised their “concerns and red-flags”. (Davies, 2015) Interestingly, at the time, it was also The Guardian, who first uncovered the story about the ethically questionable and problematic privacy issue by the Cruz campaign. Analysis of Federal Election Commission (FEC) filings shows Cruz’s campaign has paid Cambridge Analytica at least $750,000 this year. The “behavioral microtargeting” company has also received around $2.5m over the past two years from conservative Super Pacs – organizations whose aim is to influence the outcome of an election – to which Mercer or members of his family have donated. In an interview with the Guardian, Cruz said his funding and outreach apparatus “is very much the Obama model – a data-driven, grassroots-driven campaign – and it is a reason why our campaign is steadily gathering strength.” (Davies, 2015) In the interview, he also said, his understanding was that the data was being acquired legally, and with permission, when the survey takers sign up to Facebook. However, in the documentary The Great Hack, it is clearly stated by Christopher Wiley, that the quiz then pulled information from the person’s entire friends’ network. (Amer & Noujaim, 2019)

How did Democrat front runner Hillary Clinton and her team approach the elections? Katie Dowd, Clinton’s digital strategist said they see themselves as a media production company, because they are producing their own content and think about ways how to make it viral and reach lots of people. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017)

Ted Cruz’s campaign was not the only one who gathered data over the electorate with questionable methods. The Clinton campaign introduced an app called TrumpYourself, whose users could apply controversial Trump quotes on top of their Facebook profile pictures. It was a huge success, on the first day, more than a million
people visited the unique site of the application. Since they had to connect their Facebook profile with the app, they let the Clinton campaign access to their data.

Clinton had many issues with her tough persona image. Opponents like Donald Trump often tried to depict her as heartless, so she had to find a balance between seeming professional and likeable. Therefore, her team was present on many platforms, engaging in social conversation in various ways. Campaign team members were answering questions about her policies on Quora and they had a Letters to Hillary blog on Tumblr, where they published (supportive) letters Clinton received. On Buzzfeed, an article appeared with the title “8 Hollywood women who took a stand for progress and inspired us.”, and amongst the women featured there was Hillary and a direct link to her campaign website. The campaign frequently emphasized that Clinton was an avid grandma. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017)

Therefore, we can say that huge effort was invested in humanizing Hillary Clinton’s image. What struck me when reading about her campaign was Hendrick’s and Schill’s choice of words when in the end they write that the lack of emotion was a factor that left many voters unengaged with the Clinton campaign: “While stories were legion about the enthusiasm of the Sanders and Trump voters, Hillary Clinton struggled to build deep brand loyalty partly because of a lack of emotion that went right down to the hashtag: #ImWithHer.” That seems to suggest that elected officials/representatives are just like any other commodities, and they need to increase their market share via clever marketing.

The article of Elizabeth Svoboda cited in the Introduction, the same article that prompted me to write this thesis, mentions Rafal Ohme, a psychologist heading Neurohm, a political advisory firm that uses neuromarketing techniques. Ohme says that Clinton’s biggest mistake was that she failed to recognize that people couldn’t identify themselves with the Clinton campaign, and if she would have made a thorough study before the election, she and her team could have altered the outcome of the 2016 elections, as during 2015, she ran ahead of Trump according to the traditional polls. (Svoboda, 2018)

Donald Trump’s campaign is quite peculiar. First of all, he became the official Republican nominee and ultimately the president with absolutely no political background. Somehow, he still managed to convince crowds that he would be a better choice as the highest elected official in the country. According to Hendricks and Schill, the Trump campaign’s biggest significance was that they used social media as the primary communication channel. The platforms used by the campaigns (just Trump’s) included “Quora, Tumblr, Pinterest, Vox, Buzzfeed, Upworthy, Facebook, Instagram, Longform,
Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat, YouTube, and LinkedIn”. Hendricks and Schill “caution that although social media and digital communication were critical in the 2016 contest, it would be an overstatement to claim that social media elected Donald Trump. However, the campaign changed the way social media will be used the future.” (Hendricks & Schill, 2017)

When it became quite obvious that Donald Trump will prevail over Ted Cruz in the race to get the official nomination of the Republican party, Cambridge Analytica dropped out of the Cruz campaign to be of service to a bigger fish. Alexander Nix spoke at a conference where he said after collecting data for 14 months for the Cruz campaign, they handed all over to the Trump campaign when they started their work together. (Amer & Noujaim, 2019)

However, as in the case of Cruz, this was no secret at time, though probably were few people understood the importance of this collaboration. I was surprised when I found an article in The Times where author Rhys Blakely wrote already in September 2016 (two months before the elections) how this company was involved with the Brexit campaign and how “Donald Trump plans to use [Cambridge Analytica] to pinpoint 20 million “persuadable” voters in key battleground states and bombard them with psychologically targeted messages.” (Blakely, 2016) Also, quite interestingly, the sum paid by the Trump campaign to the company was $250,000, a small fee compared to the millions of dollars raised by the campaign. According to the article CEO Alexander Nix, said the company will “revolutionize the political landscape”. Well, to say the least, he did leave a great impact on how politics will be conducted in the future.

