

Democracy and the Web

A New Player in the Field of Democratizing Politics?



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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction: A New Opiate of the Masses?	5
Chapter 1: What Is a Democratizing Force?	9
1.1 This Is Where the Obscurity Begins	10
1.2 Four Positions of Digital Democracy	11
1.3 Final Definition	13
Chapter 2: Two-way Traffic	14
2.1 Bowling or a Game of Tennis?	16
2.2 One-way Traffic in Practice	19
2.3 The Heart of the Campaign	23
2.4 Tweets and the Streets	27
2.5 Conclusion	29
Chapter 3: A Paved Web	30
3.1 Online and Offline personas	30
3.2 'Democratic' Measurements against Fake News?	33
3.3 Navigating via Platforms	34
3.4 Algorithms	36
3.5 PageRank	36
3.6 Filter Bubbles	38
3.7 Filtering by Hand	41
3.8 A Censorship Tool	43
3.9 We Are Equal but Some Are More Equal than Others	45
3.10 To Blog or not to Blog	49
3.11 Conclusion	51
Chapter 4: A Global Community	52
4.1 Statistics, Statistics, Statistics	53
4.2. Discussing	56

4.3 We Are Offenders	57
4.4 The Grandma Problem	58
4.5 Lazy	59
4.6 Conclusion	60
Conclusion	61
Sources and Bibliography	63

Abstract

The invention of the Web has influenced the world drastically. Talking in real-time to someone on the other side of the planet is no longer an issue. Also, consuming information has become a lot easier and quicker; think about checking the weather or the news while you are waiting at the bus stop. Network technology has affected almost every part of our lives and therefore, expectations are high when it comes to what the Web can do more. Evidence are the many claims about the Web being a democratizing force in the case of politics for instance.

The main question in this thesis is: To what extent does the Web as a thoroughly 'democratic' medium with its two-way traffic, helps the exchange of knowledge and thus is contributing to a democratic system in politics as much as its formal characteristics appear to promise? To answer this main question, this thesis will treat several questions first: What does a 'democratizing force' mean? And: What does it mean when someone claims the Web to be a democratizing force? With help from recent case studies, news articles and research in the field of new media, I tried to find answers to these questions.

The conclusion of the thesis in a nutshell: the Web has an open structure which gives people the chance to freely publish and spread their opinion without asking permission first to a middle-man. However, this open structure does not necessarily lead to the Web being a democratizing force in politics. The reason for this is threefold: the policy of the layers on top of the open Web, our behaviour and the behaviour of politicians.

Introduction

A New Opiate of the Masses?

'And we didn't just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped.[...]. We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy.' – Time Magazine chose 'You' as the Person of the Year in 2006.¹

'I just had to take the hypertext idea and connect it to the Transmission Control Protocol and domain name system ideas and – ta-da! – the World Wide Web.'² After his graduation from Oxford University, Tim Berners-Lee became a software engineer at CERN, the large particle physics laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland.³ Berners-Lee noticed that the computer scientists were having difficulty sharing information via different computers:

In those days, there was different information, on different computers, but you had to log on to different computers to get at it. Also, sometimes you had to learn a different program on each computer. Often it was just easier to go and ask people when they were having coffee...⁴

¹L. Grossman, 'You – Yes, You – Are TIME's Person of the Year', 25 December 2006, *Time Magazine* <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>> (10 December 2015).

²T. Berners-Lee, 'Answers for Young People' <<https://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/Kids.html>> (30 September 2016).

³J. Wright, 'Why the Man Who Invented the Web Isn't Rich', 8 August 2012, *The Atlantic* <<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/08/why-the-man-who-invented-the-web-isnt-rich/260848/>> (23 August 2016).

⁴World Wide Web Foundation, 'History of the Web' <<http://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/>> (23 August 2016).

As a solution, Berners-Lee married hypertext to the Internet and with this, he invented an imaginary information system which everyone could read no matter which computer he was logged on to. This invention became known as the World Wide Web, or simply as 'the Web', which is built on top of the Internet. The invention of the Web was central to the development of the Networked Computer Age which refers to the present use of computers and other devices in a linked network, rather than as unconnected, stand-alone devices as was the case before Berners-Lee's invention.⁵

The invention of the Web changed the world for good.⁶ One of the reason why this is the case and why *Time Magazine* chose 'You' as the Person of the Year in 2006, lies in the accessibility of the Web: while the traditional media (television, radio, books etc.) gave us an one-to-many pattern, the Web and its interactive Web 2.0 platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter gives us a many-to-many pattern.⁷ Clay Shirky, a consultant on the social and economic effect of Internet technologies, explains in one of his TED Talks that these interactive platforms have introduced the possibility of 'produsing': a consumer of Web content can also be a producer of such content at the same time.⁸ In just a few clicks, you can create a blog or social media account where you can air your opinion about a political candidate or certain policy. In other words: the stream of information flows no longer just from one side – from the media elites (television, publishers, radio) – because due to the network, everyone can publish without asking permission first.⁹ You can say that Darnton's

⁵T. Berners-Lee, 'Long Live the Web: A Call for Continued Open Standards and Neutrality', 1 December 2010, *Scientific American* <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/long-live-the-web/>> (20 July 2016).

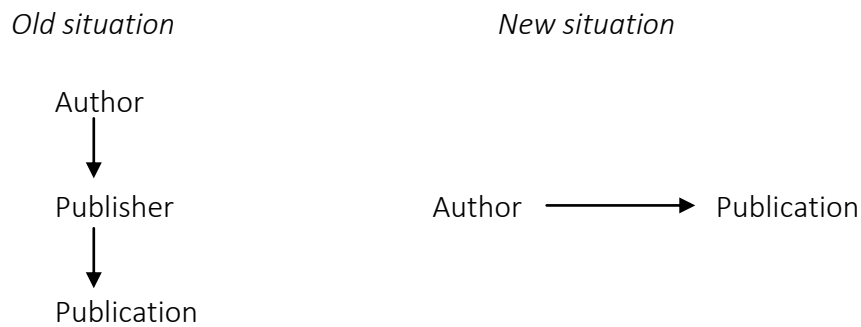
⁶J. Fallows, 'The 50 Greatest Breakthroughs Since the Wheel', November 2013, *The Atlantic* <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/11/innovations-list/309536/>> (10 December 2015).

⁷C. Shirky, 'How Social Media Can Make History', June 2009, *TED* <https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history?language=nl> (3 December 2015).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹M.T. Loveland and D. Popescu, 'Democracy on the Web', 15 February 2011, *Information, Communication & Society* <<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369118X.2010.521844>> (7

Communication Circuit is broken due to the Web. What has changed is simply this:



Thus, the middleman is eliminated and therefore, many people from all kinds of backgrounds saw 'a radically open, egalitarian and decentralized platform rising that could mean something [to politics]'.¹⁰ For instance:

Hillary Clinton, former United States Secretary of State:

The freedom to connect – the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the Internet, to websites, or to each other. The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate.¹¹

Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States:

The Global Information Infrastructure will not only be a metaphor for a functioning democracy, it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian Age of democracy [..].¹²

June 2016).

¹⁰T. Berners-Lee, 'Long Live the Web: A Call for Continued Open Standards and Neutrality'.

¹¹H. Clinton, 'Remarks on Internet Freedom', 21 January 2010, *The Financial Times* <<https://www.ft.com/content/f0c3bf8c-06bd-11df-b426-00144feabdc0>> (20 December 2016).

¹²A. Gore, 'Speech to the International Telecommunications Union', 21 March 1994, *International*

However, 'openness' in this sense hailed by many new media thinkers as the appropriate utopian ideal of our time, is also undeniably ambiguous as, for example, new media analyst Astra Taylor argues.¹³ Because to whom is the Web open? Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, said he designed Facebook – nowadays the number one Web application for many people in the world – to make the world 'more open and connected'.¹⁴ However, his company does everything it can to keep users within its confines and exclusively retains the data they emit.¹⁵ 'If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest, behind only China and India [...] and [it] has a richer, more intimate hoard of information about its citizens than any nation has ever had.'¹⁶ In other words, is there more behind this open structure than meets the eye?¹⁷

This thesis tries to shed light upon the question: To what extent does the Web as a thoroughly 'democratic' medium with its two-way traffic, helps the exchange of knowledge and thus is contributing to a democratic system in politics as much as its formal characteristics appear to promise? To reduce the scope of this thesis, this thesis will 'only' place the spotlight on democratization in relation to politics.

Telecommunication Union <http://cyber.eserver.org/al_gore.txt> (23 January 2014).

¹³A. Taylor, *The People's Platform* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014) p. 7.

¹⁴E. Staff, 'Mark Zuckerberg's Letter to Investors: The Hacker Way', 2 January 2012, *Wired* <<http://www.wired.com/2012/02/zuck-letter/>> (12 December 2015).

¹⁵A. Taylor, *The People's Platform*, p. 12.

¹⁶L. Grossman, 'Person of the Year 2010: Mark Zuckerberg', 15 December 2010, *Time Magazine* <http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2036683_2037183_2037185-9,00.html> (10 January 2015).

¹⁷A. Taylor, *The People's Platform*, p. 6.

Chapter 1

What Is a Democratizing Force?

'That a peasant may become king does not render the kingdom democratic.' – Woodrow Wilson, 28th president of the US (1914-21).¹⁸

John Perry Barlow, one of the founders of *The Electronic Frontier Foundation*, was one of the first who wrote about the democratic potential of the Web in the case of politics. In his famous 1996 manifesto *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* he claimed that no government has the right to apply laws to the Web:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.¹⁹

In just a few months' time, Barlow's paper became famous and was widely distributed. Besides Barlow, also other prominent personalities from all kinds of fields lauded the Web as the ultimate tool to foster tolerance and transform the planet into one great, wired and global village where political democracy would triumph.²⁰ 'As the World Wide Web went public, an utopian near-consensus about its likely impact seemed to bubble up out of nowhere.'²¹ This new ideology believed that the Web would have a democratizing effect on

¹⁸Lifehack, 'Quotes', <<http://quotes.lifehack.org/quote/woodrow-wilson/that-a-peasant-may-become-king-does/>> (22 May 2016).

¹⁹Electronic Frontier Foundation, 'A Declaration of Cyberspace' <<https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>> (19 December 2016).

²⁰E. Dyson, G.F. Gilder, G. Keyworth and A. Toffler, *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age* (Washington: The Progress & Freedom Foundation, 1994) p. 78.

²¹F. Turner, 'How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology: Lessons From the First Hackers' Conference', *Critical Cyberculture Studies: Current Terrains, Future Directions*, Vol. nr. 2 (2012), pp. 3-5.

politics. However, what is a democratizing force exactly and what does it mean in this thesis?

1.1 This Is Where the Obscurity Begins

Defining what it means when someone claims the Web to be a 'democratizing force' in case of politics, is not that easy to do. Mostly because there is no consensus about what it exactly means.²² Before moving on, I should therefore make clear first what I mean with a 'democratizing force' when referring to the Web.

'Democratizing' is derived from the word 'democracy'. 'Democracy', as Arend Lijphart describes in his *Patterns of Democracy*, has two basic forms which are widely recognized.²³ One form is called 'direct democracy', in which all eligible citizens have direct and active participation in the political decision making of their country. This form of democracy is quite impractical in countries that have over a million citizens.²⁴ Therefore, the other form, 'indirect democracy', in which political power is exercised indirectly through elected representatives, is mostly used in countries with a democratic system.²⁵ This form is also known as 'representative democracy'.²⁶ In other words, 'democracy' is a form of government which entails citizens' participation in the politics and the decision making of their country and contrasts, as Karl Popper once stated, with forms of government where power is either held by an individual, as in an absolute monarchy, or where power is held by a small number of individuals, an elite.²⁷ So as a logical result, a 'democratizing force in politics', in this case 'the

²²A Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 20-52.

²³*Ibid*, p. 12.

²⁴F. Hendriks, *Vital Democracy, a Theory of Democracy in Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 15-16.

²⁵*Ibid*, p. 20-21.

²⁶S. Alonso, J. Keane and W. Merkel, *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) p. 2-8.

²⁷W. Gorton, 'Karl Popper: Political Philosophy', 2010, *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/popp-pol/>> (10 December 2015).

Web', should mean something like a force that stimulates either – or both – the direct and indirect form of democracy. But what does this mean on a concrete level?

