

Promoting Democracy in the Digital Public Sphere: Applying Theoretical Ideals to Online Political Communication

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Abstract

Democratic debate has undergone a structural transformation due to the rise of the Internet, social media and online communities. Scholars of political communication have sought to diagnose the threat that these changes pose by theorizing “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers.” Responding to a growing desire on the part of policymakers to react to these trends and to uphold democratic values, we draw on empirical analyses of online discourse to consider the difficulties involved in this endeavor. Highlighting the diversity of trends detected by empirical studies of the digital public sphere, we argue that both political theory and empirical analysis are needed to promote democratic ideals. Using Jürgen Habermas’s “coffeehouse model,” we establish theoretical markers for desirable deliberative practice and consider the conditions under which these ideals can be advanced. By focusing on the significance of both digital design and user behaviour, we suggest initiatives that can promote favoured democratic ideals.

Keywords

Democratic Theory, Digital Public Sphere, Jürgen Habermas, Political Communication

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“*Coffee-houses* make
all sorts of people sociable,
the rich and the poor meet together,
as also do the learned and unlearned.”
- John Houghton (1701),
in Cowan 2014, 42

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, the Internet has emerged as a threat to democracy. While these worries often centre on campaigns and elections, there is also increasing concern about “fake news” in the form of mis- and dis-information, voter manipulation, polarisation and data misuse within online discourses (Howard et al 2018). A rich body of academic literature has emerged to analyse the impact of technology on public debate, resulting in both a wealth of theoretical scholarship seeking to benchmark ideal practices, and empirical work documenting the nature of public debate online. Both of these literatures raise urgent questions about the impact of digital technology on democratic life. However, it remains unclear how societies can and should respond to the threats posed by technology in the public sphere.

Reviewing these debates, we call for greater cross-fertilisation between political theory and digital communication. Building on scholarship highlighting the gulf between sub-disciplines (Van Biezen and Saward 2008), we argue that responding to trends online can be enhanced by disciplinary collaboration. Indeed, recognising a demand for policies designed to strengthen democracy (Bickert 2019), we argue that theoretical *and* empirical insights should be used to prescribe interventions in the public sphere online. More specifically, we make the case for policymakers to promote a more proactive vision, rather than reacting to problems once they have emerged. Drawing on deliberative democratic theory to identify good practices as well as the

empirical literature on filter bubbles and echo chambers, we consider how prescriptions for digital design and user behaviour can be used to promote democratic goals in the digital public sphere.

In order to advance this argument, we present a detailed engagement with current theoretical and empirical scholarship. Although democracy can be conceptualised in a number of ways, “research on the media and political communication tends to lean, often implicitly, on Jürgen Habermas’s work on the public sphere and deliberative democracy” (Karppinen et al. 2008, 6), which has “set the agenda for a whole new generation of scholarly inquiry” (Cowan 2013, 44). Drawing explicitly on this theoretical framework, we identify two deliberative benchmarks for desirable democratic practice online: (1) the presence of *diverse communities*, which bring together individuals from across society different parts of society, and; (2) the availability of *common, publicly-available knowledge* as the basis for shared discourse. Exploring the conditions under which these benchmarks are found, we highlight the significance of (a) digital design and (b) user behaviour in promoting these ideals.

The argument is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the current state of empirical research examining the structure and major characteristics of the digital public sphere. Focusing on prominent debates connected to filter bubbles and echo chambers, we highlight the diversity of conflicting empirical insights as well as the difficulties involved in formulating coherent policy responses. In the second section, we assert the importance of establishing clear theoretical benchmarks for any response. Drawing on the coffeehouse public sphere as a crucial space of democratic discourse, we identify two key benchmarks. In the third section, we consider how these theoretical insights can be integrated with the existing empirical evidence and reflect on the kinds of policy initiatives that would promote deliberative ideals. Spotlighting the significance of design and behaviour, we present examples of policy interventions which advance these ideals.

In this way, we entwine theoretical and empirical insights to develop a “more sophisticated model for making sense of the impacts of technology” (Wright 2012, 252) that can be used to prescribe deliberative (or, indeed, other conceptualizations of) democratic ideals.