Another part of the campaign used for voter targeting was overseen by Jared Kushner, husband to Trump’s daughter Ivanka. They used the tool Deep Root to identify and target voter blocks through geo-location which gathered data with a live Google Maps interface. This system was the bases for the campaign: which locations they visited, how they advertised, how they fundraised. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017) Once the tool identified the persuadable voters, it bombarded them with deceitful, tailored ads 100,000 per day. This tool was also used not just to divert voters, but to prompt them to donate to the campaign. Machine learning was activated so they could identify and skip ineffective ads, which had a bad response rate, and disseminate successful ones. (Bertoni, 2016)

The Trump campaign was not only interesting because of big data and advanced voter targeting. It was quite fascinating to observe how Trump himself was managing the campaign. He certainly presented himself as an outsider to the “establishment” and he
allowed himself to make such remarks or do such things which an ordinary politician
would never do to avoid backlash or criticism. Sunstein owes Trump’s boldness to the
fact that he has been in the entertainment industry for decades before running for office.
He popularized hashtags like #MakeAmericaGreatAgain (an expression which was first
used by Ronald Reagan in campaigning in the 80s) and #CrookedHillary. He used
Facebook to raise unbelievable amounts from small, civilian donors and paid more for
Facebook ads than any candidate before. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017) According to
Sunstein, he had about 10 million likes on Facebook, had 40,000 subscribers on YouTube,
but could be found on Instagram, or even Vine. But the platform he owned the most was
without a doubt Twitter. He gathered 11 million followers by the time of the election
(today he has around 66 million). (Sunstein, 2017, pp. 82-83) His insults against his
opponents went viral - Lyin’ Ted, Little Marco and Crooked Hillary became monikers
very popular amongst his supporters. His attitude further strengthens the uncivil political
discourse of our era, which is by no means the invention of the 2016 election campaign,
but it is rare to hear politicians say “Knock to crap out of him, will ya?” on his rally about
a protester.

Times are changing for journalism too. Previously, as I pointed out earlier, it was
mass media who had agenda setting power, they determined what the public was thinking
about, oftentimes even how they should think about that. “The media’s traditional
gatekeeping role has been declining in recent years due to the rise of alternative sources
like talk radio, the internet, blogs, and social media giants – and as a candidate, Trump
exploited this erosion with remarkable skill and dedication, particularly through use of
his Twitter feed. This bull and buster have only continued now that Trump lives in the
White House.” (Sargent, 2018, p. 108) Not only had he strong online presence, his
campaign under campaign-newbie Kushner let go of the concept that paid television
adverts are the most useful and effective method of campaigning. It was a bold move, but
Kushner turned out to be right.

Brad Parscale, Trump’s digital director who will head his 2020 reelection
campaign, too said after the election: “Facebook and Twitter were the reason we won this
ting. Twitter for Mr. Trump. And Facebook for fundraising.” (Mangan, 2019)

Not only was Trump breaking ground in political manners, but how he handled
statements, claims and questions around them. During the campaign, Glenn Kessler, fact
checker at Washington Post regularly pointed out that the Trump campaign rarely made
an effort to bring evidence to a claim Trump has made publicly, whereas the Clinton
campaign regularly provided information to back a statement up Clinton has made. (Sargent, 2018, p. 110)

In addition, Trump went so far to question the legitimacy of the “media”. He frequently attacked those outlets which did not have a “friendly” approach to him. His feud with CNN is the most well-known. The problem with this kind of enemy construction is that if he discredits reliable and trustworthy sources, certain people who are susceptible to his point of view, will not believe what the outlet has to say, even if it is not claiming a falsehood. This might have contributed to the strong group polarization Trump already managed to achieve with his online presence.

Although his campaign had been dosed with a fair amount of scandals, he still managed to prevail. At least part of the reason why was that when he got into a situation where his word or actions got him into trouble, he usually dropped another bomb online and exploited the fact that people’s attention span was quite short (Hendricks & Schill, 2017), and the collective memory only lasted days or so before they forgot about the previous scandal.

It is quite interesting to see how people reacted to the online content they were following during the campaign. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, during the campaign, “four out of ten people blocked social media content they disagreed with and eight out of ten people simply ignored political posts that did not align with their beliefs.” (Hendricks & Schill, 2017)

Hendricks and Schill definitely argue that considering all things said, we are heading down to a decline when it comes to being well-informed. “What we ended up with was a filter bubble election. The decline of shared news, the echo chambers of partisan media, and the algorithms that serve confirmation biases coalesce in frightening ways for the future of the republic.” They quote Wired reporter Issie Lapowsky, who said: “...this last year in American media has been rougher than most. The election inspired more than the usual amount of tribalism online, and citizens’ trust in traditional media fell to an all-time low: just 32 percent told Gallup they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. This lack of trust formed the perfect petri dish in which a plague of misinformation could fester and bloom.” (Hendricks & Schill, 2017, p. 130)

The Trump phenomenon certainly plays a somewhat negative effect on worldwide politics. Since the US has long been a trailblazer in politics, the political actors of other countries copy and try to apply certain techniques to their environment – this is called the shopping model. Levitsky and Ziblatt argues that “his continued norm violation has
expanded the zone of acceptable presidential behavior, giving tactics that were once considered aberrant and inadmissible, such as lying, cheating, and bullying, a prominent place in politicians’ tool kits.” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 193) Some parallels we can already see with Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, who also won the election with a unique, “politically incorrect” approach to campaigning.

**CASE STUDY: THE 2018 HUNGARIAN ELECTIONS**

For the last case study, I have chosen to take a look at the Hungarian parliamentary elections of 2018. There are some similarities with the above-mentioned cases, but some attributes are specifically applicable to Hungary. What is true in all three cases though, is that social media has a more significant role in the results of the campaign than ever before.

New media could have been particularly useful to the opposition, who had less opportunities to appear in traditional sources following new legislation. For example, the political advertisements were forbidden in some of the traditional and online versions of county and national newspapers. (Bauer, 2018) This impaired the opposition disproportionally, because the government parties had numerous other sources where they could indirectly or directly advertise themselves: public media, billboards and government-friendly outlets. According to Bauer’s assessment however, neither the government, nor the opposition parties could fully exploit the opportunities presented by new media.

According to a study conducted by Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, by April 2019, through various thorough mergers and acquisitions, the government parties dominated 78% of the total media (public and private) in Hungary. (Czenkli, 2019) In this context, it can be easily seen why a campaign conducted on social media can be of utmost importance for parties who lost ground in traditional media sources.