This is where the obscurity begins. The non-consensus about the effect of the Web on politics is to blame for the obscurity and the result is that there are many different meanings of and opinions about the concept around. Nonetheless, all these opinions can also provide grip on what a 'democratizing force' in the case of politics – in this thesis the Web – means. Lincoln Dahlberg has done research after the meaning of the Web being a democratizing force in politics, which he indicates as 'digital democracy', by drawing attention to what extending democracy through the Web means to many different people. He has created a framework in which he has divided all the different understandings.²⁸ The framework comprises four positions. With 'positions' he is grouping opinions together that share characteristics.²⁹ The positions are named 'Liberal-individualist', 'Deliberative', 'Counter-publics', and 'Autonomist Marxist'. In the following part I will explain each which is necessary because it helped me in shaping my own definition of what it means when someone claims the Web to be a 'democratizing force' in case of politics.³⁰

1.2 Four Positions of Digital Democracy

The 'Liberal-individualist' understands digital democracy as offering a means 'for the effective transmission of information and viewpoints between individuals and the representative decision-making processes'.³¹ The Liberal-individualists claim that the Web's democratic potential lies in its power to facilitate channels which enable and stimulate politicians and

²⁸L. Dahlberg, 'Reconstructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four 'positions'', *New Media & Society*, Vol. nr. 13 (2011), pp. 855-872.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.* pp. 860

citizens to communicate with each other to discuss politics and make policy together. This position claims also that citizens can inform themselves free of censorship or other constraints via these channels about politics. The Liberal-individualist position considers citizens as rationally calculating individuals who are actively seeking out information and know their 'own best interests'.³² If the Web's democratic potential lies in the Liberal-individualist position, then that would solve many problems that come with the traditional representative democracy. It would for instance solve the lack of transparency that the representative democracy is often accused of.³³ Some even call the so-called 'elephant tower' and the concomitant unfriendly bureaucracy the 'crisis' of the representative democracy.³⁴

'Deliberatives', referring to Dalhberg's second position, consider the Web a new public sphere for discussion and deliberation. While there is an overlap with the Liberal-individualists in the sense that citizens are considered rational beings that actively aim to inform themselves, the focus within this position is that there is more discussion between individuals which would break with the traditional voices of politics. If the Web's democratic potential lies in the Deliberative position, then that would also solve the transparency issue and moreover, people would be able and more importantly – willing – to determine the political agenda.

Two positions left: 'Counter-publics digital democracy' and 'Autonomist Marxist digital democracy' concerning, among other things, the potential for activism and the construction of a completely new society. 'The Counter-publics position emphasizes the role of digital media in political group formation [...] rather than rational individual action.'³⁵ This position

³²*Ibid.* pp. 856

³³C. M. Akrivopoulou, *Digital Democracy and the Impact of Technology on Governance and Politics* (New York: IGI Global, 2013), pp. xiv.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵L. Dahlberg, 'Reconstructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four 'positions'', pp. 860.

focuses on the bonding and solidarity with others. Just as the Deliberatives, they consider digital democracy as enabling voices excluded from dominant discourse in politics. Counter-publics try to team up with other excluded voices and help bring attention to their wishes and needs.³⁶ By making enough 'noise' Counter-publics believe they get noticed by and followed up in online and offline mass media.³⁷ 'Autonomist Marxists', the fourth position, believe that the Web can trigger a revolution in democracy: 'Democratic decision making is taking place through the collaborative, decentralized productivity of peer-to-peer networking.'³⁸

1.3 Final Definition

These four positions have overlap with each other and do not contradict. Therefore, and to avoid double work, I took these four positions together and formed my own definition of what a democratizing force in politics, the Web in this thesis, means. In this thesis it means three things that complement each other:

1. The Web facilitates channels which enable citizens and stimulates politicians to discuss the political agenda with each other and so make policy together.
2. The Web facilitates channels via which citizens can inform themselves about politics free of constraints.
3. The Web stimulates citizens to discuss and inform themselves about politics.

The other chapters in this thesis will discuss these three definitions and try to find out to what extent they are valid.

³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 862.

³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 863.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2

Two-way Traffic

'We've never lived in a world in which everyone and everything is connected: people have full access to the world's information, free communication everywhere, the ability to become educated in any field and express themselves and contribute however they can.' – Marc Andreessen, co-author of *Mosaic*, one of the first Web browsers, released in 1993.³⁹

For a long time, politics has been a message from a politician, distributed through mass media to citizens.⁴⁰ Politicians spoke through the media when and where it suited them, and the people were a large, passive audience.⁴¹ The only way to respond directly as an individual, was via a phone call but more likely via a letter which politicians could easily ignore.⁴² The interactive Web changed this one-way pattern. Today, due to social media that run on top of the Web – often mentioned in one breath with the invention of electronic mail – citizens have obtained a strong instrument that helps them to be active in politics; they can directly respond to a politician via their own account or via the public page of the politician.⁴³

Not only the possibility to respond directly in a very easy and quick way to a politician is what make 2.0 platforms a strong instrument for citizens to participate in politics, also the platforms' open structure contributes to this: the messages sent by citizens to a politician can be read by anyone and the assumption is therefore that these messages force politicians to

³⁹M. Andreessen, 'Marc Andreessen on the Web at 25: Embed the Internet', 6 February 2014, *Wired* <<http://www.wired.co.uk/article/marc-andreessen>> (14 December 2016).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹O. Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom & Political Space*, (Cambridge: Rand Corporation, 2013) p. 2-6.

⁴²D.O. Boguslaw and J. Garlicki, *Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013) p. 7-13.

⁴³J. Gainous and K.M. Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 8.

answer and think about their current policy.⁴⁴ Many claim that ignoring messages has hence become something of the past. Electronic mail is not public, but is low-cost and has drastically reduced the sent and receive time. All these factors taken together – easy to sent, low-cost and the openness – would help increase the number of conversations between politicians and citizens and thus the engagement of citizens with politics.⁴⁵

Politicians use Web 2.0 platforms as well to report about their daily work life which would help, as some claim, with making politics more transparent to citizens; it gives citizens an idea what happens behind the walls of the elephant tower.⁴⁶ Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President of the European Commission, and Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, are two examples of politicians who report almost on a daily basis about their work in the office. Mostly, they receive many reactions to their posts and as a result of that, some claim that this reporting stimulates a conversation between politicians and citizens.⁴⁷

However, one should ask oneself: Are 2.0 platforms and email truly stimulating a conversation? Are politicians responding to messages from citizens via social media and email? And is the other way around also the case: Are citizens sending messages? And if they do, do contain these messages political content? This chapter will investigate the definition: The Web facilitates channels which enable citizens and stimulates politicians to discuss the political agenda with each other and so make policy together. Citizens' behaviour in the online world will be discussed in detail in chapter 4. This chapter will mainly dive into the question whether the Web stimulates a conversation between the two and whether politicians are answering messages from citizens they receive via email or social media. These two factors

⁴⁴W.J. Grant, B. Moon and J. Busy Grant, 'Digital Dialogue?', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. nr. 10 (2010), pp. 41-54.

⁴⁵D. Linders, 'From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for Citizen Coproduction in the Age of Social Media', *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. nr. 29 (2012), pp. 446-454.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷W.J. Grant, B. Moon and J. Busy Grant, 'Digital Dialogue?', pp. 41-54.

could eventually lead to citizens and politicians making policy together or at least that citizens are more involved during the policy making process.

2.1 Bowling or a Game of Tennis?

Research has revealed that due to the invention of the Web the amount of mail sent to politicians quadrupled between 1995 and 2004 – 1995, and grew from 2004 steadily onwards.⁴⁸ A big question to answer in this chapter is: Are politicians really responding to the messages they receive via their email or via their 2.0 accounts? In other words: Are citizens playing a game of tennis in the online world with politicians or are they bowling which means that they do not receive a message back from them?⁴⁹ Let's start by investigating email traffic.

Several scientists have carried out research on the ratio email from citizen:response politician. Social scientist Christian Vaccari, for instance, sent emails to 142 political parties and presidential candidates to gauge how and if politicians responded.⁵⁰ He sent two emails to each party and candidate: one asked for the party or candidate's position on taxes, the other asked for information about how to get involved as a volunteer. At the end of his research, Vaccari reported that only one in five of his emails received a reply: the majority of the emails, almost two-thirds, went unanswered. His results can be visualized as follows:

⁴⁸D. Linders, 'From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for Citizen Coproduction in the Age of Social Media', pp. 446-454.

⁴⁹D.N. Sattler and V. Shabatay, *Psychology in Context: Voices and Perspectives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) p. 38-56.

⁵⁰A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 28-53.

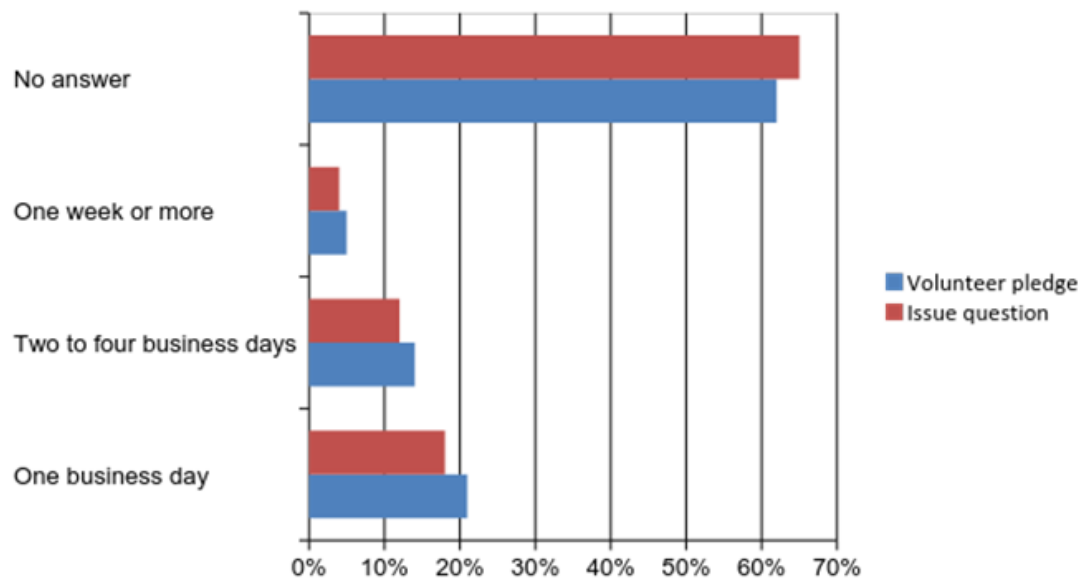


Figure 1 Do politicians respond to messages from citizens sent via email? And in case of 'yes', what is the time prospectus in which they respond?⁵¹

As one can deduce from the table: the response ratio is very low. Other research underline Vaccari's result: politicians are 'shy' when it comes to responding.⁵² One of the reasons that Vaccari gives for the low response rate is that incoming emails pose serious challenges for political organizations.⁵³ First, they take time and effort to respond to, especially if volumes are high. Secondly, answers need to be carefully crafted, and a reply that is inaccurate, offensive, or simply off message can easily be forwarded to the media or political competitor and cause unwanted embarrassment.⁵⁴ What also plays a part here, is that responding to questions or other sorts of messages while making laws, so when the law is not finished yet, can distort the negotiation with other parties. Therefore, politicians still prefer the 'old-fashioned way' of contacting citizens: via press conferences that are planned

⁵¹C. Vaccari, 'Most Political Parties Completely Fail to Respond to Email Enquiries, Wasting an Opportunity for Politicians to Reconnect with Voters Online' <<http://www.democraticaudit.com/2014/06/10/most-political-parties-completely-fail-to-respond-to-email-enquiries-wasting-an-opportunity-for-politicians-to-reconnect-with-voters-online/>> (10 December 2016).

⁵²L. Ezrow and T. Hellwig, 'Responding to Voters or Responding to Markets? Political Parties and Public Opinion in an Era of Globalization', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. nr. 58 (2014), pp. 816-827.

⁵³C. Vaccari, 'Most Political Parties Completely Fail to Respond to Email Enquiries, Wasting an Opportunity for Politicians to Reconnect with Voters Online'

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

when and where it suits the politician.⁵⁵ The result of representatives' fear, is that there is hardly no conversation between constituents and politicians via email and one can ask oneself whether the response ratio of electronic mail is that different in comparison to paper mail.⁵⁶

As one can expect, social media face similar problems as email. Hardly no politician responds on messages received via his public social media account due to the same fear. The open structure of social media platforms causes the fear to lose control over the message to be probably even bigger there than in the case of email.⁵⁷ Also the overload of messages plays a part in the low response rate.⁵⁸ Frans Timmermans even wrote the following text on his Facebook account:



Figure 2 Timmerman writes: I am curious about your thoughts. I will read each message, but I am not able to respond to each message and certainly not immediately. I count on your understanding.⁵⁹

⁵⁵B. Axford and R. Huggins, *New Media and Politics* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001) p. 6-11.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸P.N. Howard and M.M. Hussain, 'The Role of Digital Media', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. nr. 22 (2011), pp. 15.

⁵⁹F. Timmermans, 'Frans Timmermans Public Social Media Page' <<https://www.facebook.com/frans.timm>

2.2 One-way Traffic in Practice

So it looks like as if politicians are not very enthusiastic responders to messages they receive via social media or email. To find out more about how and if politicians respond to messages they receive via social media or email, this section will dive more deeply in the online behaviour of politicians. Angela Merkel's behaviour, current chancellor of Germany and the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is exemplary for how politicians act online.

Merkel has been admired for many of her decisions; she has also been criticized for many as well. One of these was her defence of the surveillance practices by the NSA. In the context of the 2013 mass surveillance disclosures she said that she defended her policy of supporting the NSA: 'The Internet is uncharted territory for us all'.⁶⁰ This statement led to various Internet memes and online mockery of Merkel, not only because many people disagreed with her defence of the surveillance practices, but also because the term she used to indicate 'uncharted territory' was 'Neuland' which refers to 'virgin territory'. On top of that, calling the Internet an undiscovered place was quite outdated; at the time, the Internet had already existed for more than two decades. In two days' time, the hash tag #Neuland was used more than 40,000 times not only to mock her language but also to stand-up against her policy.⁶¹ Some examples are:

ermans/?fref=ts> (12 December 2016).