Sketching the Diversity of the Digital Public Sphere

Confronting a raft of online media, devices, potential users and behaviours, empirical studies have assessed the impact of digital technology in a range of different ways. Rather than summarizing this rapidly growing literature in its entirety, we concentrate on two ideas that dominate investigations into online public debate and have been a prominent focus of regulatory debate: echo chambers and filter bubbles. These phenomena are widely seen as posing key threats to public debate, as they appear to violate democratic norms promoted by a number of different schools of democratic thought. And yet, as this section shows, it is difficult to diagnose their impacts or to determine what can and should be done about these developments.

Firstly, so-called “echo chambers” digitally segregate individuals into a series of parallel but separate conversations separated by ideology, education, and class that lead individuals to engage in public debate within highly polarized groups that are “largely closed, mostly non-interacting communities created on different narratives” (Quattrociocchi et al 2016,14). Cass Sunstein (2009, 44) argues that “[n]ew technologies, emphatically including the Internet, are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others.” This raises fears of fragmentation which make it “difficult for people armed with...opposing perspectives to reach anything like common ground or to make progress on the underlying questions” if they are unaware of competing views held by other citizens (Ibid, 57).

A range of studies have provided evidence to support these ideas (Mutz and Martin 2011). Looking at interactions on Twitter, for example, Marco Pennacchiotti and Ana-Maria Popescu develop a classificatory framework showing that Democrats “consistently have a large percentage of friends with the same affiliation,” while “Republican Twitter users tend to have friends – and followers – with both probable Republican and Democrat affiliations” (2011, 435). This echoes the conclusions of Elanor Colleoni et al., who find that “Democrats create outbound ties in 88% of the cases with Democrats and in 12% of the cases with Republicans. On average, Republicans create outbound ties in 76% of the cases with Democrats and 24% of the cases with Republicans” (2014, 326). These findings show that when looking at Twitter as a social medium “we see higher levels of homophily and a more echo chamber-like structure of communication” (Ibid., 328). Additionally, survey evidence from Pew (2014) found that in the US one-in-four (26%) Facebook users have “hidden, blocked, defriended or stopped following someone on a social networking site based on disagreements over political posts.”

These data have had an important impact upon popular understanding of public debate online. For example, the UK the Online Harm white paper, which aims to regulate technology companies, has pointed to the threat posed by echo chambers. It argues that there is a need for codes of practice that will promote “diverse news content, countering the ‘echo chamber’ in which people are only exposed to information which reinforces their existing views” (HM Government 2019).

However, there is also growing evidence that the “echo chamber is overstated” (Dubois and Blank 2018, 740; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al 2016). Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank, for example, present survey data showing that “people regularly encounter things that they disagree with. People check multiple sources. People try to confirm information using search. Possibly most

important, people discover things that change their political opinions” (2018, 740). Similarly, Matthew Barnidge has found that social media users perceive more politically different views, especially online, suggesting that these communities are not entirely homogenous (2017, 316). This corroborates earlier evidence from online discussion forums on Usenet and Yahoo, which shows that while users “do encounter people who are similar to themselves in ideology and opinion, they are also likely to encounter people who are different” (Stromer-Galley 2003). Similarly, Jennifer Brundidge has tested the impact of the Internet on political discussion network heterogeneity and found that online political discussion contributes “to the heterogeneity of political discussion networks beyond the influence of ‘face-to-face’ discussion and traditional news media” (2010, 695).

These findings indicate that the impact of the Internet on public debate is not straightforward. Although this is not unsurprising given the breadth and diversity of digital media, these dynamics make it challenging for those interested in protecting democracy to identify how to react. In the UK the House of Lords’ Committee on Democracy and Digital Technology recently published a report reflecting on the challenges posed by this mixed evidence, commenting:

The Government told us and states in the Online Harms White Paper that social media platforms use algorithms which can lead to echo chambers or filter bubbles where a user is presented with only one type of content instead of seeing a range of voices or opinions. Given the Government’s prominent endorsement of this theory in this major policy programme, it could be thought that there was strong evidence to suggest that this phenomena exists and is a particular problem on online platforms. However, this does not appear to be the case. (2020).

