

# Politics Under the Reign of Social Media



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**T**he surge to prominence of extreme right-wing beliefs has become a sign of our times. It only takes a glance at a comparative analysis of election results and how they changed over the last decade in many Western countries. Similarly, a look at the change of tone in public debate and popular consent, which imply racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, nationalistic, clerical or homophobic sentiments, sometimes a hatred for one specific nation/religion or acceptance of violence as a viable means of political action. Some only recently unacceptable views have entered the mainstream public opinion. Questions about causes of this phenomenon emerge. One of the most frequently given explanations is the underlining frustration of social groups, triggered by the perceived or real decline of living standards. In the second

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decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social media of the Web 2.0 era have become a major tool for the proliferation of extremism.

### TURNING POINT

People's idealistic expectation towards the Internet were fundamentally different from what is being experienced. The World Wide Web was expected to secure freedom and was to be an agent of universal inclusion – giving everyone a path to be a public debate influencer. Whoever wanted to, could be enabled to stop being only a communication recipient. Due to various Internet tools (such as blogs, discussion forums, internet radio podcasts, video streaming sites or comments under news articles) people were equipped with the possibility to emerge as broadcasters with a chance to summon a large audience and alter the views of its members. Social media have additionally reduced the virtual distance between the broadcaster and her/his target audience. They have turned out to be an instrument perfectly designed for political propaganda. Hence the increasing ease with which all manner of thought, idea or postulate is expressed. In the time of ancient Athens, a troublemaker misled to do that on the major agora would be removed by consent before he could spur confusion.<sup>1</sup> More recently, in the age of newspapers and later with omnipresence of television, a troublemaker of this kind would rather be faced with the challenge of getting away with his propaganda past the critical oversight of a newspaper or TV news channel's editor-in-chief.

Extremists have always utilized technology to their benefit. The National Socialists' proficiency in using the radio some 80-90

<sup>1</sup> Blackwell, Ch.W. (2003) "Athenian Democracy: A Brief Overview", [in:] *Demos. Classical Athenian Democracy*. Available [online]: [http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article\\_democracy\\_overview?page=all](http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_democracy_overview?page=all)



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years ago is almost legendary.<sup>2</sup> Yet radio, television, and even the news websites, blogs or discussion forums on the Internet are of a different quality from Social media. To produce successful propaganda using all the former types of media required the existence of infrastructure. No niche radio station, no amateurish local cable TV channel effectively watched by merely a few hundred people (if that many), and no blog with a similar audience reach, can alter the political processes in a democratic country. To influence the direction of a country, the owners of such media would need to have built a following by means of classical political action (networking, rallies, posters and pamphlets) before broadcasting anything. Meanwhile, social media

enables even weak and small groups to become conspicuous and to expand their reach incrementally (with the application of likes and retweets, among others). It is specifically these mechanisms that provide them with a mode of communication not only to already interested or convinced viewers/readers/followers, but also to odd recipients, who are potential recruits.

Therefore, faced with old-type channels dominated by the mainstream, extremist groups are betting visibly on social media. They have become a substantial political power in this realm. They are now able to generate the impression that their real-world level of support is drastically higher than it actually is. They achieve this goal by means of quantity (their strong activity on social media, the number of their posts, the fact that their comments tend to outnumber those of their critics) and quality (their showcased conviction to be agents of obvious truths and aggressiveness paired with a strong drive to be “winners” of all arguments they partake in). Their popularity is an Internet creation, but it also seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. From one point to the next, social media is emerging as a turning point in the battle of liberal democracy vs. extremism.<sup>3</sup>