⁶⁰C. Dewey, 'Merkel Calls Internet 'uncharted territory,' Earns Web's Endless Mockery', 20 June 2013, *The Washington Post* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/20/merkel-calls-internet-uncharted-territory-earns-webs-endless-mockery/?utm_term=.5ee59b963cbe> (17 January 2017).

⁶¹*ibid.*



Mock-ups also included an image of Merkel as Christopher Columbus landing in America, Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Star Ship enterprise hanging his head in shame, and a bespectacled pensioner peering in bewilderment at a computer screen. The message is clear: people responded via social media on an enormous scale and wanted Merkel to change her policy.

The question is, did Merkel respond to these social media messages and what did she post on her own page? The answer to this question is somewhat disappointing: Merkel did

not respond via her account at all. The only response she gave was via a traditional way, namely via her spokesman who said – nevertheless via Twitter – that Merkel was talking about a legal and political 'Neuland'.⁶²

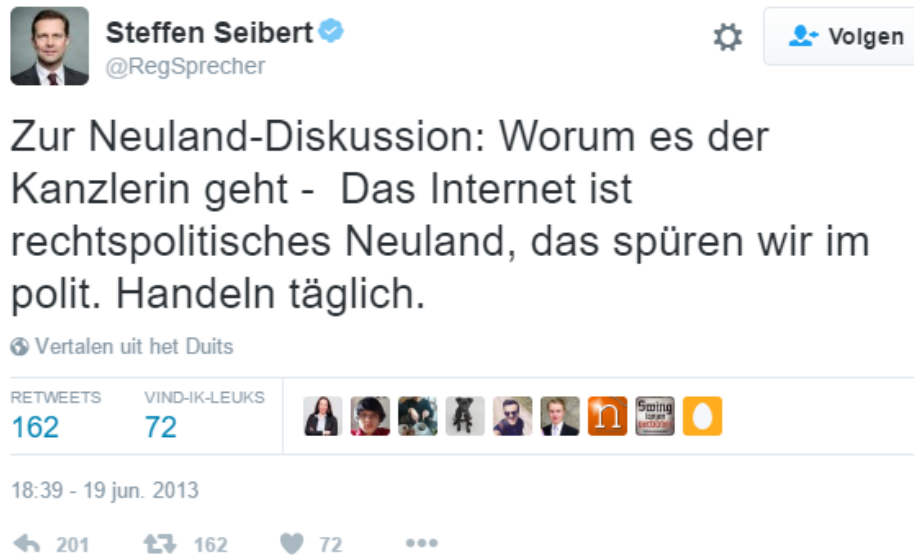


Figure 3 Steffen Seibert explains Merkel's statement.⁶³

Due to the many messages she received, Merkel did feel the pressure to send a response – via her spokesman – but Merkel did not change her point of view towards the U.S. cyber spying, she did not go into debate with citizens via social media, she did not even respond via her own account. She played just a game of bowling by leaving her own page blank just as if nothing ever happened and continued with carrying out her current policy.

In the years that followed, the NSA scandal reached the press several times due to new releases. Facebook and Twitter exploded every time new information came to light: people clearly disagreed with the NSA practices in Germany and thus clearly with Merkel's

⁶²Der Spiegel, 'Merkel Mocked for Calling Internet 'Neuland'', 20 June 2013, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/merkel-neuland-gaff-elicits-ridicule-and-goes-viral-on-twitter-a-906859.html>> (17 January 2017).

⁶³S. Seibert, 'Public Twitter Account of Steffen Seibert' <<https://twitter.com/regsprecher>> (1 February 2017).

policy.⁶⁴ An opinion poll showed that most Germans believed the trustworthiness of Merkel was seriously at stake: 62% of Germans said her credibility was in doubt.⁶⁵ This poll and the negative reactions on social media did not move Merkel to respond; neither via her social media account nor via a traditional press conference. Until 2015. Due to new releases, Merkel faced fresh demands for concrete action against Washington.⁶⁶ Her government started an investigation but dropped it several days later. German federal prosecutor Harald Range said in a statement that there was insufficient evidence to continue the investigation.⁶⁷ And that was it: no response on any other channel while Facebook and Twitter were in an uproar.

Of course there are exceptions, but the online behaviour of Merkel is typical for politicians, especially for those who belong to the top and make the final decision: politicians are afraid to lose control over their message as research from Vaccari among others has shown. So politicians chose to remain silent or chose to respond via their spokesperson to lead negative messages away from their profile as research by Pew Research Center reveals.⁶⁸ And if politicians respond directly they 'are using their direct messaging mainly as a way to push their message out'.⁶⁹ In other words: to reach people whom are not following their page yet. You can probably guess why politicians behave online to way they mostly do: their profiles are used as campaign material, the subject of the next section.

⁶⁴Der Spiegel, 'Europe Furious over US Spying Allegations', 24 October 2013 <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/angry-european-and-german-reactions-to-merkel-us-phone-spying-scandal-a-929725.html>> (17 January, 2017).

⁶⁵Der Spiegel, 'Deutsche Internetnutzer sind enttäuscht von Merkel', 1 August 2013 <<http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/studie-zum-nsa-skandal-deutsche-internetnutzer-enttaeuscht-von-merkel-a-914299.html>> (17 January, 2017).

⁶⁶A. Hall, 'Merkel under Pressure to act as It's Revealed that America Spied on German Magazine as well as Government', 4 July 2015, *Daily Mail* <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3149325/Merkel-pressure-act-s-revealed-America-spied-German-magazine-government.html>> (17 January, 2017).

⁶⁷L. Plaugic, 'Germany Drops Investigation into Claims the NSA Tapped Angela Merkel's Phone', 13 June 2015, *The Verge* <<http://www.theverge.com/2015/6/13/8775627/germany-angela-merkel-phone-tap-investigation>> (17 January 2017).

⁶⁸Pew Research Center, 'How Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media', August 2012, *Pew Research Center* <<http://www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media/>> (8 February 2017).

⁶⁹*ibid.*

2.3 The Heart of the Campaign

Thus, politicians are no big fans of responding in the online world. Why then, are there so many public social media accounts of politicians out there? Probably, there is no better way to explain than by analyzing the Tweet behaviour of current President of the U.S.: Donald Trump. Mr. Trump reacts via his account to opinions of others. He does not go into debate, but makes statement to end the 'conversation'.⁷⁰ His reaction to many who criticized his plans to build a wall between Mexico and the U.S. was for instance:

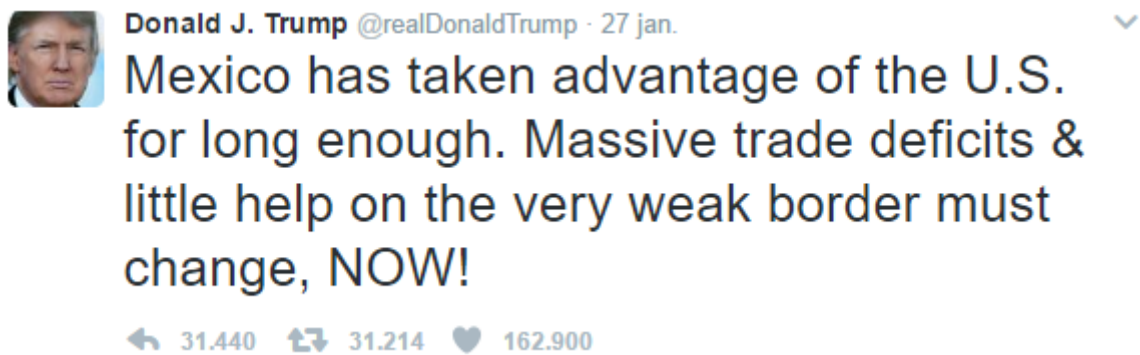


Figure 3 Trump's reaction on the protests of him building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Date: January 27, 2017.⁷¹

In his statement, Mr. Trump makes clear that there is no room for discussion and that he is not making plans to change his policy; what he does is defending his policy.⁷²

What is happening here is simply this: 'The social media platforms that were once heralded as democratic tools could also be used to undermine democratic norms'.⁷³ In other words: these social media channels are currently used to defend the current policy of the politician and not to converse with citizens and this current use undermines the norms that

⁷⁰G. Trushs and M. Haberman, 'Trump's Weary Defenders Face Fresh Worries', 20 March 2017, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/20/us/trump-obama-wiretap-comey.html?mwrsm=Email&_r=0> (24 March 2017).

⁷¹D. Trump, 'Public Twitter Account of Donald Trump' <<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump>> (1 February 2017).

⁷²G. Thursh and M. Haberman, 'Trump's Weary Defenders Face Fresh Worries' (15 April 2017).

⁷³A. Hess, 'Trump, Twitter and the Art of his Deal', 15 January 2017, *The New York Times* <<https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/arts/trump-twitter-and-the-art-of-his-deal.html?referer=https://www.google.nl/>> (17 January, 2017).

are assigned to a democratizing force (in this case the Web).⁷⁴ The Web does indeed facilitate channels which gives politicians and citizens the chance to converse but to be a democratizing force, a conversation between policy makers and citizens must taken place and that is not happening when social media channels are used as campaign material.

This sort of Twitter behaviour is not just typical for Trump, it happens everywhere. For instance, In the Netherlands. PVV leader Geert Wilders, is doing the same thing as Trump; in fact, his Twitter account is the heart of his campaigns as the *NRC Handelsblad* concluded after its research to Wilders' Tweet behaviour.⁷⁵ Further evidence for the claim that politicians use social media for their campaign can be found in Facebook's services.⁷⁶ Facebook offers tools and services developed to reach and recruit new supporters and potential donors for (presidential) campaigns.⁷⁷ And the proof that politicians use their account for these goals can be found in Facebook's profit: it was estimated that 2016 would bring Facebook roughly \$1 billion in online political advertising alone.⁷⁸

⁷⁴M.P. Lynch, *The Internet of Us* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016) p. 16-34.

⁷⁵C. Van de Wiel, 'Hoe Wilders via Twitter de revolutie voorbereidt', 24 February 2017, *NRC Handelsblad* <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/24/hoewilders-via-twitter-de-revolutie-voorbereidt-6975794-a1547658?utm_source=SIM&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Vandaag&utm_content=&utm_term=20170301> (1 March 2017).

⁷⁶J. Schelvis, 'Facebook weet heel veel van je en dat is handig in de campagne', 5 March 2017, *NOS* <<http://nos.nl/artikel/2161439-facebook-weet-heel-veel-van-je-en-dat-is-handig-in-de-campagne.html>> (11 March 2017).

⁷⁷A. Parker, 'Facebook Expands in Politics, and Campaigns Find much to Like', 29 July 2015, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/30/us/politics/facebook-expands-in-politics-and-campaigns-find-much-to-like.html?_r=0> (16 November 2016).

⁷⁸R. Respaut and L. Iberico Lozada, 'Slicing and Dicing: How Some U.S. Firms Could Win Big in 2016 Elections', 14 October 2015, *Reuters* <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-data-idUSKBN0N509O20150414>> (16 November 2016).



Figure 6 Facebook offers politicians tools and services to promote their political campaign in order to gain voters.⁷⁹

Thus, it seems that even though the number of messages sent to politicians has grown immensely, the behaviour of politicians frustrates the possible positive influence of the Web on political democracy.

One last thing should be addressed in this section. Because if politicians post a message on their social media account, what then is the content of the message? Well it seems that it is not always about politics. To gain voters, many politicians use their personality: they try to make people like them.⁸⁰ And this results into posts about their family, their family dog, cat or turtle. At times, this tactic can work for the politician to gain voters but is not very helpful to stimulate a conversation about politicians between citizens and politicians. Justin Trudeau places for instance many pictures of his family. Last Mother's day he posted on his Facebook page a picture of his wife and children:

⁷⁹Facebook, 'Tips for Politicians and Campaigns' <<https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/best-practices/tips-for-politicians-and-campaigns>> (16 November 2016)

⁸⁰D. Garzia, 'The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies: Causes and Consequences on Leader-Follower Relationships', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. nr. 22 (2011), pp. 697-709.



Figure 7 Justin Trudeau placed on Mother's day a picture of his wife with his children.⁸¹

A note to conclude this section; using your personal life to gain voters is not a new phenomenon that exists due to the Web. It was already around in the analogue area.⁸²

⁸¹J. Trudeau, 'Public Facebook Page of Justin Trudeau', <<https://www.facebook.com/JustinPJTrudeau/?fref=ts>> (16 May 2017).

⁸²D. Garzia, 'The Personalization of Politics in Western Democracies: Causes and Consequences on Leader-Follower Relationships', pp. 697-709.