Such reflections show a desire for evidence-based policy-making (Cairney 2016), but indicate that current research is unable to prescribe clear policy responses.

Secondly, in addition to echo chambers, observers of trends in digital discourse also worry about so-called “filter bubbles.” Popularized by Eli Pariser (2011, 9), this term describes fragmentation of the Internet, which creates “a unique universe of information for each of us... fundamentally alter[ing] the way we encounter ideas and information.” Rather than being exposed to diverse perspectives and issues via public broadcasters and established news sources, the Internet and the personalized filtering systems it promotes allows “users to more easily ignore information they find irrelevant” (Beam and Kosicki 2014, 59). Some existing research has shown that individuals do tend to expose themselves to information and ideas they agree with more often (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Lawrence et al. 2010; Festinger 1957). This form of “selective exposure” is found to be “especially likely in the new media environment because of information overload” (Iyengar and Hahn 2009, 34). Whereas traditional media make it hard for an audience to avoid coverage of alternative views, when browsing the web, users can filter or search through masses of text more easily.

Looking at the diversity of news material that individuals may be exposed to online, Seth Flaxman et al. find that articles discovered via social media or web-search engines are associated with higher ideological segregation than those an individual reads by directly visiting news sites (2016, 318). This means that people experience more polarised content when searching for news online. Similarly, Eytan Bashkey et al.’s study of exposure to news and opinion online found that those who choose to befriend people with similar views to their own will see less ideologically divergent content (2015, 1130). These findings appear to support Habermas’s long-standing concern that “the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world” may “lead to the

fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics” (2006, 423).

And yet, once again, empirical studies have not painted an entirely uniform picture of what is happening on the Internet (Bruns, 2019). For example, people do tend to express interest in news articles that are more consistent with their viewpoint, and to spend more time reading that content. However, R. Kelly Garrett also observes that a preference for cognate news does not result in less willingness to engage with (though not necessarily be persuaded by) news voicing alternative perspectives (Ibid., 274, 279). Similarly, Michael Beam and Gerald Kosicki conclude that “[d]espite scholarly worry that more narrow types of news would be viewed when using selective personalized filters, an increase in news sources, channels, and categories was found for personalized news users” (2014, 72). While some have argued these findings suggest that “at present, there is no empirical evidence that warrants any strong worries about filter bubbles” (Zuiderveen Borgesiu et al. 2016, 10), it is also possible to argue that these diverse trends reveal the plurality of different experiences witnessed on the Internet.

Reviewing these findings, we suggest that empirical studies do not always produce consensual conclusions about where problems exist and what solutions should be pursued. This lack of clarity makes it difficult for political actors to take steps to protect democratic debate in line with established norms of evidence-based policy-making. In thinking about this dilemma, we argue there is a need to draw insights from theory to think about the conditions under which favoured democratic ideals are advanced, moving from a reactive approach to fixing messy problems to a more proactive attempt to promote favoured democratic practices and ideals.

The Normative Model of the Coffeehouse Public Sphere

In recent years a growing number of scholars have attempted to bridge the divide between theoretical and empirical scholarship (see Phelan and Dahlberg 2011; Chambers and Gastil, 2021; Chambers, 2021), but for the most part engagement with theory is often limited (Oz et al. 2018). This is problematic because it has led to a disjuncture between “the structural features of digitalization and...the conceptual, normative and political problems it gives rise to” (Celikates 2015, 167). Given that democracy can be conceptualized in a range of different ways (Crick 2002), there is often ambiguity in regards to what is problematic and what good practice would look like. We argue there is a need to engage with democratic theory to, first, clarify the particular characteristics of the public sphere policy-makers may wish to uphold, before, second, considering empirical evidence to reflect on how these ideals can be promoted in practice.