For Hungarians, Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular social media platform. More than half of the population is registered to the site, which is especially popular for the age group under 24-year-olds. However, in Hungary, for the age group above 65-year-olds, the penetration rate is 58%, which is quite astonishing compared to the EU average 34%. (Bauer, 2018) In conclusion, Facebook is a tool which can reach various demographics, which is obviously an important factor in every campaign.
Besides the advantage of reaching a vast pool of voters easily, there’s another advantage to advertise on Facebook. Compared to other effective, expensive forms of advertising like TV adverts and billboards, this one is very cost-effective. A big number of potential voters can be reached for negligible amounts. Moreover, microtargeting, an important tool as we see from the two previous case studies, is done quite easily, without excessive (costly and time-consuming) human input. For example, people can be targeted with the ads based on their location, age group, interests, gender etc.

In this campaign, some new elements appeared. Politicians regularly used the tool Facebook Live (Lévai, 2018), a new feature in campaign as it was not available at the time of previous parliamentary elections. This let them reach their sympathizers directly on a never-before-seen level. In addition, personalization can win them new votes, as it is a powerful tool to keep contact with the electorate. Personalization could be detected in other cases too. For example, there were numerous profile picture frames the users could choose from to express their support to a party, or just to raise awareness to the importance of casting votes in the parliamentary elections. (Lévai, 2018)

Apart from all this, parties began to use artificial intelligence to reach their voters via chatbots. (Lévai, 2018) If the users replied, or asked further questions, the bot engaged with them trying to remit some ideas about the policies the parties had, or raise awareness to some issues, or just encourage voters to go to cast their votes.

The fast pace of social media contents also let parties to talk to their electorates about very recent issues, even minutes or hours after a new topic or news emerged, which would be impossible in the lengthier news cycles traditional media would allow (which is usually 24 hours).

Parties could also combine multiple tools with the help of the internet, as they could reuse their own existing database to disseminate emails to their sympathizers, which also saved them resources, because reaching them by other means would be naturally more costly.

All parties understood the importance of social media presence, even if they couldn’t fully exploit its advantages. Apart from Facebook, ads appeared through Instagram too, to Hungarian users.
Information-gathering is a critical part of forming a political opinion. There are multiple possible channels through which a citizen can be exposed to ideas and opinions: word of mouth, print media, radio, television, the internet and social media. We could see how social media is gaining ground in our contemporary era and how it is becoming one of the most important channels of communication.

However, this trend also has some disadvantages. It is no secret anymore that what we are ending up with the frequent use of social media is a phenomenon which has many names: filter bubbles, echo chamber, and information cocoons. We think that our perception is “The Reality” and dismiss information that contradicts or challenges our convictions.

The tools that meant to connect us are now dividing us apart based on our preconceptions. In a political context, how people think can decide the elections and shape the fate of a country. Polarization can be observed in the United States, in the UK and Hungary as well. “Increasing concern about polarization within American electorate has made perceived legitimacy of the opposition an even greater concern. At present, there is far more consensus on the existence of political polarization among elites than among the mass public.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 49)

This heightened political reality is called “in-your-face politics” by Diana Mutz. She argues that this “incivility” which comes with in-your-face politics has a considerable role in further dividing us, because it prompts political actors to act out, draw more attention to them then there is on others. “Uncivil programs would draw larger audiences and thus have the potential to educate more viewers about oppositional views.” (Mutz, 2015, p. 69)

However, she argued in 2015 that legacy sources, like print media and television are still the most important, because most political content is consumed through those sources. Would she argue the same way in today, now that we can see some of the absolute damage campaigns led on social media can do? To make it clear, I am not arguing here that the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum or the presidential elections should have been different. However, some of the techniques how voters have been persuaded are ethically questionable and can start a dangerous chain-reaction in other countries or regarding other issues in the future, if attention is not drawn on them.
I also have to point out group polarization in itself is neither good nor bad. Great things can happen if there is wide social consensus over a certain issue – however the exact opposite can be true. Group polarization led to for example the abolition of slavery, the suffragette movement, but it also led to the genocide in Rwanda or the rule of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

There are some factors that have a great role in group polarization. In informational cascades people do not make decisions based on their own information, but based on what other people are thinking and doing. In essence, they copy their behavior. In reputational cascades something similar happens, except when they follow the behavior of others, they do not exactly agree with them, but they fear being cast out of a group if they do not. (Sunstein, 2017) This is also called “groupthink” after Orwell’s infamous novel, 1984.

A third factor in group polarization can be confirmation bias. Sunstein says “people are more likely to click on material that confirms their beliefs and avoid materials that undermines them.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 123)

These factors add up to a lead to a new type of misinformation. “The most unfortunate part is that interest groups, echo chambers, and conceptions of identity reinforce each other, creating a new kind of iron triangle. Interest groups use social media to promote their preferred view of the world as well as create or fortify conceptions of identity. The echo chambers increase the authority of those groups at the same time that they entrench those conceptions.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 132)

In this political context, there came inevitably the question, is it possible to have a free and fair election ever again? – as asked by Carole Cadwalladr. We see how data gathered from our online profile can have a great impact on the course of history through two case studies I presented. Now, instead of dwelling on the past, we should think about the future. What possibilities are there for politics in the digital era?

Let us take the example of the world’s second most populous country. India has one of the youngest electorates in the world. Essentially, the political actor who can pursue this trench of the demography, can potentially win the elections. And of course, young people are more likely to use social media. In an instant, we have the recipe for victory. In 2014, Cambridge Analytica worked on the Indian election, too. Punit wrote: “In the 2014 polls, social media emerged as a vital campaigning tool. So much so that a large number of candidates listed their Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts in their poll affidavits. And before the rise of the fake news phenomenon in the US during the
last election cycle, these platforms had also been instrumental in spreading spurious information to influence Indian voters.” (Punit, 2018) So maybe, elections were free… but is it fair, if it is won by the spread of falsehoods?

What’s for sure, those, whose livelihood and power depends on it, are surely trying to learn from everything concerning political communication as we speak. Surely, harvesting unauthorized data seems unethical, but no criminal proceeding ended up with a sentence yet for those involved. Some criminal proceeding might not even start, because of lack of evidence or jurisdiction. At the same time, laws might not even have retentivity, because the laws may not “fit for purpose” (Cadwalladr, 2017b), i.e. they can’t keep up with such modern and sudden changes in political communication. Therefore, we are extremely vulnerable to political actors exploiting political communication.

