“Do social media challenge democracy?”1 This is what communication scientist Otfried Jarren asks in his recently published contribution to “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, thus pointing out to the dangers social media may pose for democracy. Once again, Jarren fuels the social-, political- and communications-scientific debate on the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic effects of social media on society and puts their potentials such as transparency, providing possibilities to interact and participate, which are discussed from different points of view, into question.2

Although Jarren – like so many other authors3 – has continuously pointed out to possible social-structural problems of the Internet,4 still today the new medium is connected to sometimes radical expectations for the future. Already in the debates of the 1990s there appeared the idea of a super medium uniting all other media and successfully realising all communications utopias.5 Debates on the democratic, participatory and interactive potential of social media support in particular the utopian thesis that they contribute to a general democratization of decision-making processes in society.6 It is undisputed that digitalisation has resulted in considerable social change when it comes to the structure of information and communication. Accordingly, not only a new way of making use of media has developed among recipients but at the same time the conditions necessary for public communication have changed. As a result of social media,

3 This is as, among others, media-sociologist Kurt Imhof has it. See Kurt Imhof, Demokratisierung durch Social Media? In: Imhof/Bonfadelli/Jarren (Eds.), Demokratisierung durch Social Media?, pp. 15–26. Also worth mentioning is Harald Welzer, whose focus in this respect is on discussing the power of digital corporations on which he sheds a capitalism-critical light. He warns against a new kind of totalitarianism. See Harald Welzer, Die smarte Diktatur. Der Angriff auf unsere Freiheit, Frankfurt a. M. 2016.
5 On this see among others: Hans J. Kleinsteuber, Der „Information Superhighway“. Amerikanische Visionen und Erfahrungen, Opladen 1996; Knut Hickethier, Einführung in die Medienwissenschaft, 2. Auflage, Stuttgart 2010, pp. 312–315. There, in particular Kleinsteuber shaped the idea that by help of one’s computer/the Internet one may communicate globally, state one’s mind at any time and may, by help of one’s computer and Internet connection, participate in worldwide knowledge.
communication in the public space has become much more multi-variant. Furthermore, the possibilities to interact and participate in the context of public communication have considerably been extended. Accordingly, Dan Gillmore was the first to call social media “many-to-many” media” which, he said, provide not least the opportunity to put an end to the traditional distribution of roles between producers and consumers. For example, the potential of social media is clearly, via different services such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat or YouTube, in spreading topics or contents among the public much faster and more effectively than classical mass media do, to discuss them there and to even found social movements which are of importance and are heard also outside the Internet (such as the “Fridays for Future” movement).

Accordingly, Ulrich Dolota understands social media not least as spaces of the development, organisation and mobilisation of social action and social protest. However, the question is which long-term effects may be achieved this way and in which ways this would affect society. Jürgen Habermas judges ambivalently on such possible effects and sums up: “The Web provides the hardware for the de-spatialisation of condensed and accelerated communication, but by itself it has no means to work against the centrifugal trend. For the time being, the virtual space lacks the functional equivalents to public structures which catch again, select and, in a revised way, synthesise the decentralised messages.” Thus, indeed social media provide the preconditions for the possible constitution of social, spatial or chronological sub-publics, but they are only partly capable of unfolding ways of selecting and deliberating which are important for democratic systems.