In this article, we draw on Habermas’s conceptualization of deliberative democracy.³ In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989) he inaugurated the “deliberative turn in democratic theory” (Chambers 2003, 307) by developing an account of democratic legitimacy based on informed discussion and reasoned agreement. Habermas’s approach contrasts to both the participatory model of ancient Athens, which depended on a slave economy to give citizens the time and luxury of engaging in public affairs, as well as liberal understandings of representative democracy from the early modern period, which encourage citizens to focus on their private economic interests by outsourcing politics to a professional class (outside of periodic elections). Bringing together features of both of these existing approaches, Habermas argues that informal public opinion mediated through civil society can and should play in contemporary democratic life as both an input and a constraint on formal institutional debates and decision-making processes.

³ It is important to clarify that any set of democratic ideals could be adopted by policy makers, what is important is the principle of drawing on theoretical traditions to isolate the conditions of ideal democratic practice.

By grounding his normative ideal in the “bourgeois public sphere” that emerged in eighteenth century western Europe, Habermas’s approach “oscillates between the utopian and the empirical” (Karppinen et al. 2008, 8). He argues that as the rise of capitalism forced citizens to take an active interest in the affairs of state that affected their private business interests, they gradually transformed the ruler’s power, which previously had been merely represented before the people in an absolutist manner, into an authority that could be monitored and affected through informed, critical debate. In contrast to an absolutist model of power described by Kaiser Friedrich II of Prussia as “everything for the people, nothing by the people,” Habermas therefore envisaged a form of democratic government “of the people, by the people” (1989, 219).

In outlining the conditions of ideal deliberative democratic practice, Habermas (1974, 49, 53) focuses on the coffeehouses of eighteenth century western Europe.⁴ These spaces, where private individuals gathered informally to discuss issues relating to the influence of the public authority of the state on their everyday lives, allowed those assembled to “transmit the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order, ideally, to transform political into ‘rational’ authority within the medium of the public sphere.” Coffeehouses also led to “the emergence of public opinion as a factor in political debate” (Cowan 2007, 1181). We engage with Habermas’s theory to identify benchmarks for ideal (deliberative) democratic practice. Our intent is not to provide a comprehensive account of the attributes of deliberative democracy, but to demonstrate how theoretical ideals can be used to anchor debate about the most appropriate form of policy response.

Habermas identifies a number of important design characteristics of the coffeehouse that made deliberative democratic practice possible. To start, he notes that these spaces occupied a special social position between the household, the location of business, and the royal court, to

⁴ In addition to the British coffeehouse, Habermas also mentions the French *salon* and the German *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies). For reasons of space and simplicity, we direct our attention solely to the coffeehouse.

which politics was traditionally confined. This unique positioning allowed individuals from different classes and professions, whose paths would otherwise not have crossed, to engage in conversation about issues of common concern. In this way the coffeehouse encouraged the development of a new concept of “humanity that was supposed to inhere in humankind as such” (1989, 30, 47).

As this egalitarian notion of humanity spread, these conversations led individuals from across society to conceive of themselves as part of a unified, self-conscious public. By exchanging news and demanding public transparency, these private individuals began to engage in the public supervision of government. Although this form of publicity (*Öffentlichkeit*) cannot be compared to Athenian self-rule, it served “a means of transforming the nature of power” (Habermas 1974, 52) by ensuring the responsiveness of the state to the people.

Conversation among the diverse community of individuals gathered together in the coffeehouse was facilitated by its internal layout, which “consisted of an open room with large tables around which customers gathered to read and talk as a common group.” While some booths and private rooms also existed, for the most part the coffeehouse was “a constantly public stage [designed] for open and communal performances” (Cowan 2007, 1194). Although these were rowdy, open and wild spaces, the participants (and owners) were also able to police debates as bans and suspensions were common for those who did not comport themselves in line with established norms. Although all manner of issues were discussed, including business, literature, and the arts, the coffeehouse was most (in)famous for encouraging debate about politics, which eventually enabled allowing the public sphere to “tam[e] the Leviathan of the absolutist state” (Specter 2010, 27).

This gradual move from “the public sphere in the world of letters” to “the public sphere in the political realm” was hardly smooth (Habermas 1989, 51-6). As coffeehouses “began to develop a particular culture of news dissemination and open discussion of current events” (Cowan 2007, 1185), political rulers came to view them as places where individuals engaged in “licentious talking of matters of state and government,” which the royal court viewed as its exclusive domain. Although King Charles II issued “A Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffeehouses” (1675/2006), these establishments – and the political opinion they had created – had already become a feature of early modern politics.