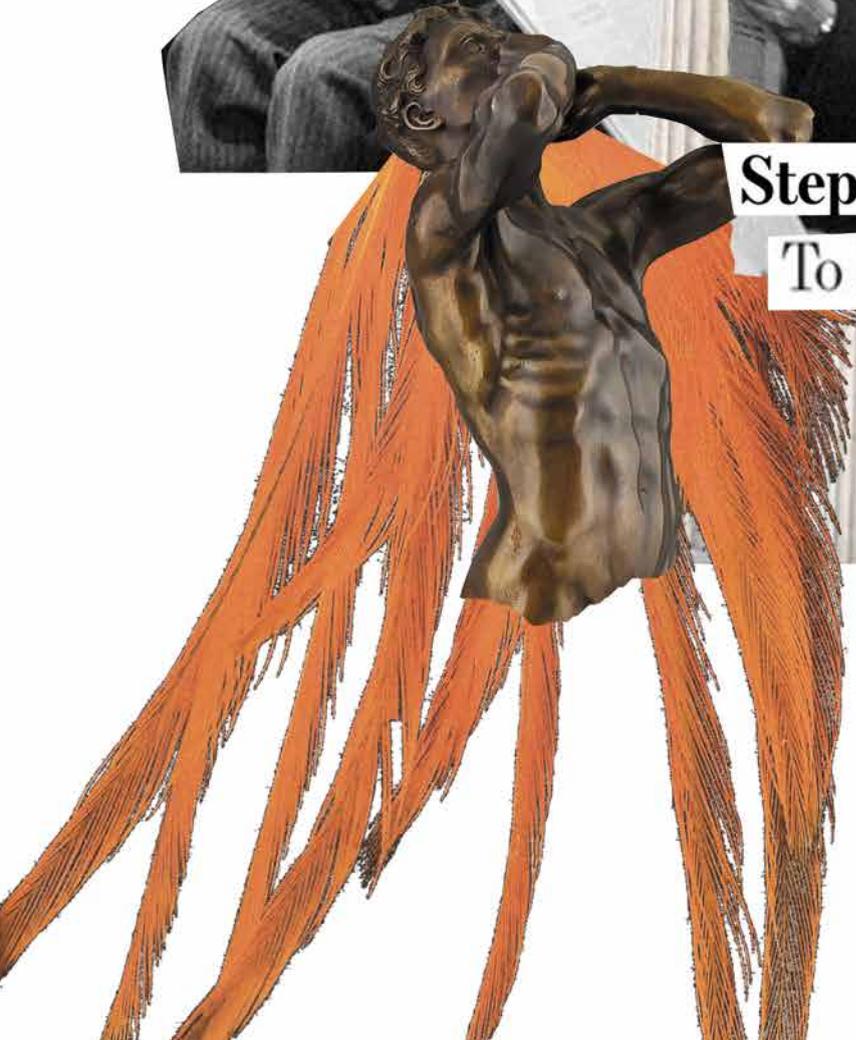
The psychological aspect is highly relevant here. People who view the world through the filter of right-wing extremism have always existed. Studies have confirmed that in Western democracies there is a numerically stable, and rather significant group of people who hold such views or have a predilection for internalizing them. (The Center for Right-Wing Studies at the University of California Berkeley offers an internation-

<sup>2</sup> Adena, M., R. Enikolopov, M. Petrova, V. Santarosa, and E. Zhuravskaya (2013) “Radio and the Rise of Nazis in Pre-War Germany”, PSE Working Papers. Available [online]: <https://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Petrova04042013/Petrova04042013.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Montenegro, R. (2015) “Social Media Is Turning Us into Thoughtless Political Extremists”, [in:] *Big Think*, July 13. Available [online]: <http://bigthink.com/ideafeed/social-media-is-turning-us-into-thoughtless-political-extremists>.



**Steps Up Rhetoric**  
**To Imitate Them**





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al overview of such studies). At the same time, resulting from the experience and fallout of World War II, the socio-psychological barriers for individuals to publicly declare themselves believers in this kind of ideology became insurmountable for many (albeit, of course, not to all). Extremists, aware of the perceived-as-reprehensible nature of their prejudices, often refrained from showcasing them. They occasionally fought internal battles against their views

themselves. Motivated by shame, they attempted to suppress their own lurking extremism. This feeling of shame led some to astonishing behavior – voting mainstream democratic. Extremists feared the reaction of their neighbors, colleagues, or of their personal role models. As a result, they often refrained from talking. They knew about the low social status of political extremism and believed that this poor opinion was widespread all throughout the society and the community they lived in. They usually were not aware of the fact that in some cases their neighbors and colleagues also hid their true sentiments of which they were likewise ashamed, while believing to be members of a marginalized group.<sup>4</sup>

The almost universal access to broadcasting one's own content on the Internet annulled these mechanisms of shame and control. The veil of ignorance fell crashing down as extremists started to publish their opinions. It began at first for the most part anonymously, but then – which in Poland could be noticed especially in the last few years – in increasing numbers with no such reservation, under real names on Facebook and other open and widely read platforms. Hundreds and thousands of people started to publish their ideas, emotions, prejudices, stereotypes, and hate speech on this media platform. In the most extreme cases, these messages were open attacks on human dignity, expressions of joy in light of fatal accidents occurring to members of a hated group, internet mobbing of specific individuals and not only public figures, and even expressed support for actions which in the past caused crimes against humanity such as genocide. All this content encouraged extremists still hiding in the closet to come out. Through social media they have

<sup>4</sup> Falter, J.W. and S. Schumann (2013) "Affinity towards Right-wing Extremism in Western Europe", [in:] Right-wing Extremism in Western Europe, K. von Beyme (ed.), Routledge: Abingdon and New York, pp. 96-110.

