The first collection of papers written by students of the course Critical Analysis of Digital Communication Literature (CADCL) was published in 2018. I explained in detail in the introduction written for that issue (Sparviero 2018) the particular features of this course. Here, it will suffice to mention that each student in the course is assigned a book and is asked to summarise it and extract information following a template, so that all the students in the course can then use such information for their own analyses. The final paper for the completion of the course contains a critical review of the literature – starting from, but also going beyond, the collections of inputs from the book considered in the course – on a particular issue in digital communication research. Students can stick to the literature review or use the literature review to introduce original or more personal thoughts. There are many final papers written for the completion of this course that are marked ‘excellent’, and so this cannot be used as the unique criteria for the selection for this journal. Variety is also a factor. Considering that students are asked to engage in their final papers firstly with the books provided to the class before looking for extra sources, some books seem to have been more influential than others in shaping the choice across-the-board. These are the books by Gerbaudo (2018), Ragnedda (2017), Schroeder (2018) and Zuboff (2019), whose key ideas are summarised next.

Schroeder (2018) points out that social theory needs one comprehensive mediatisation theory of social life, since the internet and media shape social change. So far, social science and its subdisciplines have generated several theories on the effects of the internet and media on social change, looking at economics, politics and culture separately. The effects of the internet and media on economics, politics and culture might be seen as separate because the media are a subsystem of society: they connect people, but not people to social developments as a whole. However, a mediatisation theory of social life should consider that different effects on different
Spheres depend on a common digital infrastructure and on processes and services competing for the same – and limited – users and consumers’ attention.

Ragnedda (2017) updates scholarly analyses of the digital divide by delivering a study informed by Weber’s sociological approach. His angle stresses that the digital divide not only reflects existing inequalities but also amplifies them in the offline world, as people affected are missing the new opportunities for well-being. Key to this understanding is the set of expertise, experience, skills, knowledge, digital literacy and access allowing for the conversion of digital capital into economic, social, cultural, personal and/or political capital.

Gerbaudo (2018) looks into the contemporary topic of “participationism”, a radical democratic creed coupling universal participation in policy-making with the possibility of disseminating power inside the digital parties, both enabled by the adoption of new digital technologies. Such a creed glorifies participation as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, while vilifying representation. Gerbaudo’s critical assessment of digital parties’ practices and particularly of the Five Star Movement in Italy shows that participationism remains an ideal. In reality, digital party staff assigned to the management of decision-making platforms set the content, timing and framework of online consultations, leaving members only the option of expressing a preference over a limited and largely predefined set of choices, while party officials filter and choose selectively among proposals coming from members. Hence, digital political participation in these cases is reactive rather than active and truly participatory.

Zuboff’s (2019) work on “surveillance capitalism” is probably one of the most celebrated academic works of the last decade. Her interesting analysis proposes a transformation of a capitalist system supported by the use of power to exploit labour, into one that uses power to extract and commercialise human experience. Her vision of contemporary society is premised on two realities: one is Google’s – and other tech giants’ – business model, which has been progressively adjusted in order to profit from the collection and analyses of users’ information in order to predict and influence behaviour. The second is the “full-blown ideology of inevitabilism” (Zuboff 2019: 220) diffused by tech-giants and upheld by neoliberal economic principles, which silently convince many people that waving some fundamental rights is the logical and unavoidable consequence of technological change.

Inspired by these books, the contributions written for the CADCL course and selected for this issue of the Salzburger Sonderfenster chose either a ‘problems-vs.-solutions’ or a ‘good-vs.-evil’ rhetorical approach to comply with the requirements of being critical and looking at the different sides of the issue explored.
The papers by Darwin Boy Sxander, Reza Arkan Partadiredja – both from Indonesia – and Pierrinne Leukes from South Africa adopt a ‘problems-vs.-solutions’ approach. Darwin Boy Sxander in “The Digital Virus: How Online Fake News Affects People’s Well-Being” looks at the problem of misinformation, or ‘fake news’, with a particular focus on health-related information. He argues that algorithms are part of the problem, while concerted efforts by content and policymakers should be part of the solution. Reza Arkan Partadiredja suggests in “Datafication and Design: Are We Designing the Right Thing?” that designers are co-responsible for the problems related to users’ datafication. He calls for an ethical code of conduct for designers as part of the solution. Pierrinne Leukes in “Plot Twist: the Unintended (?) Inequalities Amplified and Introduced by the Internet” extends Ragnedda’s analysis of a digital divide embedded in social inequalities but argues for a more comprehensive solution than making digital literacy opportunities available.

The papers from Dawda Wally from Gambia and Alex Dickmann from Germany adopt a ‘good-vs.-evil’ approach. Dawda Wally in “Societal Effects of the Internet of Things Devices: Contributions, Societal Challenges and Solutions” considers questions of privacy, security and digital literacy; while Alex Dickman in “The Internet as a Democratizing Tool? Old Belief, Current Challenges and Future Solutions” critically revisits the romantic role of the Internet as a democratic force. As he explains, possibilities for new forms of participation and empowerment are offset by discrimination, political extremism, surveillance and increased corporate power.

Finally, Dagim Afework Mekonnen, from Ethiopia, in his paper “Computational Propaganda: A Detriment to Democracy” considers research explaining the existence of digital tools for political manipulation, such as bots and cyber troops, but also the problem of filter bubbles and echo chambers. He argues that Africa and Ethiopia in particular are affected by these occurrences, and yet there is little research on this specific subject.

Together, these contributions represent fine and critical work from students of the Erasmus + Digital Communication Leadership’s programme and good ‘tools for thought’ that consider key scholarly work and issues dealing with important questions in communication research.

References


**Short biography of the author**

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