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7 Dan Gillmor, We the media. Grassrots Journalism by the People for the People, Sebastopol 2004, p. 270.
8 That the dissolution of the classical distribution of roles – in the sense of Brecht’s “radio theory” and Enzensberger’s dict of the unidirectional mass media being replaced by “network-like communications models” (Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien, 1970) – has only apparently come true is explained by Axel Bruns, among others. See Axel Bruns, Vom Prosumenten zum Produzenten. In: Birgit Blättel-Mink/Kai-Uwe Hellmann (Eds.), Prosumer Revisited. Zur Aktualität einer Debatte, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 191–205.
9 On this see generally: Jan-Felix Schrape, Kommunikation und Partizipation im Social Web. Eine Übersicht, Hagen 2015.
10 See Ulrich Dolata, Soziale Bewegungen. Die soziotechnische Konstitution kollektiven Handelns. In: Ulrich Dolata/Jan-Felix Schrape (Eds.), Kollektivität und Macht im Internet. Soziale Bewegungen – Open Source Communities – Internetkonzerne, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 39–69. There, Dolata critically discusses the technological infrastructures of social media as the foundation of the organisation and mobilisation of social protest. He comes to the conclusion that on the one hand indeed the technological infrastructures of social media allow for these new ways of protest but that, on the other hand, they must be considered regulation and action-structuring infrastructures with an enormous impact.
12 Deliberation according to Habermas refers to processes of political arguing. The normative understanding of deliberation Habermas developed understands deliberative
Analogously, Jan-Felix Schraper says that he understands social media as “paradigmatic meso-media” which, in contrast to classical mass media, are not capable of providing a level of an overarching description of the present and thus no arena for the general public. Accordingly, social media do “much for articulation [but] little for the debate”, as Otfrid Jarren has it. Thus, their way of understanding themselves is rather to function as platforms for debates. Classical mass media such as broadcast and press, on the other hand, contribute to creating a general public by way of which overall-societal debates and discourses may be stimulated which are necessary for maintaining a democratic system.

The above mentioned authors underline, in the positive sense, that due to extended possibilities of becoming networked the condensation of communication processes as well as the setting of agendas in the social media (as already addressed above) are crucially responsible for swiftly sending specific contents to a comparatively big number of users and for creating topic-specific spheres of meaning. On the other hand, to this way reach and create a general public, still the classical mass media are necessary, which take up the topics set by the social media and generate transcontextual points of reference. This becomes obvious, for example, by their way of dealing with Rezo’s YouTube video “Die Zerstörung der CDU” (2019) which, by an interplay with the classical mass media, triggered social and political dynamics and was thus able to, beyond the sub-publics, have effect on the general public and to initiate debates there. All in all, concerning the participatory potential of social media, in particular four discursive branches can be distinguished: firstly, discourses on state-organised, online-centred participation processes, secondly discourses on more recent civil society ways of mobilisation and participation, thirdly discourses on extended inner-organisational possibilities to adjust and coordinate, and fourthly discourses on using the Internet as a resistance medium under authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. It cannot be denied that in any case social media provide opportunities for social, cultural and economic innovations which previously required much more effort. However, to sustainably guarantee deliberation in democracies, it is not enough to press the “like”-button, says Jarren. In line with this, Schraper demands considering the relation of social media and mass media a “complementary coexistence” and thus a mutual interwovenness. Not least, social media should be included into
institutional political processes, as only this way an overall-societal usefulness of the communicative possibilities and participation opportunities becomes apparent and the risks for democracy can be limited.\(^{20}\)

The range of the current debate, which can only be roughly sketched here, shows the great challenges democracy faces in the context of dealing with social media. The four contributions of the here presented volume pick up individual focal points and put latest research results up for discussion. Of course, in this context it is not possible to completely depict running debates. Rather, the contributions aim at pointing out, by way of concrete empirical studies, to problem areas which are exemplary for the topical variety of the social media.

Carsten Reinemann (LMU München) in his contribution pursues at first the question of the extent to which particularly young people are confronted with most of all right-wing extremist contents on the Internet. That young people are a “particularly endangered” target group for extremist propaganda is undisputed – however, empirical case studies based on interviews and assessable data surveys are still a rarity in research. Based on his own studies,\(^{21}\) Reinemann demonstrates that the high presence of extremist contents in social media basically poses a great danger but that on the other hand young people adopt and reflect on the appropriate contents in different degrees. In his text Reinemann develops a user typology which makes obvious how much the respective environment of young people may be supportive for the individual perception of right-wing extremist contents. Many young people rather seldom encounter extremist contents in social media, however they find it more difficult to recognize them as such. On the other hand, there exists a small group being frequently and unreflectingly in contact with tight-wing extremist statements – in particular these young people must be feared to be further (cognitively) radicalized by the social media.