2.4 Tweets and the Streets

However, what about the Arab Spring, which is for many exemplary for the power of the Web as an instrument that can engage citizens into politics by making a conversation between the two possible?⁸³

2010, Tarek al Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, sets himself on fire. Bouazizi's public death is by many taken as the beginning of the Arab Spring, a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world against oppressive regimes.⁸⁴ Protesters contacted each other via social media platforms which has led to the claim that these are 'tools of negotiation and dissemination'.⁸⁵

RAND-author Tkacheva Olesya conducted research during 2011-12 focusing on the role of social media during protests in Egypt and Syria. She also investigated China and Russia. Her research question was: What was the impact of social media on politics during these upheavals?⁸⁶ Her key finding was that these platforms have a 'mobilizing potential'.⁸⁷ 'Social media subsequently facilitated the coordination of protests throughout the countries by providing information about the day, place, names of opposition leaders who would head the demonstrations.'⁸⁸ However, did these tools make a conversation between political leaders and citizens possible which made on its turn the political leaders change their policy?

- Did Mubarak from Egypt change his policy due to massive protests in the online world? No. During the uprising the capital, Cairo, was described as a war zone and the

⁸³D. M. Faris, 'New Media and Democracy in the Arab World', *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, (2015), pp. 776-781.

⁸⁴A. Hassan, 'Fruit Vendor Whose Death Led to a Revolution', 17 December 2014, *The New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/16/us/arab-spring-a-fruit-vendor-who-started-a-revolution.html?ref=topics&_r=0> (17 January 2017).

⁸⁵A. Taylor, *The People's Platform*, p. 2.

⁸⁶*Ibid*, p. iii.

⁸⁷*Ibid*, p. 205.

⁸⁸*Ibid*, p. 207.

port city of Suez saw frequent violent clashes between the police and protesters.⁸⁹

The grim State Police, led by Mubarak, did everything in its reach to protect the regime. Also online, Mubarak banned several websites so that protesters could no longer be in touch with each other.

- Did Bashar al-Assad from Syria change his policy due to massive protests on social media? No. Since March 2011, Syria has been embroiled in an uprising against him, a crackdown that contributed to the Syrian Civil War and to Syria's becoming one of the most violent countries in the world. The Internet has been severely curtailed by the regime's tight censorship of online content; a ban on Facebook is the result of this among others.⁹⁰ People have been silenced and Assad is still on his throne.
- In China and Russia, the situation is still exactly the same as before the protests; the same leaders and parties are ruling these countries. The situation has gotten probably even worse, because social media platforms either have been banned or are controlled by the state.

The research also reveals that the empowerment provided by the Web was not uniform across different segments of society: social media protesters were mostly highly educated, 'the majority of protesters were white-collar professionals who were also active users of the Internet'.⁹¹ In Egypt, for instance, secular students and recent college graduates in urban areas formed the core of the protesters. Thus, just as in the offline world, there is also a divide in the online world. This gap is called the 'digital divide'. Skills are needed to work

⁸⁹ The Guardian, 'Protests in Egypt and Unrest in Middle East - as It Happened', 19 August 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global/blog/2011/jan/25/middleeast-tunisia#block-32>> (17 January 2017).

⁹⁰ O. Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom and Political Space* (New York: Rand Corporation, 2013) p. 205.

⁹¹ A. van Deursen and J. van Dijk, 'The Digital Divide Shifts to Difference in Usage', *New Media and Society*, Vol. nr. 16 (2014), pp. 210.

with a computer and to contact a politician, less educated people most often lack these skills.⁹² Chapter 3 will dive more deeply into the digital divide.

The conclusion of this discussion about the Arab Spring in the light of the democratic potential of social media channels is that social media facilitates the coordination of protests but does not necessarily encourage political leaders to converse with citizens.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the definition: The Web facilitates channels which enable citizens and stimulates politicians to discuss the political agenda with each other and so make policy together. We have seen that the basic technology of the Web is friendly towards democratic values which means that it indeed facilitates channels through which politicians and citizens can communicate with each other; Facebook and Twitter are examples of these channels.

However, politicians and citizens do often not have a real conversation in the online world. We have seen that politicians mostly do not reply on messages received via their public social media account and still prefer the traditional one-way-traffic. Also the chance that citizens receive a message back from a representative via email is small. Thus, the overall conclusion of this chapter is that the Web indeed facilitates channels through which politicians and citizens *can* discuss current policy, but unfortunately this conversation is not taking place.

⁹²*ibid.*

Chapter 3

A Paved Web

*'For all of its democratizing power, the Internet, in its current form, has simply replaced the old boss with a new boss and these new bosses have market power that, in time, will be vastly larger than that of the old boss' – Fred Wilson, co-founder of Union Square Ventures which invests in Web 2.0 platforms.*⁹³

In a recent interview in which John Perry Barlow reflects on his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* he says: 'We all get older and smarter'.⁹⁴ The interview has the fitting title: *John Perry Barlow 2.0*. The reason why he has come back on his Declaration will become clear in this chapter which will discuss the Web's algorithms, censorship and the digital divide in order to answer the question: Is the Web a reliable place to gather information about politics? This chapter will explore the second part of the definition given in chapter 1: the Web facilitates channels via which citizens can inform themselves about politics free of constraints. The chapter will start with what the previous chapter already began to discuss: politicians and their public social media page.

3.1 Online and Offline Personas

On the Web a phenomenon exists which can be best described as a gap between online personas and real-world personas.⁹⁵ Social media strengthen this phenomenon:

⁹³F. Wilson, 'Platform Monopolies', 13 July 2014, *Business Insider* <<http://www.businessinsider.com/platform-monopolies-2014-7?international=true&r=US&IR=T>> (16 September 2016)

⁹⁴B. Dorothy, 'John Perry Barlow 2.0 The Thomas Jefferson of Cyberspace Reinvents His Body -- and His Politics', August 2004, *The Reason* <<http://reason.com/archives/2004/08/01/john-perry-barlow-20/3>> (May 2016).

⁹⁵T. Chamorro-Premuzic, 'How Different Are Your Online and Offline Personalities?', 24 September 2015, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/sep/24/online-offline-personality-digital->

'social media like Facebook are based on the creation of personal profiles that describe the various roles of a human being's life.'⁹⁶ In other words: you can be what you want to be in the online world and leave out what you want to leave out. However, when you live in the public eye as politicians do, the parts that are omitted, stand out immediately.

What the previous paragraph points at, is that even though many politicians have a public social media account, that does not directly mean that these accounts are used to report objectively about what politicians do in their daily work life as an objective journalist would do if he would write an article about a certain political event. These accounts only show what the politicians, who control the account, want to reveal about their lives and work just like anybody else and most of the time this means that the negative parts are left out.⁹⁷ In the previous chapter, we have seen this phenomenon already in the case of Merkel.

Why is it important to mention (again) that politicians leave out the negative parts in the light of this chapter? The previous chapter placed the spotlight on the conversation between citizens and politicians, this chapter puts the light on the gathering of political information via the Web. So one can ask oneself, can a citizen inform himself about politics via these accounts? Well, not completely because only parts of reality are told. There is also another thing about how the Web is being used by politicians which impedes the gathering of objective political information for citizens. This phenomenon is mostly seen during election time.

The information that parties spread during elections, is not always correct.⁹⁸ Some political leaders exaggerate numbers, problems in society and even attack other parties with

identity> (16 November 2016).

⁹⁶C. Fuchs and D. Trottier, *Social Media, Politics and the State* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014) p. 15.

⁹⁷T. Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) p. 30-76.

⁹⁸K. Rogers and J. Engel Bromwich, 'The Hoaxes, Fake News and Misinformation We Saw on Election Day, 8 November 2016, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/debunk-fake-news-election-day.html?_r=1> (20 November 2016).

incorrect facts.⁹⁹ The campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are exemplary for this phenomenon. In the worst case, trolls are used, a person that operates under a fake account and spreads positive news about the political party and attacks the counterparty and by doing this, he tries to influence people's opinion.¹⁰⁰ In the Netherlands, for instance, an outcry broke out because the political party 'Denk' used them during their campaign.¹⁰¹ In China, another example, the government has an entire army of 'happy citizens'. A team of researchers from Harvard discovered that the Chinese government fabricates and posts about 448 million social media comments a year in favour of itself.¹⁰² These 'people' do not only spread fake news, but also try to distract in case the government is under attack. Scientists say that there are also signs of distraction noticeable when analyzing Trump's tweet behaviour.¹⁰³



Figure 8 A Whatsapp conversation between members of Denk in which they decide to use a troll.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ M. Hildebrandt, *Smart Technologies and the End(s) of Law* (Cheltenham: Edwar Elgar Publishing, 2015) p. 30-77.

¹⁰⁰ NOS, 'Trollen is een politieke vorm die we nog niet kenden in Nederland', 11 February 2017, <<http://nos.nl/artikel/2157631-trollen-is-een-politieke-vorm-die-we-nog-niet-kenden-in-nederland.html>> (11 February 2017).

¹⁰¹ A. Kouwenhoven, 'De trollen van Denk', 10 February 2017, *NRC Handelsblad* <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/10/de-trollen-van-denk-6641045-a1545547?utm_source=SIM&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Vandaag&utm_content=&utm_term=20170328> (11 February 2017).

¹⁰² G. King, J. Pan and M.E. Roberts, 'Reverse-engineering Censorship in China: Randomized Experimentation and Participant Observation', *Science*, Vol. nr. 345 (2014) n.pag.

¹⁰³ R. Wolffe, 'Out of Control? Or Is Trump's Tweeting Designed to Distract?' 4 March 2017, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/04/donald-trump-tweeting-designed-to-distract-russia-obama>> (20 March 2017).

¹⁰⁴ A. Kouwenhoven, 'Nepaanhang online actief voor Denk', 10 February 2017, *NRC Handelsblad* <<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/10/nep-aanhang-online-actief-voor-denk-6642349-a1545568>> (11 February 2017).

And what about the bots, software developed to automatically do tasks online, used by political parties as a means for gaming online polls and artificially inflating social-media traffic?¹⁰⁵ Of course, the spreading of false news impedes the information gathering process for citizens.

At this point, it is important to note that the phenomenon of spreading false rumours and facts is as old as daylight think about propaganda etc.¹⁰⁶ So you can ask yourself, is the situation nowadays, when it comes to the gathering of objective political information without constraints, really that different from the analogue era? When looking at the bots and trolls we can conclude that that is not really the case.¹⁰⁷

3.2 'Democratic' Measurements against Fake News?

At this point, we arrive at the hot topic of 'fake news' distributed, not only by politicians during election time as seen in the previous section, but also by all sorts of companies, organizations and individuals to impede what is happening in the political field. Fake news, as Sundar Pichai the chief executive of Google, explains, can influence elections, because fake news can influence people's opinion about a party.¹⁰⁸ Measurements are taken against this phenomenon but you can question whether these are that democratic:

- Ms. Merkel has said she is considering plans to force social networks to make public how they rank news online. If social media companies refuse to cooperate, she

¹⁰⁵D. Guilbeault and S. Woolley, 'How Twitter Bots are Shaping the Election', 1 November 2016, *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/11/election-bots/506072/?utm_source=feed> (20 March 2017).

¹⁰⁶K. Rogers and J. Engel Bromwich, 'The Hoaxes, Fake News and Misinformation We Saw on Election Day.

¹⁰⁷S. Kennedy, 'All the News that's (Un)Fit', *Information Today* Vol. nr. 34 (2017), pp. 8.

¹⁰⁸K. Ahmed, 'Google Commits to 1bn UK Investment Plan', 15 November 2016, *BBC News* <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-37988095?ocid=socialflow_twitter> (20 March 2017).

considers fines or even bans.¹⁰⁹

- Some African countries have banned the use of Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter before elections.¹¹⁰
- Indonesia's government has closed sites that it says promote fake news, though experts say some portals were also targeted for political reasons.¹¹¹

3.3 Navigating via Platforms

Besides visiting social media pages controlled by politicians, the Web provides other ways as well to inform yourself about politics. For instance: many objective newspapers and news channels have a social media page and website which you can visit to read about politics. So yes, we can objectively inform ourselves about politics via the Web – but we have to ask ourselves: How do we gain access to these pages and websites? At this point, the famous saying of David Weinberger pops up: 'The Internet has been paved. You can spend an entire lifetime on the Internet and never feel its loam between your toes'.¹¹² What does he mean by this?

A visit to tracking sites Quantcast and Alexa teaches us that we navigate on the Web via platforms. Quantcast and Alexa rely on tracking pixels that website owners install on the pages of their sites to measure audience data, which is then used to compile a detailed

¹⁰⁹NOS, 'Duitse kabinet wil boetewet tegen socialmediabedrijven', 5 April 2017, <<http://nos.nl/artikel/2166669-duitse-kabinet-wil-boetewet-tegen-socialemediabedrijven.html>> (20 March 2017).

¹¹⁰H. Matfess, 'More African Countries Are Blocking Internet Access During Elections', 1 June 2016, *Wired* <<https://qz.com/696552/more-african-countries-are-blocking-internet-access-during-elections/>> (20 December 2016).

¹¹¹P. Mozur and M. Scott, 'Fake News in U.S. Election? Elsewhere, That's Nothing New', 17 November 2016, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/technology/fake-news-on-facebook-in-foreign-elections-thats-not-new.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0> (20 December 2016).