In addition to the direct, face-to-face forms of interaction that occurred between individuals in the coffeehouse, its contribution to the development of a self-conscious, political public was furthered by the spread of literacy and of “the published word,” which Habermas (1986, 6) calls the “decisive mark” of the bourgeois public sphere. As a result, the specific space of the coffeehouse also encouraged individuals to engage each other on the basis on common knowledge and enabled their participation in broader societal debates. The presence of these newspapers and journals – to which coffeehouses subscribed and made available to their customers – was crucial not only because it enabled debates to spread beyond any specific establishment to the broader conversation; it also ensured that these broader conversations proceeded on the basis of common, authoritative sources of information.

In the wake of the invention of the printing press, which “turned all users into potential readers,” the editors of the broadsheets that drove debate in the coffeehouses of eighteenth century Europe acted as important gatekeepers. By curating public debate, Habermas argues that they were able to “direct the attention of a large population to relatively few issues of relevance for political decision-making and to awaken and keep alive a general interest in such issues” (in Czingon 2020,

22). Because the participants in the coffeehouse were all potential readers and speakers, but not potential authors in the media that disseminated their deliberations, newspapers and other “classical mass media were able to bundle the attention of a large national audience and focus it on a few relevant topics” (Ibid., 23).

Habermas’s historical conclusions have generated much debate. In particular, Habermas has been accused of presenting an excessively rational “masculinist ideological notion” (Fraser 1992, 116) of communication that is missing an adequate “acknowledgement of rhetoric and emotional tone” (Thorseth 2008, 225) in public debate. While others have noted that “women frequently attended the newly fashionable coffeehouses” (Pincus 1995, 815), what is crucial for our argument is that the ideals of these new spaces – flawed as they may have been – gave rise to a new model of the “normative public sphere.” Although Habermas admittedly presents a “stylized picture” (1989, xix) of the coffeehouse, his philosophical reconstruction of this space is crucial for understanding the implicit “norms that guided proper comportment and actions in public life, even if such norms were rarely adhered to in practice and were subject to continual debate, discussion and perhaps renegotiation” (Cowan 2013, 47). In particular, this historical model highlights the importance of bringing individuals from many different walks of life together into a common “public,” which can then debate about what they perceive to be their common problems and interests on the basis of shared information.

For the purposes of this argument, we do not attempt to distil an exhaustive set of deliberative benchmarks from Habermas’ ideas. Instead, we use this brief overview to isolate two key benchmarks:

1. Diverse Communities: the public sphere brings together a diverse cross-section of individuals;

2. Common knowledge: participants have access to common, public sources of information that provide a shared basis for discussion.

By focusing on these characteristics we argue it is possible to think not only about how practices online are threatening this vision of democracy, but also about how these ideals can be actively promoted to advance favoured ideals. When confronted with an array of contradictory and messy findings, we seek to argue that theoretical anchors can help to shape proactive responses that seek not only to defend, but to promote democratic norms.

Bringing Theory and Empirics Together

When seeking to protect democracy from developments on the Internet, policy makers confront a range of challenges. As outlined above, a large and rapidly growing body of evidence suggests that technology is transforming the nature of the public sphere and altering the way that citizens encounter one another, receive political information and engage in the democratic process. In determining precisely what is happening there is, however, little conclusive evidence or uniform trends. Indeed, as illustrated in our discussion of filter bubbles and echo chambers, this makes it difficult to determine what can or should be done.

In suggesting a route out of this conundrum, we argue that while there is a need to focus on empirical evidence to understand the potential threats to democracy, policymakers can draw on democratic theory to determine what can be done. We therefore propose a more proactive form of policy-making and regulation that seeks not simply to build on existing evidence, but that also works to identify and promote democratic principles and visions of the public sphere. We argue that the diversity of the Internet and the lack of uniformity within and across platforms, makes it

challenging to rely on empirical studies alone.⁵ Additionally, there is a case for pursuing regulation that is not simply reactive (i.e. seeking to mitigate detrimental aspects of digital technologies designed and implemented by actors not motivated by democratic goals), but that rather seeks to promote and embed practices that are known to advance favoured democratic outcomes. To consider how this can be done, we return to the two ideals outlined in deliberative conceptions of democracy and discuss how these ideals can be promoted.