Independently of the individual adoption by users, it is no question that the spread of right-wing extremist contents via the social media has rapidly grown in the past few years. Maximilian Kreter (Hannah Arendt Institute) in his contribution analyses the situation for Saxony in the period 2011–2016. By way of the police files and court papers of convicted offenders from the right-wing extremist milieu, which have been assessed at the Hannah Arendt Institute in the context of an extended study,\(^{22}\) he demonstrates the great significance of social media for networking and organisation among the right-wing extremist scenes of Saxony. At the heart of his contribution there is the question of how the offenders have been ideologically influenced by the social media and how these ideologies are

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\(^{20}\) See Jarren, Fordern Soziale Medien die Demokratie heraus? Veto-Spieler und Populisten.


\(^{22}\) See Uwe Backes/Sebastian Gräfe/Anna-Maria Haase/Maximilian Kreter/Michail Logvinov/Sven Segelke, Rechte Hassgewalt in Sachsen. Entwicklungstrends und Radikalisierung, Göttingen 2019.
communicated there, in the course of which no coherent picture becomes obvious. Differentiation is needed most of all in view of individual radicalisation. How distinct the concepts of enemies are is different in each case, for example in case of statements by unorganised (single) perpetrators or by organised supporters of the extreme right. This holds also for the ideological worldview of the offenders, which is rather one-dimensional and less differentiated among unorganised perpetrators than among organised offenders.

In the past, the significance of social media for overall-societal opinion formation has frequently been discussed. However, hardly any other “case” has caused such a sensation than that of the above mentioned YouTube video “Die Zerstörung der CDU”. This case is analysed by Maren Schuster (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) and Matthias Völkel in their contribution. They are less interested in a facts-critical analysis of the video itself than in its media-theoretical classification. In how far is it possible to actually speak of “propaganda”, given that the video was published on the eve of the European elections, as some politicians and media representatives did to devaluate the statements made in the video? Which framing techniques did YouTuber Rezo use to communicate his criticism of the policy of the government parties to the widest possible and most of all young audience? The authors pursue these questions by way of basic theoretical considerations.

Rezo’s extremely much adopted video demonstrated the great mobilisation potential of the social media. If this is considered a blessing or a threat for democracy seems to be a pointless question, after all. In the future, all actors participating in the political process will have to deal much more with the communicative dynamics of the social media. At least it seems to be clear that any political regulation beyond the existing laws is no sustainable solution for reacting adequately to the challenges posed by the social media. In which developments this may result becomes obvious by the developments in China which are highlighted by Kristin Shi-Kupfer (Mercator Institute for China Studies, Berlin) in her contribution. Limited possibilities to make use of international sources of information, state regulation of social media, and the legal sanctioning of politically unwanted contents may result in the freedom of opinion and the plurality of opinions being radically restricted in the public space. Which measures in detail come to bear in this context is demonstrated by Shi-Kupfer by the examples of individual case studies. In the course of this it becomes obvious how the Chinese government, in the context of its “digital governance”, tries to establish a state-controlled public opinion – however it becomes also obvious where state censorship comes to its limits. A centralised control of digital communication proves to be difficult, as China depends on allowing at least partial liberalisation, among others in view of its international business partners. On the other hand, the most recent political troubles in Hong Kong show that the Chinese government is most committed with the fight for interpretational sovereignty.

All contributions of this volume provide impressive evidence that the current societal debate on the role and function of social media should not happen ac-
cording to a simplifying black-and-white pattern. Any optimistic-naïve support of open and as unregulated as possible communication on the Internet runs the risk of not recognizing the actual dangers which might result from this. However, also any negative-sceptical attitude towards any kind of interaction via social media does not look really helpful because it underestimates the social potential which might spread from Internet communication to the broad public. Finally the overall-societal structural change of society requires considering the relation between democracy and media, between state and society, in a new light. Also in the future we need a critical discourse taking the risks for a democratic system seriously while not ignoring the opportunities.

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