¹¹²D. Weinberger, 'The Internet that Was and Still Could Be', 22 June 2015, *The Atlantic* <<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/06/medium-is-the-message-paradise-paved-internet-architecture/396227/>> (May 2016).

picture of Web audience per website.¹¹³ At the top of both Quantcast's and Alexa's list, there are search engines and social media channels:





RANK	SITE	
1	 google.com	1 Google.com Enables users to search the world's information, including webpages, images, and videos. Offers... More
2	 youtube.com	2 Youtube.com User-submitted videos with rating, comments, and contests.
3	 hrblock.com	3 Facebook.com A social utility that connects people, to keep up with friends, upload photos, share links and ... More
4	 facebook.com	4 Baidu.com The leading Chinese language search engine, provides "simple and reliable" search exp... More

Figure 9 left Quantcast's top 4 and right Alexa's top 4 of mostly visited pages.

What this data means is that we use platforms to start our journey on the Web. Via these platforms we explore the online world. To be clear: these platforms are not the Web, they are built on top of the open Web as Weinberger argues in his famous phrase.¹¹⁴

These platforms, Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, YahooSearch and so forth have one thing in common and that is that they are all companies. One of most companies' goals is to make profit otherwise they can't exist.¹¹⁵ And how can these platforms make profit? By attracting customers. And what do customers want when they browse the Web? 'You want

¹¹³J. Ball, 'Quantserve (Quantcast): What Is It and What Does It Do?' 23 April 2013, *The Guardian* <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/apr/23/quantcast-tracking-trackers-cookies-web-monitoring>> (14 January 2017).

¹¹⁴D. Weinberger, 'The Internet that Was and Still Could Be'.

¹¹⁵E. Papke, *True Alignment: Linking Company Culture with Customer Needs for Extraordinary Results*, (New York: AMACOM, 2013) p. 55-70.

the answer, not trillions of Web pages.¹¹⁶ To give their customers what they want, these platforms use algorithms.

3.4 Algorithms

In this thesis, an algorithm is a step-by-step set of operations to be performed which exists of calculations that solve a 'computational problem'.¹¹⁷ The Web gives us access to large amounts of information. The platforms on top of the Web want their visitors, their customers, to be satisfied and therefore, algorithms are the helping hand.¹¹⁸ There are many algorithms active on the Web: Google only relies on more than 200 unique ones to make it possible to guess what you might really be looking for.¹¹⁹ Therefore, this thesis will only discuss two kind of algorithms just to give an impression of algorithms' influence on the online world and on the gathering of political information.

3.5 PageRank

Probably the most famous algorithm when it comes to search engines is the group of algorithms based on hyperlinks.¹²⁰ Google's PageRank, developed by its founding fathers Larry Page and Sergey Brin is a good example of such a group.¹²¹ PageRank determines the relevance of websites based on the number and quality of its incoming links, also known as

¹¹⁶Google, 'Algorithms' <<https://www.google.com/insidesearch/howsearchworks/algorithms.html>> (May 2016).

¹¹⁷T.H. Cormen, C.E. Leiserson, R.L. Rivest and C. Stein, *Introduction to Algorithms* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009) p. 5.

¹¹⁸E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York/London: Penguin, 2011) p. 14-16.

¹¹⁹Google, 'Algorithms', (May 2016).

¹²⁰A.N. Langville and C.D. Meyer, *Google's PageRank and Beyond: The Science of Search Engine Rankings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 25-30.

¹²¹A. Keen, *The Internet is not the Answer* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015) p. 53.

'inbound links'.¹²² A hyperlink to a page counts as a vote of support. The more prominent the status of the page that makes the link, the more valuable the link is: the website rises on the search results page.¹²³ The higher the website rises on the results page, the more important the website becomes because as Karine Nahon, an associate professor in the Information School at the University of Washington, explains: 'Whatever they give us on the first page, this is what you're going to digest'.¹²⁴ The result of this algorithm group is that a winner-takes-all structure exists in which only the big receive visitors and thereby only become bigger.¹²⁵ Chapter 4 will dive more deeply into this winner-takes-all structure and people's behaviour on the Web.

For now, in the light of gathering information without constraints, it is important to note that this group of algorithms cause that only a small portion of websites receive a lot of attention from search engines like Google. While the vast proportion of all Web content does not. This can be disadvantageous for Web users when they try to inform themselves about a certain political topic, for instance when not all views about a topic are shown on the same level; on which results page a view appears can influence someone's opinion because only a small portion of Internet users clicks beyond the first results page which will become clear in the next chapter

¹²²S. Levy, *In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works and Shapes Our Lives* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011) p. 22.

¹²³*Ibid.*

¹²⁴B. Ristow, *The New Gatekeepers: Controlling Information in the Internet Age* (London: Center for International Media Assistance, 2013) p. 13.

¹²⁵S. Yang and A. Ghose, 'Analyzing the Relationship Between Organic and Sponsored Search Advertising: Positive, Negative, or Zero Interdependence?', *Marketing Science*, Vol. nr. 29 (2010), pp. 607-608.

3.6 Filter Bubbles

The second very powerful group of algorithms are those that create personalized bubbles.¹²⁶

A filter bubble is the result of tracing software.¹²⁷ Thus, when a user browses the Web, he will see those websites first which suit his preferences best according to his search history and past click behaviour.¹²⁸

So what is the constraint caused by algorithms based on personalization? Due to the filter bubble, users do not get exposed to information that could challenge or broaden their worldview.¹²⁹ The search results will become increasingly homogeneous and users can become isolated in their own cultural and ideological bubbles.¹³⁰ Andrew Keen, writer of *The Cult of the Amateur* states it as follows:

I think the Internet is a reflection of an increasingly fragmented world, an increasingly — ironically, given that we're supposed to be living in this social media age, an increasingly lonely, fragmented, isolated age, in which we sit in front of our computers, we have less and less physical contact with everybody else, and we are more and more convinced of our own ideas.¹³¹

A good example of what this looks like in practice is Facebook's timeline during the 2016 elections in the U.S.¹³² Based on your activity, Facebook's algorithms place you somewhere in

¹²⁶E. Pariser, 'Beware Online Filter Bubbles', 2011, *TED* < http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en > (11 December 2014).

¹²⁷T. Libert, 'Exposing the Hidden Web: An analysis of Third-party HTTP Requests on One Million Websites', *International Journal of Communication* (2015), pp. 2

¹²⁸R. Schroeder, *Big data and Communication Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 4.

¹²⁹H.J. Kamps, 'Facebook's News Feed Is Changing Again to Prioritize Sites You Actually Read', 21 April 2016, *Techcrunch* <https://techcrunch.com/2016/04/21/facebook-news-is-new/?sr_share=twitter> (20 December 2016).

¹³⁰E. Pariser, 'Beware Online Filter Bubbles'.

¹³¹A. Keen, *The Internet is not the Answer*, p. 233.

¹³²A.C. Schmidt, 'Anatomy of News Consumption on Facebook', *PNAS*, Vol. nr. 12 (2017), pp. 3035-3039.

the political spectrum.¹³³ For instance, if you like the page of Hillary Clinton, Facebook categorizes you as 'liberal'. However, in case you do not like any political candidate's page, if most of the people who like the same pages that you do — such as Ben and Jerry's ice cream — identify as liberal, then Facebook might classify you as one, too.¹³⁴

What is the result of this classification system? *The Wall Street Journal* and *Science* questioned that as well and together they conducted research on what people saw on their timeline during the preamble of the U.S. elections of 2016.¹³⁵ The result was that people who were classified by Facebook as 'conservative' saw more conservative posts and posts that were negative about liberal candidates or views.¹³⁶ Also the other way around was true:

¹³³J.B. Merrill, 'Liberal, Moderate or Conservative, See How Facebook Labels You', 23 August 2016, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/us/politics/facebook-ads-politics.html?_r=1> (20 December 2016).

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵The Washington Post, 'Blue Feed, Red Feed', October 2016, *The Washington Post* <<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/#/trump>> (20 December 2016).

¹³⁶F. Manjoo, 'Facebook, A News Giant That Would Rather Show Us Baby Pictures', 29 June 2016, *The New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/technology/facebook-a-news-giant-that-would-rather-show-us-baby-pictures.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=1> (20 December 2016).

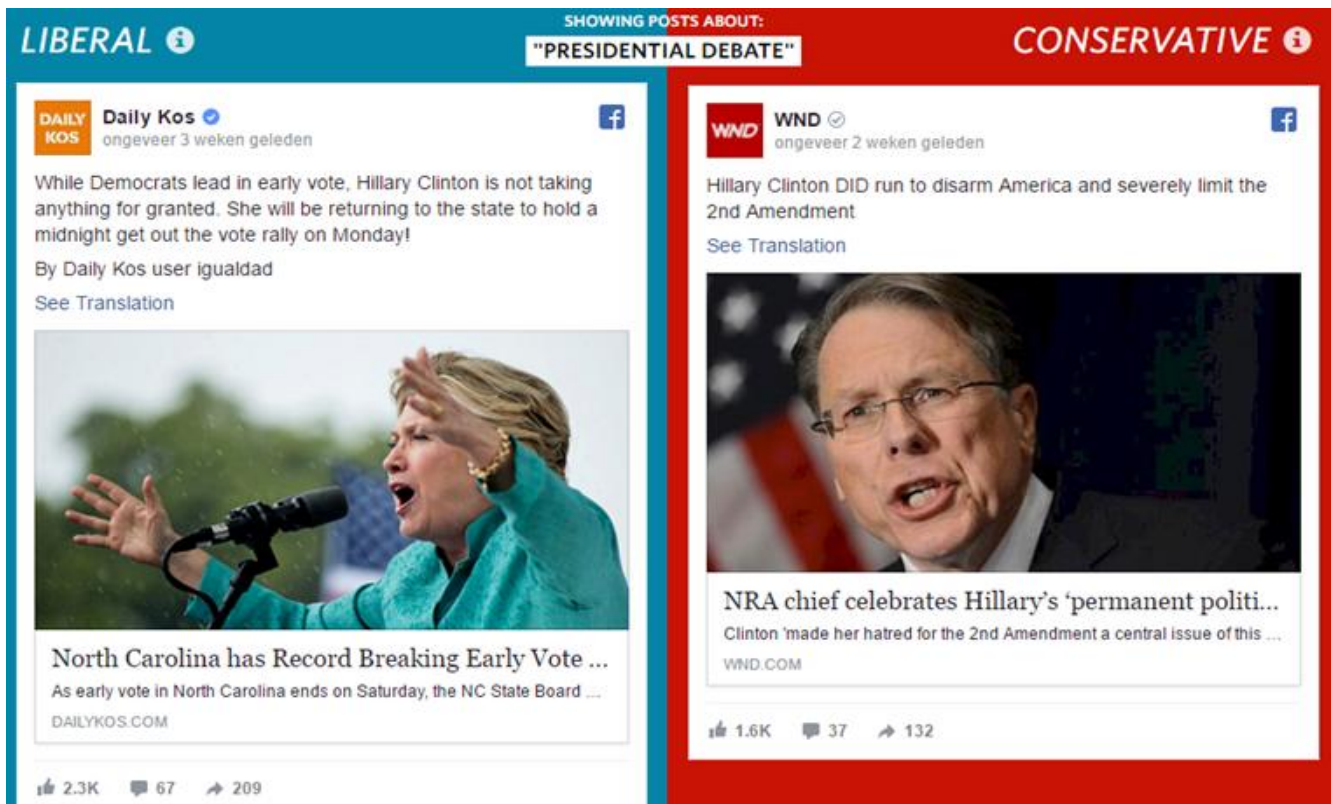


Figure 10 A screenshot of what sort of posts 'liberals' saw on their timeline (left) and what 'conservatives' saw on their timeline.¹³⁷

The increasing polarization of news and advertisements through social media like Facebook allows liberals and conservatives to live in different versions of reality.¹³⁸ Research by *MIT Media Lab* has visualized the different bubbles and explains why, when Donald Trump swept to victory in the Electoral College, mostly journalists, who had largely bought into the polls showing Hillary Clinton was consistently several percentage points ahead in key swing states, were caught by surprise.¹³⁹ Journalists spend many hours on Twitter, and their information bubble rarely includes Trump supporters. MIT's analysis — which used Twitter's complete data set — shows that on Twitter, Trump supporters formed a particularly insular

¹³⁷The Washington Post, 'Blue Feed, Red Feed',

¹³⁸T. Berners-Lee, 'How Social Media Creates Angry, Poorly Informed Partisans', 26 October 2016, VOX <<http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/26/13413292/social-media-disrupting-politics>> (20 December 2016)

¹³⁹A. Thompson, 'Parallel Narratives', 8 December 2016, *Vice* <<https://news.vice.com/story/journalists-and-trump-voters-live-in-separate-online-bubbles-mit-analysis-shows>> (20 December 2016).

group when talking about politics during the general election. They had few connections to Clinton supporters or the mainstream media. By contrast, Clinton supporters were more splintered and verified journalists often overlapped within their mutual follower network:

