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 15. **EDITORIAL**
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33. This special edition will focus on the broad area of virtual democratic behav-
 34. iour with reference to the social media acting as a public sphere to facilitate
 35. new forms of political participation, electoral practices and social movements.
 36. Therefore, it will critically interrogate the contemporary relevance of social
 37. networks as a series of cultural and political projects.

38. There has been a widespread discussion about the political and economic
 39. potential of online media and social networks, their contribution to changes in
 40. working and living practices, and growth rates, alongside their enhancement
 41. of democratic practices, public sphere and civic cultures, citizen responsibility
 42. and participation. In particular, Web 2.0 – the second generation of the World
 43. Wide Web that is focused on the public collaboration and sharing out of infor-
 44. mation online – has facilitated computer-mediated tools that allow for the
 45. creation and exchange of ideas across virtual communities. The social media
 46. have provided the technological and ideological foundations for the produc-
 47. tion of user-generated content.

48. Consequently, the social media contain the possibility for public commu-
 49. nications to be diffused in a faster and wider manner to reach a large number
 50. of people. The interactive nature of the Internet means that the technological
 51. revolution has led to personalized forms of direct communications between
 52.

the political classes and the public. This realization has also led to the online networks being seen as a means to empower grassroots forms of participation, to encourage social movements and to allow people to compete against the traditional political classes or media establishments. The rise of the Internet and the social media offer the possibility of effective political action, though the democratizing power of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) varies widely across countries resulting in different degrees of political and media openness.

Yet, does this online process actually trigger-off or reflect a more deep-seated change in public behaviour, from re-conceiving our political practices to engaging with grassroots political endeavours via the mobilization of political protests and potential regime change? Can we assume that online media channels influence much in the same way as offline networks do, that is, by creating the structure of interactions that facilitates the creation of a new online public sphere and articulates independent decision-making? Moreover, can this political discourse degenerate into personal abuse, ignorance and intolerance? In particular, has it served to polarize political ideologies so that democratic consensus has become impossible to achieve?

To gain a further understanding of the political and social trajectories that are currently defining the incorporation of the social media into the democratic process, this special journal of the *IJDTV* has commissioned seven articles to critically examine the relevance of the social networks as forms of public spheres. They ask with regard to theoretical and empirical concerns:

- Are online and social networks an unstoppable democratizing and mobilizing force?
- How are the information technologies creating new types of political and social formations?
- What are the double-edged implications for mainstream, populist and sub-altern forms of political discourse?

Jeff Shires (with Nel Orgel) considers how the technological changes have facilitated the establishment of political structures that have fomented a sense of ‘ressentiment’. This refers to the unease that is created when someone believes they have been injured by another party, but feel they are not sufficiently able to act. While modern technologies have developed at a startling rate, society cannot keep up with them. Consequently, neo-liberal economics and the accompanying political narratives have distorted the culture. Most especially, societal agencies (political, economic, technology) have become self-serving, elitist and alienating. People are now faced with a bewildering array of information in which online gatekeepers (Google, Facebook, Twitter) use algorithms to synthesize ‘real’ with ‘virtual’ emotional values. For Shires, these distortions have led to the election of right-wing populists such as US President Donald Trump and the nativist dislocation that contributed to the UK Brexit vote.

In the 2016 US Presidential election, the victorious celebrity property tycoon Trump maintained a controversial online presence. He posted tweets about his campaign and engaged in a blatantly hateful online discourse aimed at his political opponents, immigrants and ‘liberal’ media establishment. Sergei Medev analyzes the Trump phenomenon and its utilization of populist symbolic narratives to reshape the political agenda and the social reality. In particular, Medev is concerned about how Trump’s online presence and

1. deployment of 'fake news' created a meta-narrative that asserted his charismatic authority and authenticity. This created a sense of participatory involvement within his support base and a feeling of connectivity in which Trump proffered himself as a 'game changer'.

2. Similar processes were evident in the 2016 European Union (EU) Referendum in the United Kingdom when a small majority of voters decided to leave the EU. Within the Brexit vote, the social media became a vehicle for contested political arguments, fake news and post-truth positions. Darren Lilleker and Duje Bonnacci provide a detailed empirical account by analysing the big data drawn from the social media platforms during the campaign. In particular, they 'scrapped' this data resource in order to mine the range of communication styles, topics and reactions of Facebook subscribers to four of the most important Leave and Remain sites. Subsequently, they contend that the Leave pages had more active posters who had a stronger sense of ideological coherence and collective identity. These participants were able to mobilize their interests around key anti-EU rhetorical positions and demonstrated an ability to connect with a wider range of online audiences. By contrast, the Remain campaign was less coherent, failed to provide clear line of argument and was compromised by its affiliation with the mainstream political classes.