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USERS OF FACEBOOK AND OTHER SERVICES ARE HENCE SHUT OFF IN SO CALLED "INFORMATION BUBBLES". INSIDE OF THESE, THE DEBATE CEASES TO REFLECT THE FACTUAL COMPOSITION OF STANDPOINTS ON PARTICULAR ISSUES, INSTEAD BECOMING AN "ECHO CHAMBER," WHERE EVERYONE INVOLVED IS PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

discovered that they are not isolated in their perception of reality. On the contrary, an increasing number of people seemed to be expressing their secret opinions without fear of defamation.<sup>5</sup> This had a snowball effect, and the true strength was in the growing numbers. It gives strength and courage, removes the unpleasant feelings of shame and guilt, provides some kind of an alibi, and gives ground for demands to be heard. No one is ashamed, or fears being labelled an exhibitionist in a naturist colony. Shame is replaced by pride, self-confidence, and admiration, hostility towards those who previously put to shame, aggressiveness, ruthlessness, and a great relief follow. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram act as valves that can be used to release pressure.

The role of social media is further enhanced when the behavior of extremists online is compared to their behavior in real-life discussions.<sup>6</sup> Here, public shaming seems to be still intact, but it does not work on social media. The computer screen is an efficient shield against any argument, any bloom of reflection, but most of all against the tempering interaction with an actual human being. The body language and tone of voice are not seen or heard and therefore powerless to change or even alter attitudes. Tweets or comments from other users, seen only as a text next to an avatar, can be ignored and are very often ridiculed or struck down with an angry and righteous response. The debate opponents in online discussions are not perceived as human

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson J. and J. Densley (2017) "How Social Media Sends Extremism into Overdrive", [in:] *CNN (International Edition)*. Available [online]: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/23/opinions/social-media-fuels-right-wing-extremism-opinion-peterson-densley/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Montenegro, R. (2015) "Social Media Is Turning Us into Thoughtless Political Extremists", [in:] *Big Think*, July 13. Available [online]: <http://bigthink.com/ideafeed/social-media-is-turning-us-into-thoughtless-political-extremists>.

beings made of flesh and blood, but rather as some volatile actors on a virtual scene, who only play a role in hampering one's own political propaganda. Enemy entities of that kind deserve to be fought against with whatever means necessary.

### FILTERED DEBATE

Social media function as if they were designed to meet the recruitment needs of extreme right-wing political movements. The algorithms used by them to pick and choose content for users to simply display them in chronological order operate as filters that allow political information to reach the user only provided it is in line with the user's previously exhibited preferences.<sup>7</sup> This seems logical, given human psychological construction. People are comfortable with information that supports their view of the world, while troubled by data that openly challenges it. A provider of services would attempt to avoid provoking any cognitive dissonance in her/his customers, as their satisfaction is the basis of any business. Therefore, political content on social media profiles and timelines is set to enforce the recipients' existing convictions, beliefs, and attitudes while potential counterpropositions, consisting of "other side's" arguing points, which may persuade others to reconsider, face a much steeper slope.

Users of Facebook and other services are hence shut off in so called "information bubbles". Inside of these, the debate ceases to reflect the factual composition of standpoints on particular issues, instead becoming an "echo chamber," where everyone involved is preaching to the choir. A lot has already been put to paper<sup>8</sup> about

<sup>7</sup> See: Nikolov, D, D. F.M. Oliveira, A. Flammini and F. Menczer (2015) "Measuring Online Social Bubbles" [in:] *PeerJ Computer Science* 1:e38.. Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.38>

<sup>8</sup> See: Lomas, N. (2018) "Fake News Is an Existential Crisis for Social Media", [in:] *TechCrunch*, February 18.



## THE INTERNET HAS BEEN THE BATTLEFIELD OF POLITICAL RIVALS LONG BEFORE SOCIAL MEDIA ARRIVED

the problem of these algorithms regarding the spread of purposefully false but politically influential misinformation parading as credited news, we now know as fake news, and about manipulations of election outcomes. Additionally, there is the problem of public debate standards being utterly destroyed by the inflicted "deafness" to the opposing side's suggestions and by the rejection of good will assumption. Yet, the ideological information bubbles carry an additional threat.