Or is this even political communication at all? As Brittany Kaiser said, some of the techniques Cambridge Analytica was using can be considered weapons grade. In this case, information or communication warfare would be a more accurate term to describe it. The problem is, these methods were used on civilian population, at a time of peace, though the course of elections that should be democratic.

Certainly, there are cases when information / communication warfare is useful and desirable. Let us suppose they are used in an area where the danger of radicalization is a real threat. In this case information dissemination for these purposes can or may prevent extremists to from recruiting. The SCL group has been involved in a similar activity amongst others in Afghanistan, where they applied their method to dissuade Afghan youngsters from joining the Taliban. (Amer & Noujaim, 2019) Of course, because they did it on behalf of the US government, it raises other questions of foreign interference, but it had some positive value for the civil population nevertheless. We also should not forget that the companies that I most frequently mentioned in this thesis, Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ, are just a few of the companies, who specialize in political communication and possibly data mining for electoral purposes. Some of these companies, who will decide the fate of countries might not even exist yet2.

My observation is that negative campaigning is quite common nowadays. I think about this, especially now, with a recent memory from the 2019 municipal elections in Hungary, which campaign certainly was the most scandalous in recent memory. Policy

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2 On an interesting sidenote, Chris Wiley, who came forward as a whistle-blower for Cambridge Analytica, years after his employment at the company, also owns a data-mining firm, which pitched for the Brexit campaign in competition with Cambridge Analytica, but ultimately lost to it.
and issue-based politics are pushed to the background, and the personality of politicians are more important factor when casting a vote, rather than their approach to certain issues.

Focusing so much on political persona lays a good ground for a he-said-she-said type of political quarrel. Since Donald Trump, we are all aware what a “fake news” is, since he popularized this term to a new level. Falsehoods were inevitable side-effects of politics since the beginning. They were hard to catch out before, since access to information was limited, as people had to mostly rely on print media, radio, or TV. Now they are hard to catch out, because for every statement there are two claiming the exact opposite, even without any offer of evidence, and on the net opinions pose as facts. Some people are not even bothered to back their claims up, and we are stuck with “alternative facts” – which is an oxymoron in itself, and to a rational person a fact can hardly be alternative. Nevertheless, we can’t just ignore the phenomenon, however ridiculous it may seem, because apparently, fake news can win elections and referendums. And we got off easy with fake news only. In a few years, we may see our favorite candidate say absolutely disturbing statements even if they never actually claimed such things in reality.

Deepfake is a video manipulation technique which can alter a footage so much so that it looks and sounds convincingly real. Nowadays it is mostly used to make popular actresses appear in intimate situations, but I can imagine that in a few years, it can be used to create what would look like revenge porn or simply they would aim to discredit a candidate running for office. Even Mark Zuckerberg appeared in a recent deepfake saying “I wish I could keep telling you that our mission in life is connecting people, but it is not. We just want to predict your future behaviors.” (@bill_posters_uk, 2019) The video was created to call attention on the fact that our data is a value, which is worth protected. Amid a mild scandal, Instagram, a subsidiary of Facebook, let the content stay on the platform. This video was already very convincing from a visual perspective (for eye and hand movements of Zuckerberg), however, from the sound the audience can feel something is just not right. (And of course, the uploader admitted that video was fake, and intended to serve a purpose.) But over time, this technique will also become so sophisticated, that we will not be able to tell the truth from lies, facts from fiction.

This time Instagram let the video survive, because the users have the right to free speech and to raise attention to a viable threat. But this does not mean that free speech is absolute, or should be absolute. There are a vast number of cases where the lines are blurred and it is not obvious, whether or not a content should be allowed on a platform. If it is connected to politics, it is even harder to decide. But free speech is essential to a
good democracy, since it increases the accountability of political actors, who are this way prone to serve the interest of public. It is no accident that in authoritarian states, the independency of media outlets is the first to be tumbled down. “Knowledge is the great ally of both freedom and welfare” writes Sunstein. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 138) What goes out to social media during a protest can determine the success of the protest. “During the Arab Spring, one Egyptian protester tweeted, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 138) Now, the next response from governments of failed democracies or autocratic states can be to dismantle certain social media platform, or the internet itself – as it happened exactly during the Egyptian protests.

A government can choose more sophisticated ways to influence public sentiment or to halt certain political ideas. The government of China, for example, is believed to pay a small amount - 50 cents - per post to civilians praising the government or opposing views hostile to the government. Sunstein calls this “reverse censorship”, and it is certainly does not serve democratic purposes. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 138) This kind of “troll army” can be observed in other countries, too.

Some people have even proclaimed that the internet should totally be free of government influence. Most famously, in 1996, the former lyricist of the band Grateful Dead, John Perry Barlow produced an influential “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, urging, among other things the following: “Governments of the Industrial World… I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any method of enforcement we have true reason to fear.” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 178)

Some say we have entered the era of post-truth. It is hard to find credible information, because there is a vast number of sources, and the traditional principles of ethical journalism (truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and impartiality, humanity, and accountability) cannot be enforced on the online space when anyone can generate content (almost) freely, and when journalists themselves are under pressure to grab the attention of audiences with click-bait titles in the emerging virtual noise.

On social media, the politicians’ content blurs into our feed together with content from our friends and people we follow. An ad here and there, which we automatically skip to check, as usual. We might not even realize consciously that we have seen a political advertisement. As I write these lines, a phenomenon I read about pops into my mind. It is called third-person effect, and it basically says that people tend to overthink
the effect mass media has on other people, but fail to acknowledge and undervalue the
effect these same mediums have on themselves. I can only hope I’m not the victim of the
third-person effect.

**ARE THERE “SAFE” SOCIAL MEDIA FROM A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE?**

The explicit need for a “news reform” is not totally new amongst experts, but
nowadays more and more everyday people follow the topic with attention.

