

Temporality of Social Networks and Its Impact on The Perception of Political Content

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Abstract

Under the influence of the Internet, the perception of the recipients has changed radically. In the epoch of formlessness, linear time is replaced by simultaneous time, which is based solely on living in the present. The new phenomenon of 'being in the now' has also influenced the perception of political campaigns on social media. The aim of this theoretical study is to understand the principle of how political advertisements on social networks function in temporality. At the same time, we ask why recipients are not immune to online manipulation on the Internet. We conclude by considering potential solutions to the problems that have arisen in temporality not only in the context of the presentation of politics on social networks.

Keywords: social networks, temporality, online manipulation, simultaneous time

Home

In the seminar work we will discuss the issue of presentations of political content on social networking sites today. During the development of the thesis we focused on simultaneity and its impact on the recipient in times of formlessness. As the behaviour of content recipients changes, so does their perception of political events on the Internet. As the publishing of posts on social networks is not subject to regulation, this creates room for manipulation of recipients and the dissemination of disinformative political information. Using examples from the field, we not only highlight the real impact of manipulative marketing strategies that have significantly influenced the course of politics in the world.

In the first chapter of the term paper we will characterize the concept of time. We will be assisted by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, the Roman thinker Augustinus Aurelius, and their reflections on time, on which the foundation of the perception of temporality is built. We will follow this with a characterization of communication systems by the French sociologist Jean Lohiss. In particular, we will focus on his recent epoch of formlessness,

characterized by the use of the Internet and social networks. In the next chapter, we discuss the presentation of political content on social networks. We start with a characterization of the notion of social network and an explanation of their functioning. The key concept here is the notion of an algorithm that governs the operation of social networks. Since social networks are built solely on displaying content that they like, a "social bubble" is created among recipients. This also has an impact on the perception of political content. Therefore, in this paper we deal with concrete examples from political events not only in Slovakia, but also in the world. For this reason, we devote an entire chapter to manipulation strategies on social networks. We deal here with various techniques of influencing recipients, misuse of data from the Internet, but also with how politicians can help themselves to a better result in elections by simply targeting the audience. In the last chapter, we try to outline the manipulative technique of "deepfakes", which according to some experts represents a great danger for society today.

In conclusion, we express our opinion on the issue of manipulation of recipients - voters on social networks. In doing so, we will rely on new legislative proposals from the European Union, which aim to prevent the spread of misinformation about political events in the world and thus stop the manipulation of voters. However, some experts do not give the legislation any hope of 'healing social media journalism'. Nevertheless, we are trying to find a way out in the notion of countertemporality, which aims to buy time for social discourse.

1. Perception of time across cultural epochs

To understand time and human existence, we must first understand the very nature of time itself. *"According to Aristotle, time is the sum of movements. We perceive past, present, and future, and the present moment can be understood as both the gap between the future and the past and also as their union."*¹ In other works, Aristotle discusses time from other perspectives. According to him, time takes place only in the mind of man as a being with reason. Outside the human mind, time exists only in the sense of an ever-changing present in which the mutability and duration of all that is naturally existent is unified. *"In spite of all the changes in our view of the world, the Aristotelian view of time remains determinative to this day, especially in ordinary life, in science, but also in economics and the like."*² Augustinus Aurelius, too, agrees with his predecessor Aristotle that the present is a partition between the past and the future, having no duration in itself. For Augustine, then, according to Flosso, time is the basis for "the origin and cessation of the being of all being."³⁴ It is the condition of being as such.

Time also plays an important role in the media. According to Harnad and Lohiss, speech, writing, print and the Internet have had a significant impact on human development. Lohisse points out that four socio-cultural epochs have been created on the basis of these media: the

¹ ARISTOTELÉS. *The Ethics of Nicomachus*. trans. A.Kříž. 4th ed. Prague : Rezek, 2013. 291 p.

² SOKOL, J. *Time and rhythm*. 2nd, expanded. 2nd ed. Prague : Oikoymenh, 2004, 332 p.

³ FLOSS, K. *Time, History and Aurelius Augustinus*. [dissertation defended at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, Palacký University in Olomouc, 25.6.1969]. 1st ed. Olomouc : Palacký University, 1991, 139 p.