The Internet has been the battlefield of political rivals long before social media arrived. The information bubbles narrowed the room for head-on clashes though. Users and contents are filtered, and the blocking and muting of accounts on Twit-

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Available [online]: <https://techcrunch.com/2018/02/18/fake-news-is-an-existential-crisis-for-social-media/>;

Allcott, H. and M. Gentzkow (2017) "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election", [in:] *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 31, No. 2, pp. 211-236. Available [online]: <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>;

Subramanian, S. (2017) "Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex". Available [online]: <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>; Cuthbertson, A. (2018) "Russian Trolls and Fake News Are Set to Get Even Worse", [in:] *Newsweek (The U.S. Edition)*, February 19. Available [online]: <http://www.newsweek.com/russian-trolls-fake-news-790976>



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ter lowers the odds of both serious arguments and venomous hatred reaching the other side of the barricade. As a result, political predators come across each other less often than they used to, while the energy to slam-dunk political testimonies remains at the same high level. What can be done with it when only people of similar views are listening? In many cases the only viable option is to enter a contest in exceeding radicalism. Here, whoever can express the view shared by all in her/his information bubble in the most extreme, vulgar, aggressive, hate-fuelled, and sometimes even grotesque or absurd way, is deemed the “winner.” Such an individual can count on the scores of fans, “friends”, and followers with their likes and retweets. Political pundits of the social media era no longer compete against the “other side”

for the attention of the general public, but rather against rivals on the same “side” for the lasting attention of fringe fanatics.

If this is the way even the mainstream pundits behave, if extremist sound bites receive highest reward in popularity and attention, then the extreme right is bound to succeed. No one can outperform them in the radicalism race, and no one can label them as unacceptable outcasts of society anymore when they really operate within the same logic in their social media behavior. Inside their information bubble, they mobilize their ranks; hesitators become lukewarm loyalists, lukewarm loyalists become believers, believers become combat-ready activists and – finally – combat-ready activists become dangerous violent thugs. But the extreme right finds it easy to operate outside their bubble, where it recruits. The politically undecided or passive users of social media are now very much used to radical online content, therefore the general image of the extreme ceases to repel many originally moderate recipients.

### STEPPING OUT ONTO THE STREETS

The drastically shortened attention span of an average reader of Internet messages also favors extremist propaganda. Social media have taken a further step here in comparison to 24/7 news TV channels or Internet websites of news broadcasters. The shorter the message is, the better chance it has to reach a wide audience and to go viral. Long articles are passé; a profound debate about ideas or nature of civilization is too.

These days, the decision of Twitter to increase the allowed number of characters per tweet from 140 to 280 provokes an outburst of discontent and resistance.<sup>9</sup> Yet,

<sup>9</sup> Nahman, H., (2017) “Why People Are Mad About Twitter’s New Character Limit”, [in:] *Man Repeller*, September 27. Available [online]: <https://www.manrepeller.com/2017/09/twitters-new-character-limit.html>

concision is not the only relevant aspect. In the modern online debate, the clarity of using only black and white colours to present a point is equally vital. There is no space for nuance, balance or shades of gray, neither is there space for thoroughly analyzing pros and cons. It seems obvious that creation of such one-dimensional, overly simplified political messages, based on emotion rather than reflection, comes much more natural to extremist and populist forces, and may be rather challenging for the moderate mainstream technocrats. Simplification of message synchronizes very well with the speed of content proliferation by the modern media.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many experienced extremist political movements (most notably – Jacobinism, Fascism, National Socialism or Communism), many of which desired to change the world in a revolutionary manner. As they gained power, some of them managed to inflict serious harm by profoundly altering the reality of people's lives, before the natural process of blunting the ideological spear with the passage of time was able to take place under the influence of moderating pressures exerted by the majorities from the ideologically moderate center within the society.<sup>10</sup> Yet, these processes did take place and in the age of slow media, the recruitment of supporters by radical movements often lasted years. In a number of cases (Poujadism in France, Populism in the United States, Morgen Glistrup's anti-taxation movement in Denmark, radical political Protestantism in the Netherlands, the right-wing extreme parties NPD, DVU and Republicans or the populist movement of Ronald Schill in Germany) this

meant that these groups were not able to reach a sufficient following before their ideological impetus extinguished and the moderating society absorbed them by proposing solutions to conflicts or crises that generated their emergence in the first place.<sup>11</sup> With today's technology this is no longer likely. The speed of extremist communication spreading, and radicalization of these movements will now always be higher than any attempts at their "domestication" by the moderate centre.<sup>12</sup>

