Introduction

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The first edition of the *Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, published in 2016 (Bruns et al., 2016), arrived at a time of epochal change, even if few of our authors and editors were fully aware of it at the time. We had witnessed the rise of social media as a key tool of political communication and campaigning; we had seen its role in significant grassroots mobilising efforts including the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter; and we had experienced the way that social media platforms came to change everyday information flows for ordinary people – on news and politics as much as on virtually any other topic.

These changes were substantial enough. Although the presence of Facebook and Twitter logos on the placards brandished by protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square in the early 2010s did not mean that the Arab Spring could be reduced to 'a social media revolution', as some commentators had attempted to do, social media nonetheless served as an important and comparatively uncensored communications tool for these protest organisers. If the Arab Spring and other social media-enhanced political protest movements failed as they did, then, one reason is that they were unable to translate their grassroots support in the streets and on social media into a level of political coordination and organisation that could sustain such an alternative approach to politics. Protest leaders might have been "crowdsourced to prominence" (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013: 145) through the collective and connective mechanisms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) of hashtag communities and other online groupings, but they were unprepared for more institutionalised forms of leadership. Social media had been shown to be a powerful new political tool, but the old fallibilities and limitations of individuals and groups in politics remained.

Indeed, the first edition of the *Routledge Companion* was published during the Brexit and U.S. presidential election campaigns of 2016, and both those campaigns highlighted those fallibilities, as well as the faultlines in the political systems in which they took place, in devastating detail. We editors and contributors to the first edition certainly did not foresee the extent to which interested actors had already prepared to subvert and corrupt the genuinely prosocial and prodemocratic potentials of social media to serve their own interests, and had conversely also identified social media's rich uses for antisocial and antidemocratic activities. Much has come to light about these efforts in the meantime: many journalists and scholars have published analyses of the extent to which foreign influence campaigns such as those run by the cynically named Internet Research Agency (IRA), headquartered in St. Petersburg, but even more so also those of

the various domestic institutional, collective, and individual mis- and disinformation spreaders, undermined information flows and degraded public trust in governments, politics, and the media.

As a result of these developments, several new terms entered our vocabulary in the 2010s: for instance, 'fake news' (now itself abused by populists and propagandists as a slur to attack the quality media that still attempt to fight mis- and disinformation), 'astroturfing', 'sockpuppeting', 'whataboutism', 'sealioning', and 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour' (Facebook's term for groups of accounts attempting to enhance the visibility and spread of problematic information artificially; Gleicher, 2018) – collectively, all signs of an overall 'information disorder' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) that has gradually spread through the body politic.

Further, the growing recognition of these problems led to often very ambivalent responses by social media platforms. Over the years, and often depending both on the prevailing political contexts in the countries they operated in, and their Chief Executives' levels of adherence to a uniquely American misunderstanding of 'free speech' as an absolute good, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and others oscillated widely between *laissez-faire* attitudes that minimised intervention, and more forceful policing by algorithmic and human moderators. More consistently, though, as the term 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour' also implies, they located the root cause of any problems with their users themselves, rather than in their own platform designs, which favour, reward, and even monetise the fanning of controversy and outrage.

As we launched the first edition of the *Routledge Companion*, we certainly could not have predicted how these tendencies towards the derailment of constructive public discourse and the weaponisation of mis- and disinformation would be turbocharged by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated infodemic (United Nations, 2020). Not only did the anxieties caused by the information vacuum of the early pandemic months further the spread and amplification of mis- and disinformation (e.g. Duffy & Tan, 2022), and lead to the emergence of a new generation of influencers and agitators exploiting the global crisis for their own political gains (cf. Majó-Vásquez et al., 2020); but these developments also exposed the vulnerabilities of transnational, national, and local governmental, journalistic, and civic authorities, and their glaring inabilities to effectively communicate key information – especially also via social media – to citizens, to safeguard them from harm (e.g. Bruns et al., 2022; Evanega et al., 2020).