A focus on diverse communities and common knowledge is vital for deliberative democrats because these traits do not appear to be flourishing online. Indeed, Habermas himself – while preferring to “leave these investigations to younger colleagues” – worries that the centrifugal force of the Internet will undermine the “centripetal pull of the classical public sphere” and replace it with “a variety of small niches in which accelerated, but narcissistically self-enclosed, discourses are conducted on different topics” (in Czingon 2020, 21, 23). Similarly, he is also concerned about the potential for the Internet to undermine common knowledge, observing that the proliferation of new information sources available on the internet would make it harder for citizens to “be adequately informed about their own political interests...without the professional authority of a limited number of publishing houses and organs with trained editors and journalists who function as both editors and selectors” (Ibid., 23). Habermas has a personal stake in these changes, as he has often intervened as an engaged citizen and public intellectual in the very same public sphere that he theorizes as a philosopher (Verovsek 2021).

Although the currently available evidence is unclear regarding the seriousness of these concerns, we argue that it is still possible for policymakers to design interventions that promote

⁵ This is not least because few studies of the online sphere draw on the same data or adopt the same focus. This makes it challenging to isolate what is happening in a particular location or platform, let alone to characterise trends on the internet as a whole. Indeed, we would argue that attempts to understand the internet as a single site are doomed to fail because of the diversity and complexity of this media.

democracy in order to pre-empt such threats. In considering how this can be done, we turn to discuss two mechanisms by which policy makers can shape practice on the Internet: *digital design* and *user behaviour*. Discussed in detail with reference to the desire for diverse communities and common knowledge, we consider how interventions at these levels can promote favoured practices and, engaging with concerns about filter bubbles and echo chambers, consider what precisely could be done (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Summary of Argument

<u>Form of Intervention</u> <u>Benchmark</u>	<i>Digital Design</i>	<i>User Behaviour</i>
<i>Diverse Communities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auto-notification of new posts to encourage broad-based participation in debate (prevents domination of conversation) • Organisation based on open, publicly visible groups (not isolated, individualised feeds) • Encouragement of diversity through occasional or arranged publics (not pre-selected personalisation based on narrow traits that appeal to digital advertisers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching individuals about the online landscape and how different platforms work (increasing awareness of algorithmic segregation) • Equipping individuals with the skills to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds (not segregated communities) • Increasing user control over who they are exposed to and engage with (combatting passive exclusions)
<i>Common Knowledge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of references to credible sources (links to bad sources and clickbait are not highlighted algorithmically) • Regulate digital media business models (move away from personalised advertising) • Creation/Support for high quality public media companies (as opposed to for profit corporations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing digital literacy (identification of fake news, comparison of sources, etc.) • Promoting member-based enforcement of democratic norms (not algorithmic moderation) • Encouraging good deliberative practices, such as fallibility, openness to new evidence, etc. (instead of trolling)

The first, and perhaps less commonly discussed way in which policy makers can attempt to shape democratic practices focuses on the architecture of the public sphere. Far from a new idea, space has long been shown to be influential on political outcomes, as scholars have highlighted, for example, how the design of parliament buildings impacts debate (Goodsell, 1988). Translating this insight into the digital world, Jennifer Forestal notes that “the design of digital platforms can have enormous implications for how, and how well, we collectively practice democratic politics” (2021, 28). In seeking to tackle the Internet’s potential threat to democracy, we therefore contend that policymakers should pursue regulation to promote forms of design that create diverse communities and common knowledge.

