



Digital Democracy and Public Discourse

Dissonant, Disrupted and Unedited?

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Have you heard? The coronavirus does not exist. It is a bioweapon that has been grown in laboratories. The virus spreads through 5G. You can get rid of it with chlorine dioxide. A hair dryer will do the trick. Thanks to the Corona virus, nature is returning and there are dolphins in Venice again. These are just a few examples of the numerous lies, conspiracy legends, half-truths and absurdities that have been widely circulated on social media in recent months in the context of the COVID19 crisis. A wild mélange of virus denial, supposed miracle cures, racist and xenophobic content, now with a COVID19-spin, and the usual world-domination conspiracy myths. As early as the beginning of February 2020, the WHO warned of the "infodemic" that would accompany pandemic events and make it difficult to get through with correct and important information. In Germany, 46 percent reported to have encountered false information about the Corona virus (Hölig et al 2021: 31).

Especially in a crisis, citizens need orientation and rational public discourse. But the "epistemic crisis" is affecting democracy at large, beyond questions of health policies and vaccination campaigns. How can democracy work when citizens do not share the same perceptions of reality, when "alternative" facts circulate widely? How can electoral processes be safeguarded from the easy manipulation of social signals? The great enthusiasm that had once welcomed digital communication and the Internet as heralds of more citizen participation and deliberation, less censorship and a new wave of democratization, has turned into pessimism and frustration in the light of "dark participation" (social bots or trolls, Quandt 2018), massive hate campaigns and the surge of disinformation online.

Social media as news sources

In all age groups under 45, the Internet has replaced television as the main source of news. For 10% of German internet users, social media are a main source of news, and for 25% of 18- to 24-year-olds. Only 3% of this age group still read a newspaper, compared with three times as many in 2019. Even WhatsApp is used by 16% of Germans as a news source (all data: Hölig/Hasebrink 2020 and Hölig et al. 2021). So what circulates via social media is by no means marginal or irrelevant to public discourse.

It would be a misunderstanding to regard online and offline, traditional media and social networks as separate communication environments. We live in hybrid media systems in which both areas overlap and are interwoven. Information flows and discourse dynamics take place across different platforms. For example, a study by the fact-checking organization

CORRECTIV showed that while people mostly encounter disinformation about COVID19 on WhatsApp, the source in most cases is YouTube - precisely because many links to videos are shared in WhatsApp groups (Echtermann 2020). Looking at the links most shared via Twitter in tweets about Corona and Covid-19, we see for the most part links to traditional mass media, e.g., linked articles from daily newspapers or public radio. Information, correct or incorrect, travels across multiple platforms and social networks, just as users do not use either Twitter or Instagram or YouTube, but rather network different platforms. Citizens increasingly access “legacy” media not only via direct access (e.g., via Zeit online), but via links shared on social media.

Social media are algorithmically curated information environments. The content we see there has been selected for us by algorithms on the basis of data. Everything we click on, like or comment on therefore influences what content we later see or - perhaps even more importantly - what we cannot see. This means that this way of accessing information is highly personalized, for one thing. Everyone sees different content, which makes it more difficult to perceive a common, a shared reality. For another, social media is primarily used to share free content. High-quality journalism, investigative research, elaborate reports published only for subscribers or behind a paywall are unlikely to spread on Twitter or Facebook. What is popular is what is accessible and triggers many interactions.

Not made for discourse: How design influences communication

The technological and social affordances, i.e., the features these platforms, provide, the way they are set up, the interaction possibilities they offer us, and their design, have a direct influence on the communication and discourses that take place there. After early studies primarily emphasized the emancipatory and democratizing potential (Facebook revolutions!), a rather sober and gloomy picture emerges after more than ten years of empirical research. The design and functioning of social media are perfectly suited to disguising the sources of information and manipulating social signals (likes, shares, comments) (Bimber/Gil de Zúñiga 2020). A high-choice media environment has not led to better informed citizens, but to a decline of available political information and more inequality in political knowledge (van Aelst et al 2019). Hyperactive users, automated accounts (so-called social bots) create the impression of social movements and social relevance, where actually only loud minorities mobilize.

Whether in a crisis or under normal conditions, social media are hardly suitable for rational public discourse. This does not have to be the case, and the negative effects can't be directly attributed to the technology itself. Digital platforms are not primarily set up for political information and discourse, but to make as much money as possible from advertising and the collection of marketable data (Zuboff 2019). Social media are no democracy machines, but advertisement platforms. However, if a society shifts public communication and discourse to such an environment, collateral effects emerge.