The effectiveness of this type of modern communication is enhanced by old-type channels, which enable it to agitate outside information bubbles. All U.S. media report on the President's Twitter activity extensively. In Poland, the more spectacular Twitter exchanges of political foes, both active politicians and journalists, who in most cases are pledged supporters of one or other party, are sometimes headline news of the day.

Tweets and Facebook posts are frequently quoted in papers and on their websites, occasionally constituting the whole story.<sup>13</sup> The public takes note. People who hitherto disregarded social media as

<sup>11</sup> See: Bouclier, Th. (2006) *Les Années Poujade : une histoire du poujadisme (1953-1958)*. Paris : Éditions Remi Perrin; Rochester, A. (1943) *The Populist Movement in the United States*. New York: International Publishers; Hartleb, F. (2004) "Auf- und Abstieg der Hamburger Schill-Partei". [in:] *Das Deutsche Parteiensystem. Perspektiven für das 21. Jahrhundert*, H. Zehetmair (ed.), Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften., pp. 213–227.

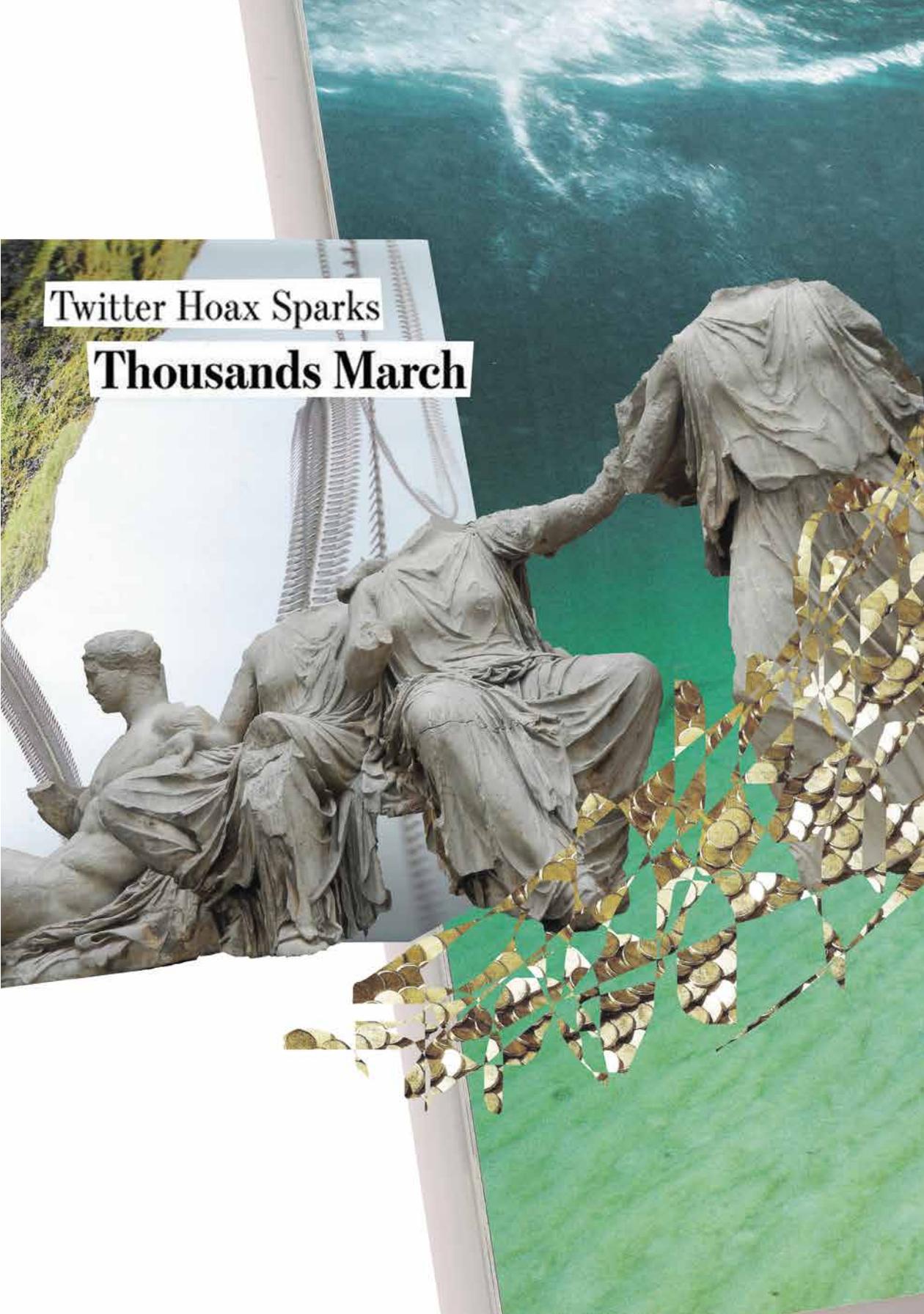
<sup>12</sup> Peterson J. and J. Densley (2017) "How Social Media Sends Extremism into Overdrive", [in:] *CNN (International Edition)*. Available [online]: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/23/opinions/social-media-fuels-right-wing-extremism-opinion-peterson-densley/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> Broersma M. and T. Graham (2013) "Twitter as a News Source: How Dutch and British Newspapers Used Tweets in Their News Coverage, 2007–2011", [in:] *Journalism Practice*, Volume 7, Issue 4 "Journalists and Sources", pp. 446–464. Available [online]: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2013.802481?src=recsys&journalCode=rjop20>.