Although certainly not the only factor, the COVID-19 pandemic was nonetheless critical in establishing patterns for the use of social media in politics that have been with us ever since: these include the widespread use of such platforms for propaganda and populism; the liberal dissemination of half-truths, unsourced claims, and outright lies by self-interested political actors (e.g. Faris et al., 2020); the failure of the fourth estate to keep up with, fact-check, and debunk this 'Gish gallop' of falsehoods (Scott, 2004), and thereby to hold politicians to account; the resultant broadening of the Overton window

governing what incorrect or extreme statements can be made in public without societal sanction in the name of 'free speech'; the enrolment of ordinary citizens as political partisans, populist fan communities, and even participatory disinformation amplifiers (Starbird et al., 2023); and the tendency toward polarised communication, where even previously nonpartisan decisions are parsed through a reductionist left/right, liberal/conservative, us/them prism (Esau et al., 2024).

These political and societal developments are paralleled by further changes at the platform level, too: this has seen social media platforms' abandonment of corporate social responsibility for their user communities; the termination of effective fact-checking and content moderation efforts; the evasion of independent scrutiny by discontinuing effective data access for researchers, journalists, and regulatory authorities (Bruns, 2019); the direct alignment of social media platform actions with the policies of illiberal and autocratic regimes, from earlier examples in India and Turkey to more recent developments in the United States; and ultimately even the creation or takeover of platforms as explicit mouthpieces for anti-democratic actors, from Donald Trump's Truth Social to Elon Musk's X (Graham & Andrejevic, 2024).

This long list of symptoms of severe decline – or, as Cory Doctorow might put it, this 'enshittification' of social media (Doctorow, 2022) – is not meant to paint the epoch preceding it as a kind of 'golden age' for social media in politics: yes, it was a time of exploration and experimentation, and as such to an extent also of optimism and even hope for a new and more inclusive mode of politics, but even so it was also already possible to discern the challenges that arise with any new communication technology, and to anticipate social media's uses by problematic actors; some of the contributors in the first edition of the *Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* certainly did just that.

Equally, the present era – from the political shocks of 2016 and beyond until now – should not be regarded as universally awful: social media also continue to be used for prosocial and prodemocratic mobilisation, and in such uses can contribute to more positive outcomes. We have seen social media used to draw attention to injustices, to promote more inclusive ways of looking at the world, to correct untruths, and even to fill information gaps caused by the decline of professional journalism. The skilful use of social media by authoritarian and illiberal figures is often met with resistance and does not make their success at the ballot box a foregone conclusion. We have seen the mass exodus of users from Elon Musk's X and the emergence of new platforms with different and innovative governance models; new attempts by democratic governments in several regions – in Brazil, in the European Union – to enforce more responsible platform policies and enable independent third-party scrutiny of their operation. Yes, the world has grown measurably darker over the past ten years – even before we come to the continuing mass killings in Myanmar, Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere, or the increasingly evident climate catastrophe facing all of us – but even so not all hope is lost.

In its 32 chapters, then, this second edition of the *Routledge Companion* attempts to cover the good, the bad, and the as yet uncertain of these developments, ten years on from the first book. In our opening section, Concepts, our contributors cover some of the key concepts that have emerged or re-emerged to prominence within these past ten years: these include resurgent phenomena like populism, propaganda, and polarisation. Here, our authors also pay particular attention to how these phenomena are reconfigured by new disruptions: as our digital and social media environments face the rising tide of generative artificial intelligence, for instance, the changing affordances and logics of digital platforms continue to substantially transform conventional political debate and campaigning.

Several of our contributors to the second section, Challenges, reflect on what this means for our research on these concepts. The contributions here encourage us to self-critically reevaluate the nature and intentions of our work, especially also from majority world perspectives, and to question whether concepts such as cosmopolitanism, mainstream and fringe, echo chambers and filter bubbles, and authenticity are still helpful for our understanding of the political uses of social media, and whether they may need to reconsidered in light of new developments.