Disinformation is also a business model

Studies show that disinformation spreads faster, further and deeper via social media than factually correct information, especially when it comes to political information (Vosoughi/Roy/Aral 2018). This is not necessarily due to the technology, but also to the users themselves. Clickbait, catchy headlines and titles lead to many interactions, which are then rewarded by the platforms' algorithms. A great deal is clicked and shared without having been read beforehand (Gabelkov/Ramachandran/Chaintreau/Legout 2016). This makes disinformation a business model because a lot of money can be made from interactions, such

as clicks on links that lead to websites full of advertisements or frequently clicked YouTube videos. This kind of business model with disinformation was also evident in the 2016 U.S. election campaign. Especially in a crisis, when users are looking for orientation and information, this can quickly become a problem.

In order to keep users on the platforms as long as possible, so that they leave as much attention and interaction there as possible, social media tend to radicalize and polarize (Tufekci 2018). In 2016, one-third of the major political Facebook groups in Germany consisted of extremist groups dominated by racism and conspiracy legends, whose members were largely recruited via Facebook's own recommendation systems, i.e., Facebook actively suggested to users that they might like these groups (Horwitz/Seetharaman 2020). When it comes to political communication by parties and politicians, emotional, negative messages and "attack messages" spread particularly well (Hemsley 2019), from which populist actors in particular benefit (Bobba 2019; Jost/Maurer/Hassler 2020).

These collateral effects do not take place in a vacuum, but against the backdrop of a massive loss of relevance of established gatekeepers, a struggling journalism that has lost most of its advertisement revenue to the platforms, and an ever weakening intermediation by parties and political institutions. As a result, the public sphere today is increasingly unedited and dissonant: a multiplicity of voices and opinions that communicate against each other in a cacophony and fail to manage conflicts in a meaningful way (Bennett/Pfetsch 2018). This is not a temporary phenomenon, but a structural problem of political communication in digital publics.

What can we do?

We have outsourced public discourse and our news sources to an environment that is not made for it and brings with it a whole host of negative effects on political knowledge and interest (Shehata/Strömbäck 2018), well documented by empirical research. However, it is important to understand that the current information environment is nothing natural or set in stone – it was created, and it can be changed. After years of “Wild West”, in which digital platforms grew and made massive profits in the absence of any form of regulation, societies and political institutions have set out to change this situation. The problem is that one cannot regulate (well), what one does not understand. Despite a decade of research, scholars still understand only little about discourse dynamics and information flows and their impact on opinion formation. One reason lies in the power asymmetry between society and the platforms – platforms do not like to share their profits or their data with society, they benefit from proprietary technologies that are untransparent, black-boxed, impenetrable. Currently, society tend to outsource finding solutions to the platforms themselves – they are expected to be “arbiters of truth” and to delete or ban harmful content. But to build a digital information environment that is beneficial for democracy, a more comprehensive effort from various social actors is needed.

What everyone can do: Research shows that how we use social media makes matters worse. If you want to be well informed, don't rely on free content. Don't share anything you haven't read or watched in full beforehand. Don't overestimate popularity ratings like likes or shares: they mean almost nothing. Read comments with skepticism: Very few, very active, and often ideologically driven players comment very much. Noisy minorities: Topics and opinions online are not representative of the population as a whole. Remember: Social networks are pretty unedited (anyone can post anything) and full of hidden advertising.

What civil society can do: Support professional journalism – journalism may not be perfect, but for a public sphere to work, it needs strong, independent, authoritative and trusted institutions that provide epistemic editing (Bimber/Gil de Zúñiga 2020: 710): “operating a truth-biased

filter on claims before they enter the broad public sphere, publicly identifying false claims that escape the filter, and providing signals about the provenance of truth claims such that interested parties can weigh evidence themselves.“ It is also necessary to strengthen the media literacy and the digital literacy of citizens – surveys show that less than 10 percent of EU citizens have a good understanding of how algorithms work (Grzymek & Puntschuh 2018).

What political actors can do: In the long term, it won't work without regulation. During the coronavirus crisis, platforms took numerous measures to show that they take disinformation seriously. Google prioritized information from authoritative sources, Twitter and Facebook deleted disinformation or provided it with warnings, WhatsApp stopped the mass sharing of links in chat groups. They also took serious steps to stop the dissemination of lies about electoral process by de-platforming the out-going US president, Donald Trump. Indeed, disinformation runs from the top – it is often parties, politicians, people in power with large reach and impact who spread disinformation, not only the infamous troll-factories in Russia. However, platforms lack incentives to prioritize the public good, a sense of public service, and to implement it into their technologies. Finding meaningful rules for social media will require platforms, policymakers and academics to cooperate more and better than they have in the past.

The coronavirus crisis has exposed grievances in many areas. The infodemic has shown us how excellently social media are suited to spreading disinformation and propaganda, how receptive broader sections of the population are to such messages, and how unsuitable these platforms are for rational discourse. This remains the case beyond the acute crisis, but it is by no means inevitable. Technologies are not static; they can be changed. It remains the task of democratic societies to insist that technologies benefit it rather than harm it.

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