In 2017 already, after heavy pressures from Congress to change, Facebook
announced some new features that they hoped would contribute to the integrity of the
news industry and elections. The company promised to put pop-up banners on political
ads, so viewers can see who paid for them. They also wanted to introduce a security
feature, namely only verified advertisers could pay for the ads. The verification would
have been a mixture of automated and human-controlled check. “What’s more, for all
advertising – political and otherwise – Facebook will aggregate every spot purchased by
an advertiser on a special page, making them visible to users even if they’re not part of
the intended audience. That cache will include details on the demographics of those
targeted by the ads and how many times they were viewed. Facebook will maintain a
searchable archive of each advertiser’s political ads going back four years, the company
said.” (Scola & Overly, 2017) This feature has since been extended to 7 years. (Facebook,
2019)

It is not only Facebook that came under scrutiny regarding suspected political
interference. At the end of 2017, the Congress introduced a bipartisan bill, the Honest
Ads Act, which would enforce a higher level of transparency for the big tech companies,
like Google, Twitter and of course Facebook, which has the richest data set of users
compared to any other social media platform globally.

There are many issues we can talk about information security and Facebook. But
one of the most pressuring point is that previously, for example at the time of the US
elections, the platform allowed so-called “dark posts”, non-public posts that were
untraceable to whom the appeared, and how many times. (Hendricks & Schill, 2017, p.
193) This made investigations about the alleged Russian interference with the elections
very difficult, however, there were several claims that possibly Russian fake users created
fake memes and events, for example in the name of the Black Lives Movement to incite
anger and division between the other users. And according to Christopher Wiley,
approximately 50 million users’ data has been illegitimately harvested through Facebook, but the real number can even be higher, as suggested by Brittany Kaiser. (Cadwalladr, 2018a)

Twitter cannot escape backlash either because the platform’s relevance to news and politics is unquestionable today. My favorite example to demonstrate this is a short article I saw a few months ago. MTI, the Hungarian Telegraphic Bureau reported that Donald Trump announced a 10% increase on tariffs to Chinese goods on Twitter. It was quite surprising to see that a news agency reported solely on a Twitter post. But since then, I understood that Donald Trump regularly announce his policies through the platform.

The problem with Twitter is that quite a few accounts are mere bots who are interacting with the human users – and many times the humans have no idea they are replying to a robot. Twitter was recently challenged about this in connection with the Israeli elections. CEO Jack Dorsey in defense highlighted some other positive features of the app, like how they began to measure the health of a conversation. The four observed measurements include shared attention (how much the discussion is about the same topic), shared reality (the percentage of the same facts in the conversation), receptivity (the quality of reactions: civil, incivil/toxic etc.) and the variety of perception (if the user is in an echo chamber or they are seeking out different points of views) (Dorsey, 2019)

Although I think it sounds very exciting and it would be very interesting the see the data to analyze it, I am not sure how the mere statistics will solve Twitter’s issues, as the problem is more complex with multiple layers. Are they going to intervene in case of incivil discussions? If yes, aren’t they going to compromise the right to free speech?

Apart from Facebook and Twitter, another popular platform came under fire recently. In Brazil, fake news favoring then-candidate Jair Bolsonaro spread very quickly before the elections over (Facebook-owned) app Whatsapp. According to Avelar, “approximately 42% of rightwing items contained information found to be false by fact checkers”, so almost half of the news shared were falsehoods. This is quite disturbing, especially considering the fact that Bolsonaro prevailed in the end. Could this be the new recipe for winning an election: claiming outright lies and getting away with it?

Even worse than this, all platforms are actively used by terrorists. Although many attempts targeted already accounts linked with terrorism on several platforms, this fight is never ending. Recently even TikTok, an app popular amongst teens was confirmed to be used by terrorists for recruitment. The posts in question were since removed from the
platform, but I assume after the news broke, several other attempts can be expected in the future. And of course, surely there are so many more cases that do not make it to the headlines.

After heavy criticism that Facebook contributes to the deterioration of democracy, the company unveiled new features, which hopes to strengthen journalism and the integrity of social media in a political context too.

The company wrote on its business-related blog: “Journalism plays a critical role in our democracy. When news is deeply-reported and well-sourced it gives people information they can rely on. When it is not, we lose an essential tool for making good decisions. People want and benefit from personalized experiences on Facebook, but we know there is reporting that transcends individual experience. We want to support both.”

The new feature was announced on 25 October 2019. For the moment, it is only in a test-phase, meaning it is only available in some geographical locations in the United States. If successful, the company wants to further extend.

Facebook involved experts of the industry for their input on the matter. They came up with a concept that has 5 pillars: Today’s Stories, Personalization, Topic sections, Your Subscriptions, and Controls.

Today’s stories are a bouquet of news which are picked by a human team: journalists, and not an algorithm – this makes it one of the most important elements of the update. Personalization is a tool which uses machine learning to eventually displays articles on the Facebook News section based on our previous interests, Topic sections is a pool of different topics, Your subscriptions is a section where people can views their paid subscriptions, and Control is a tool through which you can unfollow certain topics, outlets and articles. (Facebook, 2019)

The other novelty of the platform is that Facebook decided to pay a fee towards certain news outlets, so that they publish their articles through Facebook. This way, Facebook contributes to the survival of traditional journalism, and outlets have an additional income, which they can invest in themselves.

This new feature seems like a promising solution of Facebook for the conundrum it set up for itself. However, this can be perfect in no way. First of all, the company’s choice of which outlets to include in the pool of contracted sources would always raise concerns on both sides of the aisle. For example, some Democrats already raised an eyebrow when Facebook classified Breitbart as a trustable online source. But of course, some Republican would have done the same, if it had not done so. Secondly, as we can
see from recent historical events, machine learning and algorithms are not perfect when it comes to political issues. But neither are humans. The team of journalists brought in as experts could all bring in some degree of personal bias. Nevertheless, after initial testing, we may be one step further to deal with the technology disruption of our political era.