<sup>10</sup> Coy, P. G. (2013) "Co-Optation", [in:] *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Available [online]: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470674871.wbepm054/full>. (accessed on February 25, 2018)

Twitter Hoax Sparks

**Thousands March**



a not-so-serious activity are faced with necessity to reconsider, since most of politics and their country's future seems to be decided there. These citizens, then, enter the stronghold of extremists and see a tendency to increase tolerance towards radical views. The final link of these processes is when radical views permeate reality, when online tolerance encourages the followers to express them during real-life rallies. What happens is a normalization of extremism as simply one of acceptable options for political choice.

It all starts in social media, and is then transferred through traditional media until it reaches the streets. Lessons learnt online are not forgotten. The strength-in-numbers philosophy continues to apply. In Poland, a huge march of radical right-wingers is organized every year during the National Independence Day on November 11. The additional linkage to "regular" patriotism on that day is designed to lower the psychological barrier of participants to admit to extremist views outside of the safety of the virtual world. Another lesson learnt is the only gradual uncovering of extremist depth of their true beliefs of the Polish Independence March vehemently rejected all remarks that they exhibit an ideological closeness to fascism or racism.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as time went by and the numbers at the march annually increased, some of the comments to acknowledge these implications have been allowed to test public reaction. The marching folk's leaders of the November 11 rallies described themselves off and on as "Judeo-Sceptics" (expression used by former Polish MP Artur Zawisza) or "racial separatists" (word of Mateusz Plawski, the spokesman of the March's organizer), while at the

same time completely rectifying the term "nationalism", handled rather apprehensively not so many years ago.<sup>15</sup>

## HOW TO REACT?

It seems that the aforementioned phenomena are Plato's proposition coming true. Each democracy is fated to end as tyranny. Will it be the progress of information technology, as John Gray<sup>16</sup> suggested, that effectively leads people back to the faults of coercion, servitude, tragedy, and crime? It does appear increasingly likely. Donald Trump does not have to be (and surely is not) this dreaded tyrant we are expecting more and more to arrive, but much rather a tentative harbinger of what the future might hold two more turns from now. Can it be prevented? Will the societies be forced to transform their liberal democratic countries into something similar to contemporary Arabic states, where genuine democratic choice leads religious extremism to power, and the alternative is to uphold a limited scope for freedom by means of a semi-democratic regime based on progressive military? It is an important question to elaborate on in a separate article. Here, the question is a different one, and it deals with the future of social media. What ought to be done if they are to stop inadvertently assisting right-wing extremists in gaining support and, eventually, power?