The evidence of echo chambers and filter bubbles reveals that the architecture of the Internet affects the dynamics of online public debate and can advance deliberative ideals to different degrees. Daniel Halpern and Jennifer Gibbs conclude that “some social media channels may be better suited for deliberation than others,” arguing that “when users are automatically notified about content generated in their networks, more people contribute and this [sic] the debate is not dominated by specific individuals” (2013, 1167). Similarly, Mustafa Oz et al. argue that the different affordances seen to exist on Twitter and Facebook cause people to “shift the manner and tone of their comments,” meaning that “deliberative attributes—linking to supporting material, using numbers and statistics to support one’s point, and offering a legitimate counter-argument—were more frequent on Facebook, than Twitter” (2018, 3415-6).

Reflecting on the literature on filter bubbles, Ron Berman and Zsolt Katona highlight how “algorithmic curation” decisions made by social media platforms have “non-trivial implications” that “can alter the structure of the network as well as the quality and diversity of content on a social network” (2019, 31). More specifically, different content promotion algorithms have the potential

to create filter bubbles (although it is notable that they judge that many claims around the impact of algorithms on polarization are inflated). Frederik Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. make a similar point in discussing how “pre-selected personalisation” determined by algorithms can influence the content a user sees (2016, 2). The impact of design is also evident in Garrett’s study, which concluded that “the information management capabilities afforded by new ICTs [information and communication technologies] could ultimately yield some desirable changes in people’s political information exposure” (2009, 279), suggesting that platforms could be designed to promote information in line with certain ideals. Although many of these studies call for further research to determine precise effects or focus on alternative democratic benchmarks, we argue that they show design choices to be an important way in which agency can be exerted to promote certain favoured ideals.

In reaching this conclusion, we therefore argue that those interested in *prescribing* responses to mitigate undesirable trends such as echo chambers or filter bubbles should think not about whether or not these practices exist, but rather about how design could be used to promote desired forms of democratic interaction. For those favouring the form of deliberative politics outlined above, we argue that it is possible to use the attributes of the coffeehouse to identify design principles likely to produce inclusive and informed debate.

Revisiting our discussion above, we highlighted how coffeehouses allowed individuals from different social classes and professions, who otherwise would not have met and would not have had any shared interests, to gather and engage in conversation about issues of common concern. These spaces also stimulated conversation using a layout that was oriented towards communal discussions. Applying these principles to the online sphere, we can see that, as Forestal has argued, these dynamics are not often found on the Internet, with digital platforms such as Facebook using

design features such as the NewsFeed to “homogenize and isolate site users.” She argues, that there are, however, some examples of digital practice on Facebook more aligned with deliberative ideals, such as groups that allow users to “more easily see what they have in common with others” (2020, 28; 40). This would allow for the creation of open but nonetheless “*occasional* or arranged publics of particular presentations and events” (Habermas 1996, 374) that encourage diverse individuals from different backgrounds, who would not otherwise encounter each other, to meet in settings organized around common interests.

Recognising the potential for digital platforms to be designed in different ways we argue that policymakers could mandate practices more aligned with, in this instance, coffeehouse ideals. As such digital forums could be compelled to be designed as open, publicly visible, inclusive spaces that provide citizens with places to discuss issues with a wider public based on common sources of information. While it will be important to test the precise implications of different design choices to prevent backfire effects (Tromble and McGregor 2019), this form of design change could have a substantial impact of the character of public debate.

Although digital companies can choose to promote these practices on their own, because they are bodies driven by “competitive motives rather than a public service orientation” (Carlson, 2018, 14), we argue there is a need for political actors to determine design principles underpinned by democratic (as opposed to commercial) ideals. Recommitting the state to providing high quality public broadcasting is only one example of how this could be done. Public media approximate Habermasian ideals by providing “a neutral space responsive to the interests of all in society, where matters of the public good can be debated, considered and ideally agreed upon” (Karppinen et al. 2008, 13). As suggested above, this would mark a more proactive form of policy-making, shifting attention from how to mitigate undesirable practices, to instead focus on specifying and mandating

design principles intended to promote desired democratic goals.