Some social media platforms have been criticized not only for the impact they’re having on politics and political culture, but how they affect the mental health of their users. For this reason, Facebook and Instagram is experimenting with not displaying the number of followers a user has, or the number of likes a post has. This can also have an impact on political actors, because if this feature will be permanently introduced, it will be harder for them to measure their own or their competitors’ popularity. Also, this new feature can have an impact on overall engagement rate, because with the likes, people were kind of incentivized to generate content, but with this possible new feature, the user habits could change.

**How We Can Try to Stay Well-informed in the Era of Bias**

As we could see from various examples, it is quite challenging to be or stay well-informed with accurate pieces of information on politics on social media. In this chapter, I will introduce important notions which can determine our perception of reality in a political (but also in a general) context. Once introduced, I can demonstrate how we can use the knowledge to our advantage.

When people use social media in to gather information about politics on any media, they usually already have some presuppositions about certain topics or certain political actors: they have certain beliefs. Potter says “...beliefs are a type of cognition; that is, they require cognitive processes to construct, and they reside in human memory. They are mental constructions about the probability that an object or event is associated with a given attribute.” (Potter, 2012, p. 141) These beliefs prompt people to search for real or only perceived patterns: in their minds, some events become highly probably, or exactly the opposite. Beliefs make it harder to the audience to regard any issue without premises or rather prejudices, and to gather information in impartial ways.

There is one certain belief which is particularly interesting in connection with media. It was first described by sociologist Phillips Davidson in 1983. He said that “typically people [feel] that the media exerted a strong effect on other people (third persons) but not on themselves (first persons).” (Potter, 2012, p. 74) Based on his findings
he asserted that in general people overestimate the influence of media on others, but underestimate this same influence on themselves. Potter mentions some interesting aspects of the topic: he thinks that some people want to regulate media content for this reason, but they fail to acknowledge that some media content is having a negative influence on them as well. This hypothesis is well-documented and supported by empirical evidence.

Not only we misevaluate the influence of media content, but we seek out information that strengthens our own beliefs. As we grow older, we have more experience and we gather more knowledge. However, Potter says “...the more knowledge individuals have accumulated, the greater the confidence they have in their beliefs. Intelligent people are continually looking for more information, but this information we seek is almost always confirmatory, not information that challenges our beliefs. So, the higher the IQ, the more chance there is of ideological immunity.” (Potter, 2012, p. 158)

Even though we really hang on to our beliefs, it is still possible to change our minds and views on a certain topic, however, it is not easy and it does not happen overnight. The challenging piece of information first have to be accepted, and put some other confirmatory pieces of information around it, so we can see the bigger picture. It is hard to stay impartial, as we might unconsciously start to look for information that confirms the first, contradictory piece we encountered.

The order we encounter a new piece of information can have particular significance. The theory of priming deal with this question precisely. According to Jo and Berkowitz, the brain is a network of nodes, which always activate other nodes the closest to them. “The primed node is important because it sets up our expectations for our thought paths. As applied to the media, priming refers to the effects of the content of the media on people’s later behavior or judgements related to content.” (Potter, 2012, p. 76) Further to this, priming can also mean the order in which a piece of information is presented. For example, presenting certain topic after each other might suggest, there is a certain connection between the two, even it is not a valid affiliation.

Closely connected to this notion is framing. “Framing regards meaning as residing primarily in the messages, particularly news messages.” (Potter, 2012, p. 77) The frame is everything that goes beyond the classical questions journalists answer – Who? What? Where? When? Why? – when reporting on news. “The frame provides context in the way it defines a problem, diagnoses cause, makes moral judgements, and suggests remedies.” (Potter, 2012, p. 78) Framing is important, as they can turn truth into falsehood or
influence the audience in a dishonest way. For example, in the cases of “fake news”, the authors can wrap accurate information into false and misleading narratives so that they achieve a hoped outcome in the attitude of the audience.

Not being well-informed can be the consequence of not only being offered inaccurate information, but the lack of information too. In the 1970s, Noelle-Neumann created the theory of the spiral of silence. She established that in case media avoids a certain topic, people will refrain from expressing their own thoughts in connection with that topic, because they fear they would represent the minority, and if they acknowledged their opinion, they would be ostracized for it. (Potter, 2012, p. 75) Since people remain silent, the issue is not discussed extensively, therefore people are not exposed to a wide range of information. This might result that they become misinformed.

Some issues are more likely to be discussed than others. If a topic is controversial, it is more likely to be featured in media, as controversy increases the chance a piece of news will be seen or heard. Some outlets can even feel the pressure to report on controversial topics to increase the views of their reports. There’s a notion that describes this trend: “infotainment” (Mutz, 2015) refers to the phenomenon that today’s hard news are often presented in such fashion that aims to grab the attention of the widest possible audience, like soft news. This has three big advantages: first, it attracts viewers, second, the viewers remember the content more vividly, and third, these stories are likely to be picked up by other outlets. (Mutz, 2015, p. 45)

From these various examples we could see that there are quite a few factors that can interfere with our ability and willingness to judge impartially when it comes to certain issues. Beyond this, we also have to admit that not all decisions are based on reason: some are purely based on emotions. We do not find the candidate of party A likeable, or we have some reservations about an outlet etc., and this has an impact on how we think in terms of politics and issues.

Being well-informed on social media regarding politics is not an easy resolution. If we would like to avoid being in a filter bubble / echo chamber, we have to accept that only following outlets that we sympathize with will result in our one-sided knowledge. If we expose ourselves to outlets that we otherwise would avoid, we have a chance to regard issues from multiple perspectives and weigh arguments to counter arguments relating to a certain topic.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The main issue my thesis revolves around is the effect new media, especially social media has on elections, hence politics overall, and the quality of democracy.