⁴ AUGUSTIN. *Confession*. In Kalich 5th ed. Prague : Kalich, 2006, 565 p.

epoch of speech, writing, mass and formlessness, and with them four different perceptions of time.

In the epoch of speaking, the cyclical time was the first to develop, influenced by the alternation of day and night, the seasons and the resulting magical-mythological narrative of the wandering of souls and the cycle of all living things. From this we can conclude that speech was the key and main communication tool. As a study on the temporality of time says: "*Speech, with its ability to draw communicators into unity and depth, was influential in creating a cyclical understanding of time.*"⁵

In the second half of the 15th century, the cyclical understanding of time changed to a linear one, thanks to Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press. Periodical printing spread massively and globally, supporting the linear understanding of time. "*Newspaper readers located in different geographic spaces began to place events in the same time, promoting an understanding of time that was both uniform and abstract and quantitative.*"⁶

After the epoch of the masses comes the epoch of formlessness, which is characterised by new media, including the functioning of the Internet. According to Samuel Brečka, electronic media have gradually started to displace print culture, i.e. books are losing their readers due to their low interest. "*In fact, in communication through the Internet, our perception, imagination and thinking must adapt to this nature.*"⁷ Samuel Brečka sees this as the demise of print culture, which in his opinion means a great loss for society. Flusser also responded to the onset of the epoch of formlessness, arguing that the linear code has been replaced by a code based on technical images and the Internet, which has influenced not only our sensory perception but also our understanding of time.⁸ The core of contemporary media communication rests on the foundations of how the Internet works. Such communication through virtual space is characterised by speed, interactivity, multiplatform and multimedia. In addition to the immersion into cyberspace in Internet communication, communication is furthermore networked, lacking a beginning and an end. It is a one-way communication. "*Experiencing time on the Internet is therefore referred to as simultaneous or simultaneous.*"⁹ The Internet, together with social networks, bring people into a single time, and therefore into the present. There is thus a shift of time from linearity to simultaneity. As Dvorak argues, there are no fixed moments in time. The flow of information is based on cycles that override even historical understandings of time.

⁵ GÁLIK, S.: *The Temporality of (New) Media*. In. 73, no. 5, p. 409.

⁶ GÁLIK, S.: *The Temporality of (New) Media*. In. 73, no. 5, p. 409.

⁷ GÁLIK, S.: *Being and Time in online communication*. In: *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2016, vol. 12, no. 5, p.7.

⁸ GÁLIK, S.: *The Temporality of (New) Media*. In. 73, no. 5, p. 409.

⁹ GÁLIK, S.: *The Temporality of (New) Media*. In. 73, no. 5, p. 409.

2. Presenting political content on social media

With the simultaneous understanding of time, new problems arise in society. The generation that uses the Internet has an increasing problem with concentration¹⁰ and abstract thinking. Further, they show workaholicism and lack of time at the expense of family and leisure time.¹¹ The consequences of simultaneous time are also naturally reflected in the reception of political content through social networks. The recipient does not have time to navigate through the rush of information, and so receives mainly emotionally charged and personalised posts selected by an algorithm. In fact, social networks are built on the workings of an algorithm that prioritises the display of posts that the recipient will like or reflect their current mood. This increases the likelihood that the recipient will click on the post, which benefits the companies that own the social networks in particular. With the help of algorithms, we see not a real reality but a personalised reality - a reality that we will like. *"These algorithms create a 'social bubble' that shuts us out and prevents people from encountering different opinions that go beyond their own."*¹² Artificial intelligence from our phones can thus influence us without us realising it. *"YouTube recommendation algorithms, for example, can force viewers into increasingly extreme content, which can lead to radicalisation itself."*¹³ Social networks can quickly become effective tools of manipulation that can influence the future decisions of their users.