The chapters in subsequent sections are grouped thematically. First, in the Policies section, we feature several contributions that explore the corporate and state policies that govern the various political uses of social media platforms: these cover the platforms' inconsistent and vacillating support for independent fact-checking initiatives; policies on and the policing of political advertising on social media; frameworks for gathering data from social media platforms to enable critical, independent, public-interest research into their roles in public debate; and initiatives for the use or development of social media platforms by democratic governments themselves.

Next, in Problems, we address several current and emerging political dysfunctions: the intersections between propaganda activities by state and non-state actors; the role of popular social media influencers in promoting participatory disinformation campaigns; approaches to combatting coordinated influence operations; the embrace of populist propaganda as a communicative strategy for political candidates; and the growing use of generative AI in the creation of harmful social media content masquerading as humour.

We continue from here with a grouping of chapters that explicitly address developments on key social media platforms: the Platform section covers the dismantling of Twitter and its reinvention as X; the role of Weibo for political communication in China's authoritarian media system; the diverse uses of Instagram for political communication; the impact of WhatsApp as a communication platform especially for Indian politics; the emergence of Telegram as both a platform for political content, and a political actor in its own right; and the various uses of TikTok for playful and meme-driven political activism.

The collection concludes, finally, with a set of chapters that sketch out potential further developments in research and practice: the Possibilities section revisits long-standing questions about the leadership structure of political movements emerging from digital activism; highlights the persistent uses of social media for resistance even under oppressive authoritarian conditions; examines the extension of physical warfare to the environments of digital and social media; and explores the role of social media in enhancing the visibility of emerging actors in electoral contests. Clearly, these potential dynamics are far from universally positive, yet embedded within them there also remains a sense that, even at a time of severe challenges to the global democratic project, glimpses of alternative, and more pro-democratic, future trajectories can still be seen.

As this brief introduction to the structure of this collection already indicates, this edition arrives, of course, at what may turn out to be yet another pivotal moment in the intertwining history of social media and politics, as the impact of new, consumer-grade generative artificial intelligence technologies is beginning to be felt in full. Increasingly incorporated into search engines, social media, mobile devices, operating systems, and many other facets of everyday digital communication, GenAI could prove to be a power for good or bad, and inevitably will be used for both: to summarise complex political topics in everyday language and thereby open them up for interrogation by a much wider range of citizens, but also to 'flood the zone' with even more artificially generated misleading and false information in text, image, audio, and video forms – so-called 'AI slop' (Meyer, 2025) – that overwhelms journalistic scrutiny and feeds into existing processes of participatory disinformation dissemination.

Further, like social media platforms before them, generative AI providers and their (usually) tech-bro CEOs are themselves far from neutral political, economic, and societal actors: how they design their systems, what safeguards against nefarious uses or even accidental malfunction they implement, and how they respond to the emerging regulatory regimes for artificial intelligence industries is certain to be determined also by a mix of factors including their entrepreneurial philosophy and corporate bottom line. Already, too, various antidemocratic actors are known to be building their own generative AI systems, reflecting their political preferences and obsessions (Roose, 2025) – or, as in Donald Trump's Executive Order against the phantasm of 'woke AI', seek to impose their worldviews on other operators (Robins-Early & Gambino, 2025).

Several chapters in this second edition of the *Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* anticipate these future trends and speculate on their further trajectories. If there is to be a third edition of the *Companion* in another ten years' time – with a different team of editors, no doubt –, perhaps we will find out how accurate their inklings about these developments turned out to be. For now, however, we offer this second collection as an extension of the first, bringing us up to date with the state of play in social media and politics as of 2026. At the same time, this edition stands at a crossroads: generative AI and other emerging technologies may either accelerate the crises of disinformation,

polarisation, and democratic decline, or open new spaces for civic innovation, regulation, and accountability. The politics of digital platforms remain unsettled, and this *Companion* provides a critical map of the present while pointing to the possibilities and futures that will define the next decade of social media and politics.

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