Social Media Networks and Ideological Polarization:
Power Relations and Socio-Cultural Impact

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Is social media reshaping international conflicts through ideological and political polarisation in the 21st century? The contribution of this conference to the contemporary world relates to the power of social media networks as a battlefield in which power is decided and conflict is managed. Studies indicate that in the era of social media, we have shifted from a democratic public sphere to the domain of deception and collective mind manipulation that creates polarised groups, nations and cultures. The same studies also provide evidence that the disruptive power of social media, or networked power, is rooted in its use to manipulate the public mind and win the war in international conflicts. Among these conflicts are the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Russian war on Ukraine and Islamophobia. Social media networks constitute an integral part of "media capitalism" that also includes consumerism and ideology.

The debate over ideological polarisation is on the rise everywhere, and many publications have explained how and why it happens. Another research trend focuses on the threatening effects it has on democracy, the public sphere, civil society, international relations and political tolerance. Algorithms function to personalise users' online behaviour, placing users in a bubble and exposing themselves to information that matches with their previous patterns of consumption. Although digitally connected citizens are increasingly accessing varieties of information from different platforms, evidence shows that the algorithms that drive these platforms are activating users' biases and eventually enhance the spreading of fake and misleading news. Meanwhile, this behaviour meets the tendency of social media users to consume content that aligns with their attitudes and values and disregard content that conflicts with or challenges

their existing beliefs. Accumulated evidence is consistent with the concerns that social media networks reinforce ideological exclusion, and that the consumption patterns of social media users tends to focus on clusters of highly ideologically similar news outlets.

The ultimate outcome of ideological polarisation is that polarised people who echo their favoured views lack the tendency to get involved in a proactive discussion of opposing ideas and opinions. This widens the gap between the two polar extreme views of social and political reality, and results in low or no tolerance towards others and the rejection of the views of those on the other side of the political spectrum. Polarised groups and nations also do not use their critical mind to judge the adequacy of their views, and lack the ability to see any vision aside from their own. Although the psychological theories explaining the phenomenon of polarisation are valid, we argue that their explanatory power is very limited. To better understand this phenomenon and its socio-cultural consequences, we have to look at the structural organisation of global social media, the powerful countries and the companies that manage the global flow of disinformation, the engineering of public opinion and the manipulation of the ideological public sphere for commercial, economic and political benefits. Drawing on data collected from the 2017 Computational Propaganda Project, it was found that state and non-state actors are increasingly using social media as a tool of information warfare on both local and global levels. The recent examples of Russian involvement in the United Kingdom's Brexit Referendum, interference with the US election of November 2016, and the social media manipulation and banning of Palestinian social media platforms by the Israeli occupation during armed conflicts have proven it to be a powerful tool for ideological and political influence. In fact, the project concludes that computational propaganda is now one of the most powerful tools against democracy. Social media firms may not be creating this horrible content, but they are the platform for it.

Are algorithms neutral? Can we hold algorithms accountable? What are the forces that control algorithms that influence social behaviour and determine alliances, issues of war, conflict and peace? Studies demonstrate that algorithms are designed by people with ideologies, biases and institutional mandates. Experts and computer scientists such as Nick Diakopoulos argue that algorithms are beyond control and accountability. They are black boxes. We as human beings lack the skills and the capacity to understand how such algorithms operate; and this is why Andrew Leonard, a journalist, states that such automated software control our lives. Since the world is affected by such mechanisms, it is the right of people to regulate it, understand the power behind it and the invisible goals and agenda it serves. Digital technologies mean freedom, decentralisation and the empowerment of the powerless. But experience tells us they are not neutral forces. They came to perpetuate existing power be it cultural, economic, political or military at the expense of marginalised cultures and civilisations.

Indeed, digital technologies have fostered freedom of expression, the free flow of information

and improved governance. In some cases, it has enabled marginalised groups to hold their governments accountable. But the dark side is that it enables authoritarian systems across borders with their influence to engineer the public mind, sharpen polarisation and undermine democracy. As Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil and Jessica Ludwig conclude, authoritarian regimes including those in Russia and China are striving to construct the international standards that will determine how the future generation of digital technology is conceptualised and practiced around the world.