My hypothesis was that since the usage of social media in relation to being informed about politics and political news has a negative effect on being well-informed, it has a negative effect on the quality of democracy. In order to be able to make any conclusions, I took a look at the academic literature to create a strong notional base for the 3 case studies I prepared.

First, I examined why media is important to consider in a political context. After Burke, I identified media as the “fourth estate”, the 4th arm of power. Then I described the model of political communication by McNair, and presented the four different functions of the media. After this, I talked about the importance of first and second level agenda-setting, and the significance of repeated content-exposure. I emphasized that it is incorrect to think the audience of a given content is equal to the public.

In the next chapter, I made a comparison between the traditional news sources, like newspapers, radio and television and the new media sources like websites (Web 1.0) and social media (Web 2.0). I looked back at historical significance of a new source, and emphasized that television and new media have overwhelming importance in providing information to their audiences. I introduced notions like videomalaise, the knowledge gap, or incivil politics. I pointed out, that even though politics appear particularly dirty today, it is an ongoing observation from the past and not a new phenomenon at all.

Later on, I tried to assess how the internet has changed the way politics is conducted. I wrote about how the traditional role of journalists for gatekeeping erodes, as more and more people generate content on the net. In consequence, more and more inaccurate information exists on the web, therefore I mentioned the notion of fake news, and how it can generate a divide between content consumers, and how it can contribute to partyism. As a new phenomenon, I introduced the tabloidization of hard news, which we also often call infotainment.

Based on all this, I tried to pre-assess the role of social media in politics. After Strömbäck and Kiousis I wrote about how the internet has become a challenger of traditional news sources. Not only this, but social media and the internet in general shortened the news old news-cycle of 24 hours to hours and minutes in some cases. I also talked about mediatized interdependency, how journalists and politicians rely on each
other’s content, and social media logic, which determines how information gets from point A to point B. As a consequence of social media, I stated users have a fractured political reality, since their perspectives vary greatly. I also mentioned microtargeting and narrowcasting as an effective tool in reaching potential voters. However, as a positive aspect of new media, I mentioned how social media can be an effective tool in reducing the knowledge gap. Later, I mentioned important notions like the Daily Me, filter bubbles, echo chambers and information cocoons, or general and special interest-intermediaries, deepfake and their significance.

After taking a thorough look at the academic sources, I prepared 3 case studies on recent political campaigns.

I first observed the 2016 EU referendum, which lead to the British exodus from the European Union (although at the time of submission, the issue is still not finalized). I wrote about how Carole Cadwalladr’s investigative journalism revealed numerous pieces of the Brexit puzzle, which turn out to be quite upsetting. I presented the shady operations the SCL Group led to influence national elections on commission of political actors, not just in Britain, but basically all over the globe. I draw attention to the fact that according to one former employee, the company was using weapons-grade techniques (psychological operations) to influence the outcome of the referendum. Unfortunately, this company is not the first, and certainly will not be the last to execute such operations on civilian populations for political gains.

Next, I took a look at the 2016 American Presidential Elections. To understand the context better, I started with how Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign changed the way political campaigns are conducted for good. I emphasized that as in so many fields, the US leads the way for the rest of the world in political communication too. After Delli Carpini I wrote how the American political scene (and consequently others) became multiaxial and hyperreal. Then I assessed the campaign strategy of Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton and finally, Donald Trump. I pointed out that it was no secret even at the time that Cambridge Analytica worked first on Ted Cruz’s, later on Donald Trump’s campaign, and what far-reaching consequences political incivility might have on how politics is conducted in the future. I wrote about the scandal that broke out after it turned out that at least 57 million Americans’ profile was compromised in the fake news war of the elections.

After this, I assessed the Hungarian parliamentary elections of 2018. As a novelty, a great reliance on social media appeared, however, neither the government parties, nor
the opposition parties managed to exploit the advantages of the platforms. In Hungary, Facebook is the number one social media platform, so the online political communication was very much focused on that. Especially, from opposition parties, since their chance to reach potential voters via traditional news sources, since the governing parties overwhelmingly influence these.

Next, I wrote about the dangers of one-sided information gathering as a consequence of utter reliance of social media sources in a political context. I talked about (group) polarization, in-your-face politics, role of legacy sources, and confirmation bias. I raised the point that in the words of Carole Cadwalladr, it is problematic in our contemporary era to have a free and fair election. I also mentioned how the demographics can have a disproportionate effect on the election results, especially when certain parts of the electorate excessively use social media in their decision-making process. Next on, I further emphasized the dangers of communication and/or information welfare and deepfake, or the importance of reverse censorship and paid online political activity of regular users. I mentioned debates on free speech and whether or not the internet should be absolutely free of government activities.

In the next chapter, I wrote about attempts to reform social media platforms so they can be an impartial means to political communication. For example, how Facebook updated their terms of service on dark posts, or how Twitter measures now the quality of social conversation conducted on the platform. I mentioned other social media platforms like Whatsapp and TikTok and political scandals connected to them. I described the new feature Facebook intends to launch to stop further democratic deterioration: Facebook News. I presented the new features connected to the blueprint. After this, I wrote about another possible update, the disappearing of like-counts, and how they may affect politics conducted on Facebook and Instagram.

In the final chapter, I made an attempt to assess how we can try to remain well-informed in our contemporary political environment. First, I introduced some important notions, through which we can understand the basic mistakes, we make when we form an opinion or decision - general and political likewise. I talked about beliefs, the third person effect, confirmation bias, the challenge to be impartial, priming and framing, the spiral of silence, controversy, and again, filter bubbles/echo chambers.

Now, I attempt to make a final assessment to my thesis. As said, I assumed that the usage of social media in relation to be informed about politics and political news has a negative effect on being well-informed, therefore, it has a negative effect on the quality
of democracy. I based this assumption on the observance that on social media platforms, users tend to follow topics they are familiar with and they are interested in. Consequently, users not interested in politics would be less likely to come across news relating to politics. Those users however, who are interested in the topic, would be more likely to follow information sources who would provide content in this matter. However, they probably already have existing presumption about the credibility of a news based on the sources it comes from. Therefore, we seek out information that is in line with our already existing assumptions, and we reject the ones that challenge it. Online, the power is in our hands, with a few clicks we can follow and unfollow media sources, depending if we are interested in it or not.