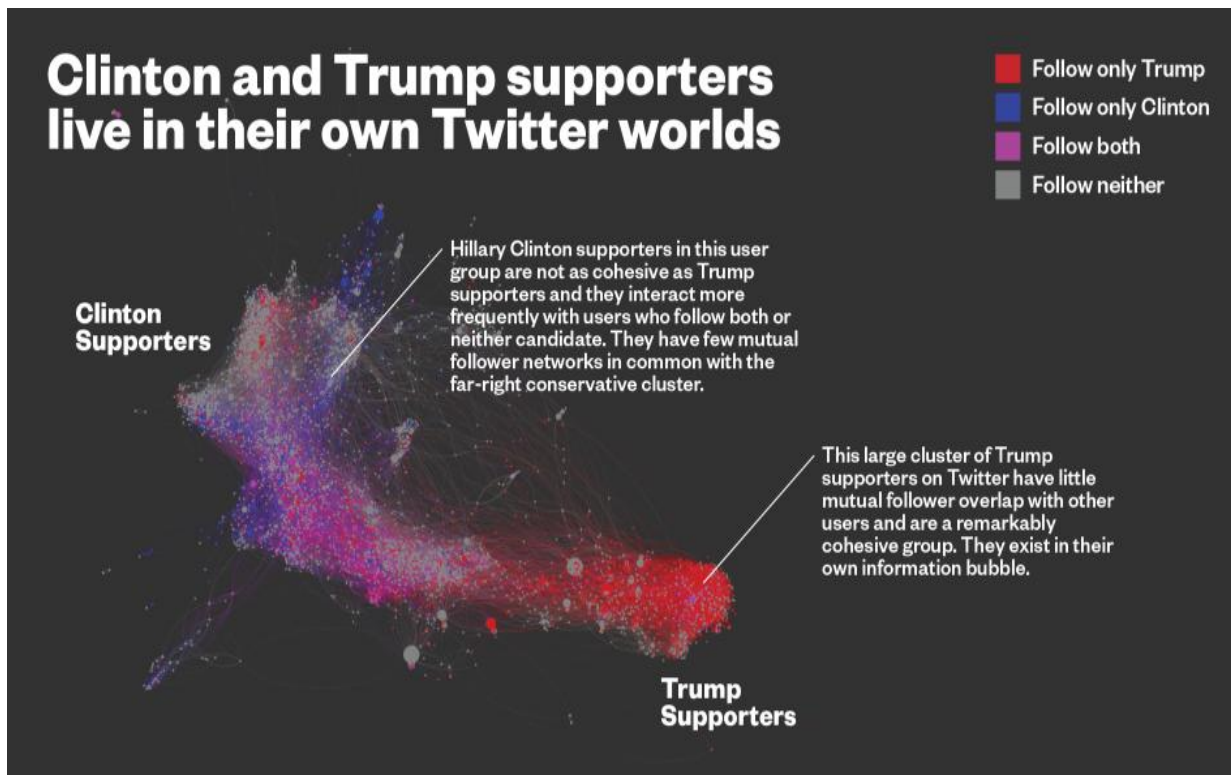


Figure 11 The visualization of the filter bubble.¹⁴⁰

Ultimately it may be clear that this separation is a constraint when it comes to informing yourself about politics via the Web.¹⁴¹

3.7 Filtering by hand

Besides the algorithms, these platforms on top of the open Web use another way of filtering: filtering by hand. It has been estimated that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. have a massive labor force that handles content moderation: the removal of offensive material such as for

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁴¹A.L. Schmidt, 'Anatomy of News Consumption on Facebook'.

instance, racism and pornography but also political information.¹⁴² These platforms have established their guidelines on the basis of the preference of their users. Some call this 'the Grandma Problem'. Chapter 4 will dive more deeply into our preferences and how they cause a constraint when it comes to informing yourself via the Web about politics. For now, in the light of constraints on political information in the online world, it is important to note that platforms like search engines and Facebook are frequently applying the concept of censorship not only with the help of algorithms, but also with an entire army of workers and that is of course a constraint when you want to inform yourself.

An example of the consequence of filtering by hand can be illustrated with Google's censoring of the video *Innocence of Muslims*. 'With violent reactions taking place throughout the Arab World, Google decided on its own, in September 2012, to block the video from YouTube in Egypt and Libya.'¹⁴³ There was no request from a legitimate court or government to delete the video from YouTube in these two countries. Google declared that the reason behind the censoring was based on the very difficult situation in Egypt and Libya at the time.¹⁴⁴

However, it also happens quite often that search engines and social media platforms are forced by governments to remove content – if they don't, then the government shuts the platform down. The platforms are more or less forced to apply censorship. An example is the disablement of the Facebook accounts of four editors of the *Shehab News Agency* and three executives from the *Quds News Network*. Both Shehab and Quds cover news in the occupied Palestinian territories, and their Facebook pages have 6.3 million and 5.1 million likes,

¹⁴²A. Chen, 'The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings out of Your Facebook Feed', 23 October 2014, *Wired* <<https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>> (21 December 2016).

¹⁴³B. Ristow, *The New Gatekeepers: Controlling Information in the Internet Age*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁴B. Bosker, 'What Google Isn't Telling Us About the Video It's Banned in 5 Countries (And Counting)' 18 September 2012, *The Huffington Post* <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bianca-bosker/google-youtube-innocence-of-muslims_b_1893623.html> (11 March 2017).

respectively. Even though the editors were given no explanation for the suspension, it is believed that they were linked to a recent agreement between Israel and Facebook to crack down on content that incites violence.¹⁴⁵ The Israeli government says online incitement has driven a wave of Palestinian street attacks over the past year, and it has called on Facebook to do more to police its platform. In June 2016, the Israeli Justice Ministry drafted legislation that would force Facebook, Twitter, and other Web companies to remove content that incites terrorism, otherwise the government would shut these platforms down.¹⁴⁶

3.8 A Censorship Tool

The pressure by governments goes even a bit further. Facebook has quietly developed software to suppress posts from appearing in people's news feeds in specific geographic areas. The censorship tool was created to help Facebook get into China, a market where the social network has been blocked.¹⁴⁷ The software enables the Chinese government to monitor popular stories and topics that bubble up as users share them across the social network. The government would then have full control to decide whether those posts should show up in users' feeds.

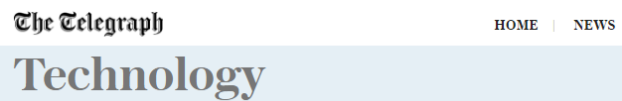
Besides these agreements between governments and Web platforms, it also happens quite often that governments censor websites of news channels or entire platforms without warning. For instance, in December 2016, the Turkish government censored the website and

¹⁴⁵A. Toor, 'Facebook Accused of Censoring Palestinian Journalists', 26 September 2016, *The Verge* <<http://www.theverge.com/2016/9/26/13055862/facebook-israel-palestinian-journalists-censorship>> (11 March 2017).

¹⁴⁶T. Cohen, 'Israel Eyes Law to Remove Online Content Inciting Terrorism', 22 June 2016, *Reuters* <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-security-socialmedia-idUKKCN0Z817O>> (11 March 2017).

¹⁴⁷M. Isaac, 'Facebook Said to Create Censorship Tool to Get Back into China', 22 November 2016, *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/technology/facebook-censorship-tool-china.html?ref=technology&_r=0> (11 March 2017).

app of the NOS, the Dutch public news channel, because it showed images of the killing of the Russian ambassador, Andrej Karlov, in Ankara.¹⁴⁸ Thus, censorship is not just something far away and long ago, but is alive and kicking:



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Turkey blocks access to WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter



BBC Sign in News Sport Weather Shop Earth Travel

NEWS

Home Video World UK Business Tech Science Magazine Entertainment &

French government orders website block

HOME SEARCH

The New York Times

EUROPE

Russia Blocks Web Content Amid Tension Over Ukraine



theguardian

sport football opinion culture business lifestyle fashion environment tech travel all sections

europa US americas asia australia africa middle east cities development

North Korea announces blocks on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

¹⁴⁸NOS, 'NOS op Internet geblokkeerd in Turkije', 21 December 2016 <<http://nos.nl/artikel/2149479-nos-op-internet-geblokkeerd-in-turkije.html>> (11 March 2016).

3.9 We Are Equal but Some Are More Equal than Others

Besides censorship, there are also other forces in the online world that form constraints when it comes to the gathering of political information, which brings us to the digital divide. If you want access to the Web, you only need a device and an Internet connection. However, for some, buying such a device is expensive and in some parts of the world, Internet access is very expensive. This is called the 'digital divide'. In this thesis, the digital divide means three things:

- 1) The gap between regions that have access to the Internet and those that do not have Internet access¹⁴⁹
- 2) Affordance of devices and Internet costs
- 3) The possession of digital skills¹⁵⁰

The first one needs little explanation; even though the gap between those areas that do and do not have access to the Internet diminishes, there are still areas in the world that have limited access to the Internet as this map shows:

¹⁴⁹P. Norris, *Digital Divide, Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 12-22.

¹⁵⁰A. van Deursen and J. van Dijk, 'The Digital Divide Shifts to Difference in Usage', *New Media and Society*, Vol. nr. 16 (2014), pp. 210.

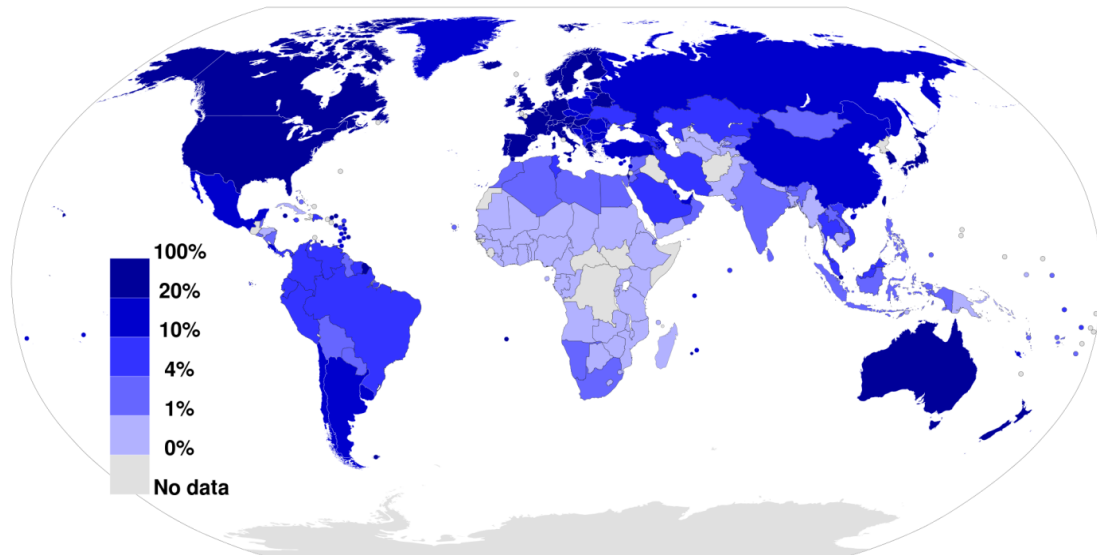


Figure 13 In the dark blue areas, Internet coverage is between 20 and 100%. In the light blue areas, Internet access is limited.¹⁵¹

The second needs more context. The high cost of devices and data prohibits many people in the world's poorest countries from gaining full access to the Internet.¹⁵² More than 4 billion people remain offline due to the high costs.¹⁵³ Full access to the internet is only affordable for 100% of the population in just 29 countries.¹⁵⁴ In Africa, one gigabyte of prepaid mobile data costs the average resident nearly 18% of his monthly income.¹⁵⁵ The graph below reveals the price of 1 GB mobile broadband relative to monthly income:

¹⁵¹T.Berners-Lee, '40 Maps that Explain the Internet', 2 June 2014, *Vox* <<http://www.vox.com/a/internet-maps>> (11 March 2017).

¹⁵²A.L. Dahir, 'Government Dithering Prevents Millions of Africans from Accessing the Internet,' 20 February 2017, *Quartz* <<https://qz.com/915159/alliance-for-affordable-internet-government-inaction-prevents-millions-of-africans-from-accessing-the-internet/>> (11 March 2017).

¹⁵³World Economic Forum, '4 Billion People Still Don't Have Internet Access. Here's How to Connect Them' <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/4-billion-people-still-don-t-have-internet-access-here-s-how-to-connect-them/>> (12 March 2017).

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵Alliance for Affordable Internet, '2017 Affordability Report' <<http://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2017/>> (12 March 2017).

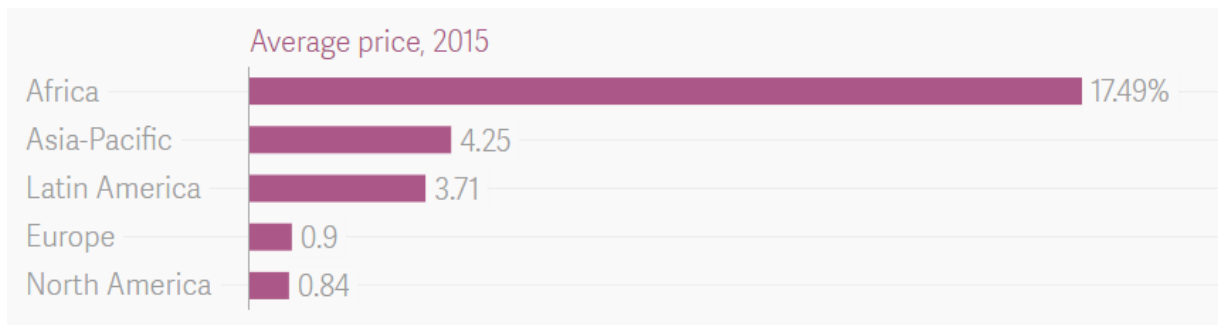


Figure 14 Internet in Africa is expensive in comparison to Western countries.¹⁵⁶

High costs are of course a constraint when you want to make use of the Web to inform yourself about politics while your budget is limited.