Censorship of content is the easiest answer, but not the solution. Social media could theoretically be restricted, regulated, or even banned by law. It would not be the

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<sup>15</sup> Polish Press Agency (2017) "My chcemy Boga", 'Naszą drogą nacjonalizm'. Marsz Niepodległości na ulicach Warszawy", [in:] *GazetaPrawna.pl*, November 11. Available [online]: <http://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1084338,marsz-narodowcow-przechodzi-ulicami-warszawy.html>

<sup>16</sup> Niederhauser, J. (2013) "An Interview with John Gray: 'Human Progress Is a Lie'", [in:] *Vice*, March 28. Available [online]: [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qbwqem/john-gray-interview-atheism](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qbwqem/john-gray-interview-atheism)

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<sup>14</sup> Żaryn J. (2010) "Z Marszem Niepodległości w tle", [in:] *Salon24*, November 2. Available [online]: <http://jan.zaryn.salon24.pl/245574,z-marszem-niepodleglosci-w-tle>

first time that freedom of speech was limited in the name of homeland security in terms of securing the political system from degenerating into a version of itself that would precisely pose a security threat.<sup>17</sup> Yet, censorship of freedom of speech is anathema to liberals who stand for human freedom, also because censoring freedom of individuals for one reason that the government perceives as a problem would encourage its application all over the place.

Furthermore, effectiveness of such censorship is questionable in the digital era, global economy and open borders in the liberal democratic world. For purely practical reasons it seems unlikely to successfully introduce separate and varying legal regulations for Facebook/Twitter operations in each of the approximately 200 countries. What should constitute grounds to, say, remove a post from Facebook if it is in violation of one legal framework, but completely acceptable within another? The language it is written in? Really? In the age of Google Translate? Besides, there is a strictly political consideration.

Authoritarian regimes are already eager to get around to censoring social media (some of them, like China and Iran on a permanent or Turkey on a temporary basis, already do that by simply banning or blocking them, but a complete blocking of a website in a country is a different approach from allowing it, yet tampering with the content of users' timelines). And there emerges a gray zone: countries no longer universally accepted as liberal democracies, but not yet classified as authoritarianisms. Poland and Hungary are among those, and in their case there is an anxiety among commentators and citizens that

these governments might seek to protect extreme right-wing content in social media from any censorship attempts generated by corporate terms of service. Germany, considered on the other hand a flawless liberal democracy, shows a different approach based on a recently introduced law that attempts to enforce a very strict handling of these terms of service. Social media companies can be fined for being ineffective or slow in removing extremist hate speech content from their services. Human rights defenders fear an overzealous reaction and hence a substantial infringement of free speech.

The current populist, nationalist, conservative governments in Warsaw or Budapest believe that they can use the spread of right-wing extremist propaganda to their advantage. It is their belief that as long as these groups remain under state control, their activity can influence a general shift of average political attitudes to the right, while allowing the far right-of-centre governments to parade as the new centre, a moderating middle ground between extremist and "leftist liberal" opinions, and even as the only credible bulwark against a surge to power of fanatics. The "monster" has to be on display to influence people's political decisions. Nationalist, conservative, and populist governments can become at least tactical allies with social media right-wing extremism, especially as long as the spread of accompanying fake news negatively impacts their political adversaries only, which certainly seems to be the situation. Therefore, as it is the case with any debate on freedom vs. security, the infringement of free speech on social media by political power bears great dangers and little to no advantages. In some cases, it will amount to no actual amends of the current situation, in others it will only provoke an outcry about yet another political discrimination by mainstream elites against the "people"

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<sup>17</sup> Mockaitis, T (2017) "Security vs. Civil Liberties", [in:] *Huffington Post*, February 19. Available [online]: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-mockaitis/security-vs-civil-liberties\\_b\\_9273478.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-mockaitis/security-vs-civil-liberties_b_9273478.html)

or it will simply be a tool for governing circles to silence democratic opposition. Social media must remain able to withstand political pressure of censorship.

Another way to weaken extremism is the use of algorithms. These filters certainly are a form of censorship as well, albeit an unmanned one. Facebook and Twitter already attempt to use algorithms to remove aggressive extremist content from their services. Yet, in this day and age, this can still lead to misinterpretation of the nature of tweets and posts. Should employees of social media companies undertake the job of censorship, the accusations of partiality, political discrimination, and freedom of speech infringement are unavoidable. Staunch defenders of freedom of speech and privacy rights, such as Polish Panoptikon's Katarzyna Szymielewicz, suggest the method of dispersed responsibility, such as grass-roots actions undertaken by users, who can tag, report or boycott extremist or false content<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, the aforementioned strength of extremist groups in social media paired with their well-documented capability to act in a coordinated manner can lead to their practical dominance in the "self-censorship" procedures of users. The result could be intensive tagging, reporting, and removing of anti-extremist content instead of the other way around. When fake news often receives three times as many likes or retweets as fact-checking posts that contradict them, the user-controlled content management can lead to very poor results indeed.