After considering all the information I came across with during writing this thesis, I can consider the pros and cons of politics conducted on social media.

The advantage of politics conducted on social media can be that political actors can target their electorate very accurately, for example based on demographic attributes like age, location, or gender, or based on their interest. With chatbots, they have a chance to “personalize” their message and get new voters for themselves. Also, on social media platforms, those can have a voice, whom for some reason lost ground to campaign through traditional sources like newspapers, radio and television – for example, Hungarian opposition parties. In addition, on social media, people might speak more freely, or at least have a chance to talk to a larger audience, within the reasonable limitation of free speech. If they incite for violence or target a minority just because they are part of that group, they stumble upon the field of hate speech, which in an ideal world, would be limited and surveilled by the platforms they appear on. In addition, it can be a source to countercheck a statement. For example, to hear from people on certain topic, if they are physically in a faraway location, and falsehoods emerge on the state of that location.

The dark side of politics conducted on social media however, can be that the targeted electorate comes across misinformation, or worse, deliberate disinformation. Or, social media can be used for propaganda purposes by the political actors. From the users’ side, they risk being in a filter bubble / echo chamber / information cocoon, if they bar themselves from news sources they have (sometimes incorrect) assumptions about. Social media unfortunately can be a ground to foreign or merely malicious interference, as it turned out from the case studies.

Every tool can only be as useful, as it is utilized. In the case of politics and social media, the arguments are not black and white, and we are mostly in an area of grey. My
final assessment is that even though social media can pose a great threat to the quality of democracy in some cases, their advantages weigh more, than the possible disadvantages. Furthermore, since we cannot go back in time, and more and more technological developments will challenge us, in many ways, it is our duty and responsibility to learn how to adapt to these new situations.

At the end of this thesis, I find the topic of my choice is a complex one, therefore the solutions offered should be complex, too. I think making sure that the opportunities provided by social media are in line with our democratic expectations – and in some cases, our mental health – should be the joint responsibilities of citizens, legislative, the executive, and the judiciary arms of power, and the media sources. All parties have their part to take in for the common good.

I believe citizens should make an effort to being well-informed. They should think critically, when they come across (either contradicting or affirmative) information, be open-minded, a feel responsibility for their choice. I’m not saying, they should all be politically active, but in an ideal world, citizens would express their opinion through voting, so the outcome of the elections would represent the true state of preferences. (In some countries, like Belgium, citizens are obliged to vote, for example.) They also should have some kind of information on the media content they consume. (I also admit, not every part of the electorate is always on top on their political knowledge, and “the elites” disproportionately concern themselves more with political topics. Those, who struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis, do not need fancy political ideas, but on-the-spot assistance, to survive.)

Of course, all this cannot be expected from an electorate that has never been taught how to consume news. Therefore, I think it would be good to introduce non-digital and digital media literacy courses into the curriculums. In our contemporary and future world, we do not need to remember everything, because we have a vast pool of information. So much so, that it is starting to become a problem. How should we distinguish between information that we need or we do not need? What is useful and what is not? I would like to see an education system that raises future generations to think critically, and teach them how to seek out trustworthy information, and not just make them learn certain archaic information by heart. I can imagine this critical part of education taught in the framework of information technology, or ethics classes, for instance. Unfortunately, the Hungarian education system nowadays would hardly allow to deviate from centrally determined education policy, so I can not really imagine this happening in the foreseeable future. I
justify the need to reconsider our education strategy with the fact that the jobs our children will take in 30-40 years do not even exist today, because they depend on new technology. We need to teach them how to adapt to new circumstances. Or maybe, they will teach us.

We need to remember that big tech companies, and social media platforms are not charities, they are for-profit organizations, and they have an interest to feature the ads that were paid for. Therefore, in some cases they will be incentivized to provide a platform to potential falsehoods. (And also, a piece of information, be it true or not, can shine in a very different light depending on the narrative they appear in.) So, their role in politics is a hard question, because they should not accept every penny for an advertisement without considering the message, but we should not allow them to be ethical supervisors or “guardians of truth” either.

Therefore, I think we need legislative control over them, however, in most countries, legislation cannot keep up with such sudden changes and updates in terms of services. As quoted before, our laws might not be “fit for purpose”, especially, because we are slow to understand the far-reaching consequences of politics conducted online.

That is why we need to consider the judiciary. Some countries, where common law has a chance to make precedents, could experiment with adequate solutions more quickly, than in countries which have a civil law system. The problem is, some countries like the United Kingdom already tried to unfold criminal activity for example in connection with Cambridge Analytica or Facebook, but since these are American companies, the UK does not have jurisdiction over them, so there was hardly anything they could do for a criminal proceeding.

I believe governments are integral part of the equation, but to be honest, it is not quite clear to me what their role should be in finding a solution. We have to admit, that sometimes, in autocratic or semi-autocratic systems, it is not in their best interest, to remain on the side of the “truth”. Therefore, I think it comes down to us, citizens, to make a responsible choice based on our convictions, information and personal interest when casting a vote. I think the key is the previously mentioned architectural serendipity, when we build a system of random information on social media sites, and a well-informed electorate, which has less chance, to be manipulated online.
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APPENDIX

Sender of messages:

* is a complex organization or institution, not an individual
* use standardized practices to mass produce the messages and disseminate them
* have an awareness of specific niche audiences and actively promotes itself in order to attract as many audience members of that niche as possible
* condition audience members for habitual repeated exposures

Audiences members:

* are widely dispersed geographically, that is not all in one place
* are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing
* encounter messages in a variety of exposure states but most often in a state of automaticity

Channels of message dissemination are technological devices that:

* make messages public, that is available to anyone
* extend the availability of messages in time and space
* can reach audiences within a relatively short time, even simultaneously