The layers on top of the Web see business in this division. Facebook is a good example; it has worked to ensure that it is the easiest and cheapest to access in those parts of the world where it is very expensive to access the Internet. The company backs internet.org, 'an app [...] that provides free access only to Facebook, Facebook messenger, and a handful of other services'.¹⁵⁷

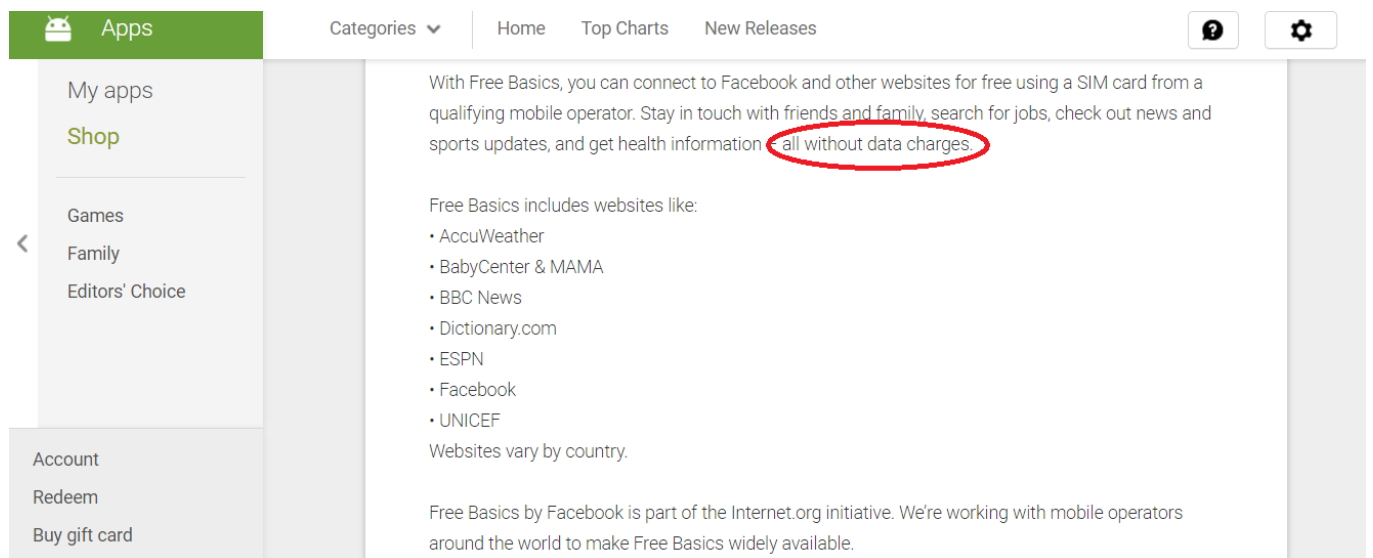


Figure 15 A screenshot of the app in the app store.

¹⁵⁶ A.L. Dahir, 'Government Dithering Prevents Millions of Africans from Accessing the Internet.'

¹⁵⁷ L. Mirani, 'Millions of Facebook Users Have No Idea They Are Using the Internet', 9 February 2015, *Quartz* <<http://qz.com/333313/millions-of-facebook-users-have-no-idea-theyre-using-the-internet/>> (16 December 2016).

If you leave the app, you start paying for your Internet and this is what makes Facebook so powerful in the third world. In fact, in developing countries, a large part of the population believe that Facebook is the Internet:

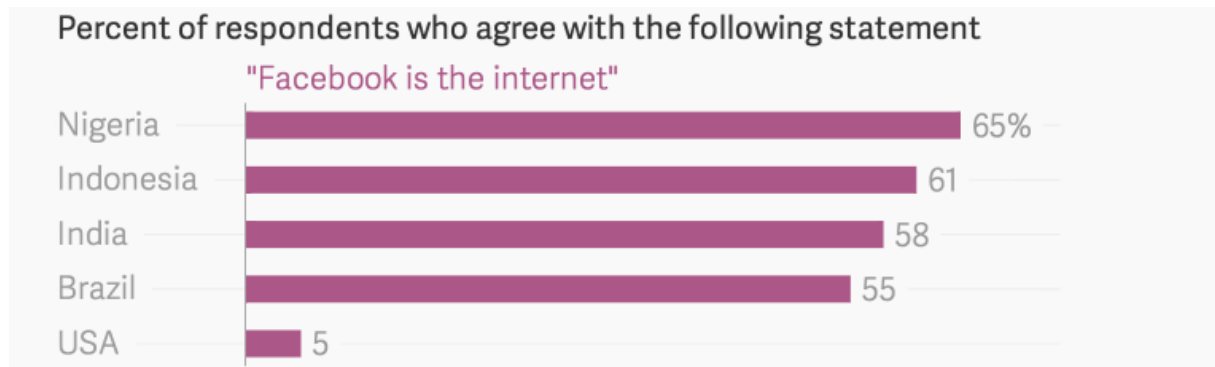


Figure 16 A large part of the population in the third world believes that Facebook is the same as the Internet.¹⁵⁸

Why can this be a constraint when you want to inform yourself about politics you might think? Well it can be a constraint because the algorithms of Facebook decide in which filter bubble you belong and so what kind of political news you see on your timeline. As you might expect, the population in the third world almost never leaves Facebook, simply because they do not have money to pay in order to view other websites..

Thirdly, the digital divide is more than just an access or money issue and cannot be alleviated merely by providing the necessary equipment. Individuals need to know how to make use of the information and communication tools of the Web. These are called 'digital skills'. These skills entail the ability to find, evaluate, utilize, share and create content, using information technologies and the Internet.¹⁵⁹ Those who obtain these skills can interact with interfaces and know what is seen as proper behaviour in the online world. Research by Van Deursen and Van Dijk has revealed that age but especially education plays a large role in who

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ A. Van Deursen & J. van Dijk, 'Internet Skills and the Digital Divide', *New Media Society*, Vol. nr. 13 (2011), pp. 855-872.

can become digitally literate and who cannot. 'The higher educated more often own computers, have Internet access at home , and [...] spend more time online.'¹⁶⁰ Goldin and Katz add to these findings that the highly educated are able to keep up with technological advancement and 'therefore increase their lead over people who are not able to keep up'.¹⁶¹ Consequently, the people who obtain digital skills, are often also those who are being heard in the online world and that brings me to blogging, a digression on this chapter but worth mentioning because it reveals where the constraint of not being digitally literate may lead.

3.10 To Blog or not to Blog

Some individual bloggers distinguish themselves from other bloggers in terms of audience traffic. Some individual bloggers have more subscribers than newspapers like the *New York Times*. Some individual bloggers are even seen as an authority due to their blog.¹⁶² Thus, who are these bloggers and what makes them so successful?

N.Z. Bear's Blogosphere Ecosystem project tracks five thousand of the most widely read blogs.¹⁶³ One of these is *Daily Kos* from Moulitsas Zuniga. He graduated with a journalism degree from Northern Illinois University and earned a law degree at Boston University.¹⁶⁴ While attending NIU, he wrote for the college newspaper, the *Northern Star*, and became its editor-in-chief. Eventually he was inducted into the Northern Star Hall of Fame, an honour bestowed by the newspaper's alumni association. Another successful blogger is Hugh Hewitt who runs the political blog *HughHewitt.com*. Hewitt studied at Harvard University and at the

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 895.

¹⁶² R. Meyer, 'What Blogging Has Become', 26 February 2015, *The Atlantic* <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/02/what-blogging-has-become/386201/>> (22 March 2017).

¹⁶³ M. Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) p. 113.

¹⁶⁴ M. Zuniga, 'About Daily Kos' <<http://www.dailykos.com/special/about#mmz>> (16 October 2016).

University of Michigan. His degrees brought him into the Reagan administration and later on he became the executive director of the Richard M. Nixon Library and Professor of Law at Chapman University.¹⁶⁵

Hewitt and Zuniga are exemplary when it comes to successful bloggers: they all have a college degree in the field of media and/ or law.¹⁶⁶ These degrees brought them knowledge and skills on how to behave in the online world. Furthermore, their education brought them into boards and management teams of a large company. These jobs have brought them into contact with other managers and sometimes even with journalists who routinely write press releases. And last, but probably not the least, these jobs brought them into positions in which they had autonomy over their own schedule. As a result, they had time to start their blog. Running a world-class blog that is being heard by policy makers requires constant updates, only then, the blog remains interesting among others because only then it appears high in the search results.¹⁶⁷ Or as Gina Trapini, founder of the blog *Lifehacker*, said: 'A successful blog is like a hungry pet that needs to be walked, fed, washed, cleaned up after, and loved regularly'.¹⁶⁸ As one can guess, no one working a ten-hours shift, without control over his schedule, would be able to update his blog on a short break.

Thus, most likely, only those who do not have a direct supervisor, the top managers or those who can afford to be without a job, are ranked high in the blogosphere. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Zuniga and Hewitt are read and are having impact on politics. Due to their degrees and the resulting jobs, they know how to write proper texts, how to handle a computer and moreover to place content online in a proper way. On top of that: they have a

¹⁶⁵ H. Hewitt, 'About Hugh Hewitt' <<http://www.hughhewitt.com/about-hugh-hewitt/>> (16 October 2016).

¹⁶⁶ M. Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ M.A. Banks, *Blogging Heroes: Interviews with 30 of the World's Top Bloggers* (London: Wiley and Sons, 2007), p. 31.

network, existing of other top managers and sometimes journalists, who are interested in what they are writing. Of course there are exceptions, but this is the general profile of a successful blogger, and successful means: one that is being heard by policy makers.

Thus, it seems that the blogosphere is an autocracy where whoever has the most money and highest education can buy the biggest microphones.

3.11 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained Barlow's 'We all get older and smarter'.¹⁶⁹ In this chapter we have seen that nearly two decades after the Declaration's publication, a staggering percentage of communication flows through a small set of corporations that work with algorithms and censor, sometimes under pressure but sometimes of their own accord for no clear reason. Censorship leads to the fact that citizens cannot inform themselves free of constraints about politics. We have also seen that politicians are at times to blame for this as well. Politicians use their accounts often as campaign material and that means that negative news about their policy making is often left out; negative messages scares potential voters away. Also their use of trolls is not very helpful for citizens when they try to inform themselves about politics via the Web. Thus, the old phenomenon from the analogue age, propaganda and the spreading of fake news, has not disappeared due to the Web.

Also other factors for instance, digital skills, the area you live in and your income decide whether you can inform yourself about politics without constraints. Thus, can citizens inform themselves via the Web about politics free of constraints? Well, citizens can indeed inform themselves about politics but at times, not without constraints.

¹⁶⁹B. Dorothy, 'John Perry Barlow 2.0 The Thomas Jefferson of Cyberspace Reinvents his body -- and His Politics', *The Reason*, Augustus 2004 <<http://reason.com/archives/2004/08/01/john-perry-barlow-20/3>> (May 2016).

Chapter 4

A Global Community

'Facebook stands for bringing us closer together and building a global community.' – Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook.¹⁷⁰

I have a pen

I have an apple

Apple-pen!

I have a pen

I have a pineapple

Pineapple-pen!

Apple-pen, pineapple-pen

Pen-Pineapple-Apple-PenPineapple pen

This is the text of one of the most absurd and inexplicable videos of 2016, but nevertheless is on YouTube's second place of best watched video of the year.¹⁷¹ YouTube's entire top 10 over the year 2016 is as follows:

1. Adele's performance on 'Carpool Karaoke' with James Cordon
2. 'Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen' aka. the strangest thing you will watch all day

¹⁷⁰M. Zuckerberg, 'Building Global Community', 16 February 2017, *Facebook*, <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>> (20 February 2017).

¹⁷¹J. Azeves, 'These Are the Most Popular YouTube Videos of 2016', 17 December 2016, *Buzzfeed* <https://www.buzzfeed.com/javieraceves/these-are-the-most-popular-youtube-videos-of-2016?utm_term=.dt1KkPxPLd#.qpBZQMgMxp> (17 January 2017).

3. This dad and son discovering what makes a rattlesnake's tale rattle together
4. 'The Switch' a short film from Nike starring Cristiano Ronaldo
5. Grace VanderWaal's breakout performance on *America's Got Talent*
6. The Dude Perfect Dudes nailing a synchronized water bottle flip
7. Channing Tatum doing his best Beyoncé in a lip sync battle
8. John Oliver talking about a Donald Trump presidency nine months before the elections
9. Casey Neinstat's ride in a \$21,000 first class airplane seat
10. These brothers convincing their drugged sister that the zombie apocalypse is happening¹⁷²

You see, in the entire top 10, there is only one video that contains political content, number 8. All the other videos are entertainment videos. What does that say about our behaviour on the Web? Are we in the online world behaving as Counter-publics and Autonomist Marxists, Dalhberg's third and fourth position? What are we actually doing online? These are the key questions in this chapter which will investigate if the Web stimulates citizens to discuss and inform themselves about politics.