Even though Russia and China offer the most striking examples of the control of online discourse for political and ideological goals, they are by no means the only such cases. The majority of countries in the contemporary world system, including the United States, are increasingly restricting social media networks for different purposes. Autocratic countries fight to restore sovereignty, legitimacy and power, which is a part of a wider and permanent challenge that has taken shape in an era of globalised authoritarianism. They have contracted with companies in Western and non-Western countries to provide surveillance services that limit the scope and nature of diversity and enhance the diffusion of governmental ideology. The same freedom technologies that empower freedom of expression and have been shown to be suppression technologies providing the main asset of a surveillance state. On the other hand, the United States, as an imperial country, has managed to dismiss the myth that social media is out of control, and made the family of protocols known as Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and Internet Protocol (IP) from a protocol of freedom to a protocol of control. Moreover, the United States controls the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware and network connectivity. Digital hegemony equals ideological colonialism, which is why Michael Kwet, a Visiting Fellow of the Information Society Project at Yale Law School, suggests a structural change. Otherwise, he argues, the march of technological progresses will resemble the colonial past.

In consistent with this conclusion, Alex Galloway, author and professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, establishes that empire is how technological control exists under decentralisation; and Langdon Winner views technological architecture as reflective of political power structures. Similarly, Laura DeNardis, Professor of Technology, Ethics and Society at Georgetown University, and Andreas Hackl, Lecturer in the Anthropology of Development at University of Edinburgh, rightly state that social media companies influence politics, ideologies and communication rights through their ability to control the flow of information.

Given the above discussion, the central argument around which this conference is based is that the digital technologies of freedom, empowerment and social change have become tools in the hands of powerful countries in the contemporary world system to impose their ideological, economic and political domination. Thus, the theories of psychology such as selective

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exposure, filter bubble or eco-chamber are not sufficient theoretical frameworks to explain the phenomenon of ideological polarisation and the and hegemonic nature of network connectivity. The explanatory power of such theorisation is very limited and unable to attribute polarisation and its socio-political consequences to its original sources. Hence, the critical perspective is badly needed to help us understand this phenomenon. It is no surprise that ideologies are modalities of power that are involved in the formation and maintenance of unequal social and political relations within and between nations and cultures. In the contemporary world system, social media networks are most likely produced, planned and run by the global powers that seek to control political and ideological discourse in order to instil a common-sense worldview and finally to win the war be it military, economic, social or cultural. It is through this mechanism, hegemony is established discursively to manage international and intercultural conflicts and crises. Social media networks are not the owners of power, but the sphere through which power is negotiated and contested. Users of social media are also victims of implicit or sometimes explicit manipulators of their mind who seek to attain specific ends in the struggle over power and counter-power.

More directly related to this conference are two main critical knowledge gaps that remain salient. The first is the scarcity of empirical studies examining social media polarisation from a critical perspective that views social media as a force for perpetuation of unjust power relations both within and between countries. The second is the lack of future studies that map the road for a just infrastructure of the internet as a legal and legitimate step towards just international and intercultural relations. Based on the structural and architectural nature of social media networks, the business model governing its performance, consumption patterns and the significant role ideologies play in all phases of intercultural and international conflicts, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies and the Department of Mass Communications at Qatar University are organising an academic and policy-oriented conference. The conference will host the most prominent philosophers, scholars, academics and experts from around the world to explore the extent to which social media contributes to the ideological and political polarisations that shape conflicts between powerful and powerless nations, the global North and the global South, developed and developing countries, and rulers and ruled peoples. More importantly, it will explore how the internet can be governed in a way that neutralises social media without empowering the dictatorial systems that seeks to censor and regulate the digital communication.

Accordingly, the conference seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Is social media reshaping global conflicts in the 21st century and to what extent?

2. What forces determine the ideological polarisation in social media and what are its socio-cultural consequences?

3. Is ideological polarisation in social media a new wave of the cultural and socio-economic

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hegemony of the West?

4. To what extent is ideological polarisation an outcome of global network capitalism?

5. Why do people share ideologically misleading social media content despite the availability of accurate information?

6. To what extent is social media polarisation a manifestation of trust deficit in both political systems and mainstream media?

7. How and why does control over social media network exist after the technological decentralisation?

8. Is social media ideological polarisation a shift in the epistemic authority from professional to non-professional journalists?

9. Can the countries of the global South reconfigure the infrastructures of social media networks to decolonise digital communication while protecting the civil and political freedoms of citizens?

10. What does the future of social media, ideological polarisation and socio- economic hegemony of the West look like?

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