According to Cirner, the connection between politics and social networks was inevitable, as political events have always been largely about emotions. *"A politician who can't create emotion doesn't have charisma. It's always been that way, it's just that the media has never had the reach it has today."*¹⁹ The emergence of new media and the expansion of the internet have caused a significant portion of political campaigns to move online. It should be noted that politicians have up to 4.55 billion social network users, equivalent to 57.6% of the world's total population.¹⁴ The 2004 Bush campaign was a pioneering act in the use of political microtargeting. His ad was about his opposition to gay marriage, which was intended to appeal in particular to conservative Democratic-leaning black voters, whom he also targeted through social media microtargeting. Bush wanted to put pressure on this group of voters and win their votes at the same time. Apparently, he succeeded in doing so. *"Republican strategists say that through this tactic, Bush improved his favorability with voters, and in Ohio in particular, he raised his score from 9% (2000) to 16% (2004)."*¹⁵ So

¹⁰ Following Virilio's dromological ideas, S. Hubík argues that the current fast media communication in synergy with pycnolepsy constantly distracts human attention, which is extremely important for human survival (2013, 88).

¹¹ In this context, the importance of media education is highlighted in an article entitled Current development trends of media education by D. Petranová, M. Hossová, P. Velický (Petranová, Hossová, Velický 2017, 53).

¹² MARKOVIČ, M.: *How does personalization work?* [online]. [2020-08-27]. Available at: < <https://www.ecommercebridge.sk/ako-funguje-personalizacia-a-kde-sa-s-nou-mozete-stretnut/>>.

¹³ MALÁ, M.: *How social media algorithms disrupt our ability to make free choices.* [online]. [2020-10-16]. Available at: < <https://tech.instory.cz/1235-jak-algoritmy-socialnich-medii-narusuji-nasi-schopnost-svobodne-rozhodovat.html>>.

¹⁴ *Global social media stats.* [online]. [2021]. Available at: < <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users/>>.

¹⁵ EDSALL, B. T.: *Let the nanotargeting begin.* [online]. [2012-04-15]. Available at: < <https://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/let-the-nanotargeting-begin/>>.

we can say that this was the first significant impact of an online marketing strategy on real-world politics.

3. Manipulation strategies on social networks

But social networks can also be used against politicians and damage their reputation. One of the most notorious cases of source hacking (a way of manipulating an audience to get high traffic for a selected social media post without arousing suspicion that it is fake and unverified news) involved French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron. Two days before the second round of the presidential election, fake documents were leaked claiming that Emmanuel Macron had tax evasion. *"The published emails, according to Macron's critics, suggested tax evasion and an attempt at electoral fraud. Internet bot activity was also detected in the dissemination of the information, raising questions about Russia's possible involvement. The Kremlin, however, has denied the allegations."*¹⁶ While the presidential candidate convinced the public that it was fake news, French citizens took to the streets to protest against him. The speed of the internet has overtaken reality.

Those attacked may not only be politicians, political parties or various other organisations. Social network users themselves can also become victims. The most notorious case where personal data of internet users was misused was in 2016 just before the US presidential election. The London-based consultancy Cambridge Analytica bought the data of the users concerned from Facebook without their consent, which was then used by Donald Trump's election team. *"The illegally obtained personal data of Facebook users was attempted to be used to influence the election results."*¹⁷ Speaking to Euractiv, the Commission said that *"this incident reaffirms the importance of the GDPR in protecting fundamental rights, especially when the data of millions of Europeans is at stake."*¹⁸ Finally, in this case, 87 million accounts were involved, which Cambridge Analytica accessed illegally. In addition to names, email addresses and telephone numbers, it also had data on residential address, date of birth and place of residence. Other information from the CVs that Facebook users filled in their profiles was also leaked. Every "trace" of us on the Internet can be exploited without our knowledge. Thus, the consumer of content on social networks has almost no chance to fight back to keep their data safe in time.

We are now asking the question that if we can target the audience according to our ideas and preferences and then influence their next decision on the basis of that, then it is no longer just political manipulation, but a total manipulation of a person's future. According to Janoscik, the future is therefore open. At the same time, he argues that we cannot just peer

¹⁶ Emmanuel Macron, *hoaxes and propaganda*. [online]. [2022-01-11]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/minuta/2676669/>>.

¹⁷ TASR: *Washington prosecutor sued Facebook for invasion of privacy*. [online]. [2018-12-20]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/spravny/washingtonsky-prokurator-zazaloval-fa/368247-clanok.html>>.