4.1 Statistics, Statistics, Statistics

Google Trends and tracking websites like Quantcast and Alexa are good starting points to find out what we are doing in the online world. Chapter 3 gave already a short insight in our behaviour with help from statistics. But now, we are going to dive more deeply in this data.

¹⁷²*Ibid.*

I started with cross-referencing the dataset from Quantcast with the dataset from Alexa.¹⁷³ After comparing Quantcast's top 100 with Alexa's top 100 of most visited websites in the world, I came to the conclusion that we search online mostly for clothing, films, entertainment in general and cooking recipes. There is not one website in the entire top that contains political news or offers the possibility to discuss political news.¹⁷⁴

In order to avoid hasty conclusions, I also investigated several top 100 lists from different countries. Perhaps, if I would reduce the scale, I would find nuances. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. After zooming into several countries' top 100, I found per country only 2 to 4 websites in the entire top that contain political information:

Country	Political news site/ forum (place in top 100)
The Netherlands	NOS (28) Telegraaf (30)
U.S.	CNN (28) Nytimes (31) Washingtonpost (45)
France	Le monde (15) Le figaro (18)
Australia	ABC.net (17) The Guardian (49)
India	Ndtv (31) Bhaskar (45)

¹⁷³Measurement services have blind spots: websites with the measurement tag can choose to keep their results private etc. Due to these blind spots, the data set can become contaminated. Therefore, it is best to use different measurement services next to each other. By cross-referencing these data sources against one another, both datasets can be validated and so, a good picture can be painted of Web traffic.

¹⁷⁴One should take into consideration that these statistics are dynamic; they change from day to day and therefore I tracked the data for one entire month (from December 2016 to January 2017).

Of course, we need to take the digital divide into consideration as discussed in the previous chapter; not only between people, but also between countries. It is no wonder, for instance, that in a poor country like India the top 100 does not contain one political news website but mostly social media sites like Facebook.org or other online services that are available for free. However, in the end we can carefully conclude that we are not so much political news seekers online.¹⁷⁵ Google Trends, the public Web facility of Google Inc., based on Google Search, that shows how often a particular search-term is entered relative to the total search-volume across various regions of the world confirms this finding as well. Over the year 2016, we searched almost 200% more on the terms 'Pokémon Go' and 'iPhone 7' than the U.S. election for instance.¹⁷⁶

Thus, what all this data means, is that traffic to political content is a niche activity in the broader Web. Matthew Hindman, associate professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs, comes in his book, *Political Accountability and the Web's 'Missing Middle'*, to the same conclusion. With help from *Hitwise*, a service providing data on trends in visitor and search behaviour, he analyzed Web traffic: 'about 10.5 percent of Web traffic goes to adult or pornographic websites [...] a slightly smaller portion (9.6 percent) goes to Webmail services such as Yahoo Mail or Hotmail [...] while only 2.9 percent of Web traffic goes to news and media sites'.¹⁷⁷ Take in mind that 'news and media' entails – besides political news and blogs – also showbiz, sports etc.¹⁷⁸ So, the number of people that visit the Web for political information is just very, very small. Hindman estimated that 'Political sites receive slightly

¹⁷⁵A. Attrill and C. Fullwood, *Applied Cyberpsychology* (London: Springer, 2016) p. 116-128.

¹⁷⁶Google Trends, 'Year in Search 2016' <<https://trends.google.com/trends/yis/2016/GLOBAL>> (22 January 2017).

¹⁷⁷M. Hindman, *Political Accountability and the Web's 'Missing Middle'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) p. 8.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*

more than one tenth of one percent'.¹⁷⁹

4.2 Discussing

Thus, from Alexa's, Google Trends' and Quantcast's data, we can conclude that we do not use the Web to search for political content in the first place, but this does not directly mean that we are not interested in discussing politics online. Interactive platforms like Twitter and Facebook are due to their open structure the preeminent platforms to discuss politics and these platforms are on Alexa's and Quantcast's number one and two respectively. So do we discuss politics on these platforms is the next question?

Pew Research Center has examined the basic contours of how users encounter and navigate political discussion and debate in the context of social media: '9% of social media users say they often comment on politically related posts on these platforms [...] nearly seven-in-ten indicate that they hardly ever (30%) or never (38%) do this'.¹⁸⁰ And what about the posting of messages, which could stir a reaction that could lead on its turn to a discussion about politics? '6% of Facebook users and 8% of Twitter users indicate that of what they post is politically related.'¹⁸¹ It seems that we are not very enthusiastic about, or at least not that interested in discussing politics on these platforms. This finding comes also forward in the results from a survey the Pew Research Center carried out: 'A notable proportion of users simply don't pay much attention to the political characteristics of the people in their networks.'¹⁸²

Besides how we respond online to political content, you can also ask yourself: What

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ M. Duggan and A. Smith, 'The Political Environment on Social Media', *PewResearchCenter*, 25 October 2016 <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/political-content-on-social-media/>> (30 October 2016).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

are the possibilities of responding? You can ask yourself whether platforms like Facebook and Twitter are that democratic themselves if they give you the possibility to respond but only in 140 characters or with a thump or a smiley. Many tried to reach these companies to ask them about their policy but without result.¹⁸³ So, to state it very grimly: if we discuss politics, we are discussing it on platforms that decide how we discuss without considering our opinion.

4.3 We Are Offenders

While I was reading about these statistics, I stumbled on research about the content of the political discussions online; so about what we are really writing on these platforms when we discuss politics with others. It seems that website comments sections are rarely at their best.¹⁸⁴ Often they devolve into racist, misogynistic maelstroms.¹⁸⁵ 'A substantial share of social media users are worn out by the tone and volume of political material they encounter on these platforms.'¹⁸⁶ The offending of others does not stimulate democracy at all. It makes us angry and makes us digress from the 'real' discussion: a certain political topic..¹⁸⁷

There are two results visible of our rude behaviour in online political discussions. The first one is that websites delete the comment section. Examples of these websites are *IMDb*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, *Vice* and *The Telegraph*.¹⁸⁸ In extreme cases, websites can be held responsible

¹⁸³Zondag met Lubach, 'Facebook als nieuwsmedium' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RH5zhAiAiWo&feature=share>> (10 January 2017).

¹⁸⁴M. Duggan and A. Smith, 'The Political Environment on Social Media' (30 October 2016).

¹⁸⁵J. Smith, 'We're Getting Rid of Comments on Vice.com', 20 December 2016, *Vice* <https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/were-getting-rid-of-comments-on-vice> (10 January 2017).

¹⁸⁶M. Duggan and A. Smith, 'The Political Environment on Social Media' (30 October 2016).

¹⁸⁷T. Berners-Lee, 'How Social Media Creates Angry, Poorly Informed Partisans', 26 October 2016, *VOX* <<http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/26/13413292/social-media-disrupting-politics>> (10 January 2017).

¹⁸⁸P. Zantingh, 'Weg met die rotzooi onder online artikelen', 20 February 2017, *NRC Handelsblad* <<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/20/weg-met-die-rotzooi-onder-online-artikelen-6726385-a1546835>> (20 February 2017).

for hateful reactions; the Delfi arrest forces websites to delete hateful comments.¹⁸⁹ The other result is censorship: the use of moderators and algorithms that attempt to suppress the anarchy and this brings us back to the 'Grandma Problem' as introduced in chapter 3.¹⁹⁰

4.4 The Grandma Problem

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are used by many people with different backgrounds: old people, young people, people with a religious background or with strong environmental beliefs.¹⁹¹ These platforms want to satisfy the needs of all these people so that these users return to the platform which ensures the platform's income. And how do these platforms satisfy the needs of their customers? Simply by listening to them. Facebook, for instance, gives its users the option to 'flag' content. 'Flagging' means basically that Facebook-editors receive a warning. The editors look at the flagged post or comment and decide to remove it or not. And we love to flag: 'Facebook users flag more than one million items of content for review every day.'¹⁹²

So what do people flag? Well: beatings, beheadings and pornography, but also content like breastfeeding or sunbathing. 'Content posted as comedy might get flagged for overt racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, or transphobia.'¹⁹³ Facebook removes these posts from its platform because apparently, people do not want to see posts like these. In other words: Do platforms like Facebook censor political news on their own? The answer is

¹⁸⁹P. Zantingh, 'Europees Hof: Website is aansprakelijk voor lezersreactie', 16 June 2015, *NRC Handelsblad* <<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/06/16/europees-hof-na-heroverweging-website-is-aansprakelijk-voor-lezersreacties-a1415473>> (20 February 2017).

¹⁹⁰J. Smith, 'We're Getting Rid of Comments on Vice.com' (10 January 2017).

¹⁹¹A. Chen, 'The Laborers Who Keep Dick Picks and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed', *Wired*, 23 October 2014 <<https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>> (10 January 2017).

¹⁹²C. Buni and S. Chemaly, 'The Secret Rules of the Internet', 13 April 2016, *The Verge* <<http://www.theverge.com/2016/4/13/11387934/internet-moderator-history-youtube-facebook-reddit-censorship-free-speech>> (10 January 2017).

¹⁹³*ibid.*

'no'. Its user is guilty as well.

4.5 Lazy

Besides our flagging, something else should be mentioned when we discuss our behaviour online when it comes to discussing politics. In the previous chapter, it was already pinpointed by Karine Nahon: 'Whatever they give us on the first page, this is what you're going to digest'.¹⁹⁴ Her statement is supported by several investigations which have revealed that 91% of Web users do not go past page 1 of the search results and over 50% do not go past the first 3 results on page 1.¹⁹⁵

What does this mean? Well in the first place that online, we are lazy. Our laziness causes that only the first results receive traffic which indicates that Web traffic is very concentrated.¹⁹⁶ And this behaviour – helped by algorithms as explained in the previous chapter – results into a winner-takes-all structure in the online world: 'the Web is a star system [...] a new form of feudalism'.¹⁹⁷ So our laziness results into a very narrow public sphere in the online world which could lead to the result that not all voices and views receive the same amount of attention.

Why is our laziness important to mention in the light of this chapter which discusses whether the Web stimulates citizens to discuss and inform themselves about politics? It indicates that the Web does not really stimulate us to look beyond the first three results which could lead to that we are not fully informed about a certain topic because.

¹⁹⁴B. Ristow, *The New Gatekeepers: Controlling Information in the Internet Age* (London: Center for International Media Assistance, 2013) p. 13.

¹⁹⁵A. van Deursen and J. van Dijk, 'Using the Internet: Skill Related Problems in Users' Online Behavior', *Interacting with Computers*, Vol. nr. 21 (2009), pp. 393-402.

¹⁹⁶C. Anderson and M. Wolff, 'The Web Is Dead. Long Live the Internet', *Wired*, 17 August 2010 <https://www.wired.com/2010/08/ff_webrip/> (10 June 2016).

¹⁹⁷J. Lanier, *Who Owns the Future* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014) p. 240-253.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that mostly, we are not that interested to inform or discuss political topics online. We use the Web rather for purposes like shopping or watching films. This leads to the fact that only a small portion of all Web traffic goes to websites or blogs that contain political information. And, if we do discuss political topics with each other we act very rude which has led to the removal of comment sections. So even though the Web provides many options to read about and discuss political content, we are not very much stimulated to make use of these possibilities and rather search for kitchen ware or clothing.

Conclusion

This thesis was about many things and many of these are in the news on a daily basis: you only have to open a random newspaper or news website to read about the (potential) democratizing force of the Web on politics. I started this thesis with defining what a democratizing force in politics, the Web in this thesis, exactly means. However, this thesis was not about this definition but about: To what extent does the Web as a thoroughly 'democratic' medium with its two-way traffic, help the exchange of knowledge and thus is contributing to a democratic system in politics as much as its formal characteristics appear to promise?

In the second chapter, we have seen that the Web indeed facilitates channels that enables citizens to discuss the political agenda with politicians. Citizens are sending much more messages to politicians now in comparison to the analogue age. However, these channels do not so much stimulate politicians to answer the messages from citizens mostly because they are afraid to lose control over their message. Thus there is not much conversation online between citizens and politicians which means that the policy making is still in the hands of the latter.

In the third chapter we have seen that online, citizens can inform themselves about politics via many ways. However, old phenomena like trolls have not disappeared in the online world. Also the use of social media accounts by politicians impedes the information gathering of citizens. Most politicians use their social media account as campaign material and therefore, negative news is left out. We have also seen that the Web's algorithms impedes the information gathering. Thus, even though the open structure of the Web is

intact, due to these factors it is not always possible for citizens to inform themselves without constraints.

In the fourth chapter we have seen that the Web is not so much used to inform oneself about politics. We rather search online for clothing or cooking recipes than we search for political content. Sometimes we even flag political content because we do not want to be confronted with it.

So what can we say in the end about the thesis statement? The Web offers many possibilities to converse and to inform yourself about politics. However, these possibilities are not always exploited. Behaviour from citizens is to blame when they flag political content, but also politicians are to blame. Their fear to lose control over their messages causes that the number of conversations between citizens and politicians is still small. Also old constraints like censorship and trolling are not very helpful to democratize politics. The Web is a true democratic medium because there is no middle-man, however there is still serious work to do to really make it contribute to democratize politics.

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