Algorithms are censorship in any case. Today, their major role is to show the users content similar to what they already liked. This means that they strengthen their pre-

existing political stance and are an obstacle, should they be willing to change it. Let us consider the following situation. There is a user who could potentially be convinced to alter her/his position on an issue after reading a particularly brilliant article. Yet, this will never happen because the user's access to the perspective-changing article is simply artificially denied by means of an algorithm that determines what does and what does not appear on this user's timeline. The user never becomes aware of the article's existence. This is political engineering. There is no reason to consider this circumstance more innocent than an algorithm-based operation to modify political views. Both are morally suspicious. If there could be an agreement on that conclusion, then the way utilizing algorithms for a digital-era anti-extremist education would be paved.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social media companies could actively engage in a process of anti-extremist education. The experience of various school programmes<sup>19</sup> (such as the Holocaust Educational Trust in the UK) shows positive results of meetings between the youth and people who witnessed the cruelties of war, who survived the Holocaust, or fell victim to race-related violence. Delivering content about harm done to people as a result of extreme right-wing views and prejudices to timelines of users whose previous liking or retweeting behavior allows suspecting extremist sympathies, could have a similar, moderating impact. Algorithms could be perfected to introduce such counterpoints without annoyance, as mild but catchy suggestions. This strategy could be implemented to fight the spread of extremism (both right and left) in the first instance,

<sup>18</sup> Ćwiklak, D. (2018) "Jak uratować świat przed Facebookiem", [in:] *Newsweek Polska*, no. 7/2018, pp. 56-59.

<sup>19</sup> Alon, A. (2016) "97-Year-Old Holocaust Survivor Tells German Children about the Holocaust", [in:] *ynews.com*, April 29. Available [online]: <https://www.ynews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4797397,00.html>

but in a longer perspective it could simply lead any users out of their information bubbles for the sake of reinstating open-mindedness and a viable political debate.

The business risk for social media corporations could be minor. Of course, no governmental institution should expect these to risk a widespread rebellion of large groups of users and customers. The processes of anti-extremist education would have to be gradual and slow, as any work on changing strong attitudes of people must be.

On the other hand, though, the position of Facebook or Twitter is strong enough to consider the creation of an "alternative" Facebook/Twitter practically unconceivable, especially in relatively small markets such as Poland or Hungary. The Polish nationalist circles undertook such an initiative in 2017 after Facebook cancelled a number of extreme-right profiles<sup>20</sup>. The "Pol-Face" lasted a few weeks and was closed. The immensely strong market position should ultimately embolden Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to act to turn these information bubbles into at least sieves, through which opposing views can travel more freely.

All users of social media, especially the young generation that is not even familiar with the world from before the digital age, is exposed to relentless propaganda of clickbaits. The ability to recognize the ideological agenda of content providers, to identify fake news, and to become a critical consumer of information is now key to remaining a free citizen<sup>21</sup>. These are the ba-

sics of digital literacy. Although it remains a task for schools, social media can and should get involved. It is the major corporate social responsibility task of our age.

In the end, an informal understanding between directing boards of the abovementioned global companies and the political liberal democratic mainstream, which still controls a vast fracture of influential governments with strong economies, would be helpful. It would be not only in the best interest of democratic societies, but also of corporations. They should also get involved in the process that would prevent a deep political change. Neither the introduction of strict rules or bans for their businesses by authoritarian governments, nor the loss of hundreds of thousands of potential users due to war, can be considered by them as good perspectives for business expansion.

One thing is certain. Wherever right-wing extremists, strengthened by their proficiency in using social media, would come to power, they would likely submit the very social media under their total control or dismantle them altogether, quite possibly during their first day in office. ●

[ven-luckert/extremists-are-thriving-on-social-media/](https://www.ven-luckert.com/2017/08/27/extremists-are-thriving-on-social-media/)



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<sup>20</sup> Kwiek, D. (2017) "Powstał Polfejs – 'Facebook dla polskich patriotów'", [in:] chip.pl, September 27. Available [online]: <https://www.chip.pl/dzieje-si%C4%99/powstal-polfejs-facebook-dla-polskich-patriotow/>

<sup>21</sup> Luckert, S., "Extremists Are Thriving On Social Media. How Should We Respond?", [in:] huffingtonpost.com, Available [online]: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ste->

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