¹⁸ YAR, L., EURACTIV.SK: *Facebook leaked data from half a billion accounts. Nearly 100 million of them belong to users from the Union*. [online]. [2021-04-08]. Available at: <<https://euractiv.sk/section/digitalizacia/news/facebooku-unikli-data-pol-miliardy-uctov-takmer-100-milionov-z-nich-patri-puszivatelom-z-unie/>>.

into it and get to know it. As Dvořák says, *"it is no longer a matter of 'moving' forward, but of 'sourcing' from the future."*¹⁹

4. The future of online politics

The era of formlessness also brings with it many pitfalls that hinder the objective acceptance of reality, whether our own or political. Recipients lose interest in the past during online communication, preferring an associationalist mindset based on images rather than discourse.²⁰ Hence our concern that a generation is gradually being reshaped and born that will only accept history that is currently written about on social media, not history that actually happened and is 'in the library in the textbooks'. We believe that if misinformation continues to spread on the internet, and at the same time recipients become less and less educated from books, a completely different understanding of historical and political events may result as recipients will be working with incomplete or incorrect information without context.

However, one more significant element has been added to the era of formlessness, namely virtual lying in the form of "deepfakes", which has contributed to manipulation on social networks. This is an artificially created video where a person looks, speaks and articulates like their original. This technological innovation has also begun to be used in the political arena. *"In 2020, a political group published a speech by the Belgian Prime Minister linking the COVID-19 outbreak to environmental damage and calling for strong action on climate change."*²¹ Many viewers believed that this speech was real. US Senator Marco Rubio sees the publication of political deepfakes as a potential threat to society. *"All you need today is the ability to produce a very realistic fake video that could jeopardize an election and plunge our country into an internal crisis and deeply weaken us,"*²² he said in an interview with Forbes. According to The Global Risks Report, on one hand, artificial intelligence represents the innovation with the greatest impact, but it also identifies it as the greatest existential threat.²³

¹⁹ DVOŘÁK, T. et al. (2016). Prague: Academy of Performing Arts.

²⁰ GÁLIK, S. - GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S. (2015): *Influence of the Internet on the Cognitive Abilities of Man. Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Approach*. Communication Today, 6 (1), 4-15.

²¹ FORBES EDITORIAL, US: *The deepfake phenomenon will cause chaos in the world. And we are not prepared for it*. [online]. [2021-07-30]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.sk/fenomen-deepfake-sposobi-vo-svete-chaos-a-my-na-to-nie-sme-pripraveni/>>.

²² FORBES EDITORIAL, US: *The deepfake phenomenon will cause chaos in the world. And we are not prepared for it*. [online]. [2021-07-30]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.sk/fenomen-deepfake-sposobi-vo-svete-chaos-a-my-na-to-nie-sme-pripraveni/>>.

²³ HÚSKOVÁ, E. : *Current trends in the dissemination of disinformation*, SSPI - Slovak Institute for Security Policy, 2020. [online]. Available at: < <https://stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/publi-trendy-%C5%A1%C3%ADrenia-dezinform%C3%A1ci%C3%AD2.pdf>>.

Conclusion

During the development of our work, we found that the problem is not in the use of algorithms, marketing strategies or the creation of deepfakes, but mainly in their regulation in the digital market and the protection of users. In the few years of its existence, social networks have earned a dominant position, which mainly affects the economy, democracy, fundamental rights and society.

To address this imbalance, the EU has prepared an update of the existing rules on digital services, the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA), which should be applied across the EU. The new regulation will therefore also affect the publication of political advertisements on social networks, which should now be labelled. Political ads should include information about the advertiser, their price and source of funding and the election for which they were made. Under the new proposal, non-compliance with this obligation carries a fine of up to 4% of their worldwide turnover.²⁴

But Epstein worries that laws will be too short for the manipulative tactics of social networks: *'Only technology can fight technology; laws and regulations will never keep up with new technologies.'*²⁵ There is, however, another way out that could mitigate the impact of manipulation on the recipient, and this is seen in the form of counter-temporality²⁶, that is, creating time for the formation of social consensus, human cognition and knowledge. However, whether this will give the current generation enough time to 'wake up' from simultaneous time and realise its implications on their not only political decision-making is questionable.

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