20. The divisions between traditional and alternative political agendas are further explored by Dong Hyun Song and ChangYoung Son in their contribution outlining the South Korean social media's role in the 2016 South Korean Presidential scandal. From October 2016 until March 2017, the South Korean body politic was traumatized by the illegal activities of the former president Park Geun-hye and her corrupt alliance with Ms Choi Soon-Sil. Throughout this upheaval, the employment of the social networks by mainstream news media played an instrumental role in keeping the public informed and by facilitating the calls for impeachment. Song and Son provide a detailed survey of the online coverage and interaction of protesters on the Facebook pages of the three major news broadcasters in South Korea, concerning the scandal. In this respect, they demonstrate how JTBC adopted successfully its official Facebook page departing from other two South Korean television news channels, JTBC not only provided a critical coverage of the scandal and Candlelight rallies, but also an alternative sphere for the public and facilitated a more grassroots narrative of political activism.

36. Such a concern with social movements is evident in the next contribution which considers the erstwhile more progressive forms of online engagement within a liberal democracy. Michael Daubs provides an analysis of the US-based Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and its apparently more egalitarian deployment of the Internet. He considers how protest movements have been symbolically mediated through the traditional media tropes associated with the decentralization of power. Daubs demonstrates how this myth of bottom-up social communications was further perpetuated during the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle. He moves on to discuss how these arguments for an egalitarian mediatization have been applied to the Occupy Movement. Therefore, he addresses the complexities of horizontal social movements, the ambiguities of networked forms of communications and the more individualized types of political discourse which have been associated with 'lifestyle' anarchist or alternative groups. Daubs suggests that the online protest paradigm does not simplistically equate with a mythologized equality. Instead, it is necessary to address a more complex series of cultural and material variables that have emerged in the wake of online activity.

Conversely, the social media may equally be seen to perpetuate top-down forms of political communications designed for social control. Therefore, there have been panoptic state controls over data, the state-sponsored hacking of political information and the deployment of ICTs as tools for propaganda or censorship. Duygu Karatas and Erkan Saka's article provides a variation of these critiques by focusing on the online trolling activities adopted by ruling populist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to stifle debate and manipulate public opinion. The AKP has used Twitter to undermine dissenting voices and unprotected citizens by branding them as traitors and terrorists. Such hate discourses peaked in the aftermath of the failed 15 July 2016 coup against President Erdogan. Karatas and Saka use an ethnographic methodology to shed light upon how Twitter became a vehicle for collective-trolling practices for those trolls who are organized around networks of individuals and groups with specific political motivations. They also reveal how political trolling is deeply embedded in the political system, politicians and mainstream media and how trolling practices are facilitated by the coordinative work of these institutions.

Finally, Jamileh Kadivar considers one of the most politically controversial applications of the social media with reference to the propagation of the extremist Islamic group Daesh. She considers how the radicalization of internationally based Muslims has been used to demonize the Internet. In particular, her article considers whether such radicalization can be appropriately conceptualized and what evidence exists concerning such online forms of radical theocratic behaviour. Consequently, Kadivar provides insightful critiques about the technological deterministic and dialectical approaches that have been used to analyse the calls for Jihad. By considering the social media's relationship with the prevailing economic, political and ideological structures, she maps Daesh's online presence to show how they spread fear and horror across the international community.

Taken together, these articles provide a holistic account about the usage of the social media across a range of societies and forms of political activity. They provide unique insights through some very recent cases, into the purposes of the social media, and their impact upon the public sphere. In turn, these contributions will serve to open up the wider debates associated with the democratizing processes concerning political communications and participation. Finally, we would like to thank all the contributors and peer-reviewers for their diligence in producing this special edition.

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Duygu Karatas is a Ph.D. student and scholar at the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) at the University of Westminster. She is also currently leading media seminars as an associate fellow at the University of Westminster. She received Media and Communications Master of Arts degree from City University London Sociology Department. Her dissertation focuses on the social networking sites in the construction of collective identity of the Gezi protests. She co-authored Persistent Activist Communication in Occupy Gezi (2017) in Sociology, an official journal of the British Sociological Association with Dr Dan Mercea and Dr Marco T Bastos.

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