In addition to questions of design, existing scholarship has also pointed to the significance of user behaviour for public debate. Our literature review shows that individuals play an active role in determining the diversity of the community they interact with, and the kind of knowledge they are exposed to online. Cristian Vaccari et al. detail how “individuals select online content and sources” and “are more likely to seek agreement than disagreement on social media” (2016, 3). Similarly, Stromer-Galley (2003) reflected that although she did not directly study whether her interviewees “sought out people who were diverse from themselves,” her findings suggest that individual choice was a significant determinant of the character of the communities in which they engaged. Elsewhere, Dubois and Blank have highlighted the significance of the choices individuals made in exposing themselves to different media, concluding that “Having a diverse media diet is a step towards exposure to diverse information and perspectives” (2018, 740).

This point is also apparent in literature on filter bubbles, where a number of scholars point to personal choice. Berman and Katona’s study, for example, explored how users’ capacity to “choose to connect only with friends with similar tastes” informed the existence of filter bubbles (2019, 2). Similarly, Eytan Bakshy et al. explored the relative impact of individual behaviour and algorithmic design and found, “Within the population under study here, individual choices more than algorithms limit exposure to attitude-challenging content in the context of Facebook” (2015, 1131). Such conclusions point to the impact of individual action, suggesting that the choices citizens make in regards to where they engage in public debate, how they curate online communities and decide to behave within these environments can affect the dynamics of the online debate.

In thinking about the implications of these findings for democratic debate, we argue that in

addition to outlining design principles for online spaces, there is also potential for policymakers to promote programs of civic education designed to educate and inform citizens about democratically desirable practices online. It is notable that this response has already been advanced by policymakers, with calls for young people to be provided with “the knowledge, confidence and literacy skills they need to actively engage with today’s plethora of news sources and to thrive in this digital age” (Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools 2018, 3), and for digital literacy to become the “fourth pillar” of education (House of Lords 2017).

Within the academic community there have been similar calls to promote algorithmic literacy, empowering users “to independently test the contours of their own filter bubble, to find out for themselves how algorithmic personalisation affects their digital experience’ in order to foster the ‘responsible use of social media’” (Milan and Agosti 2019). Despite broad support there has, however, been limited progress in rolling out such literacy programmes. Seeking to translate the deliberative practices found in the coffeehouse to the online sphere, we argue that it is important to educate citizens about desirable digital practices and establish norms that discourage retreat into forms of debate that lack diversity and common knowledge. This could be done through formal programs of digital literacy education, or by using digital moderators who work in real time to establish norms of user behaviour and the veracity of information (Fishkin 2009), just as participants in the coffeehouse policed each other and the editors of newspapers curated information in the bourgeois public sphere. Deliberative citizens could therefore be encouraged to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds and “to provide some kind of justification of evidence, some kind of argumentative or evidential support for statements or judgments, explanations or proposals, some kind of anticipation of doubt, openness for questions and objections, recognition of fallibility” (Peters 1997, 35). By thinking about how to inform and affect

user behaviour we therefore argue that policymakers have the opportunity to try and shape the dynamics of public debate online.

By looking beyond often contradictory empirical findings to focus on desirable democratic practices and ideals, we argue that there is potential for policymakers to shape digital design and user behaviour to promote favoured democratic goals. This approach allows regulatory debate to move from a reactive focus on often contradictory evidence, to instead see policymakers playing a more proactive role in shaping the architecture of or, and practices on the internet. Recognising the importance of both empirically informed concerns and theoretically derived ideals, we therefore argue it is possible to identify a path for reform – a path that could promote deliberative or other schools of democratic thought.

Conclusion

In this article, we respond to growing fears about the negative impact of digital technology on democratic debate, focusing in particular on filter bubbles and echo chambers. Since competing empirical findings make evidence-based policy-making difficult, we contend that those interested in responding to the impact digital technology on public debate need to draw from both theory and empirical research. Specifically, we point to the necessity of identifying clear benchmarks for desirable democratic outcomes and considering the conditions under which those ideals can be promoted in practice. By entwining theoretical and empirical insights we argue that it is possible to make prescriptions for favoured forms of democratic debate.

Having reviewed the existing scholarship on filter bubbles and echo chambers, we show that the digital public sphere is a complex set of spaces whose practices vary considerably. As a result, it is challenging for policymakers to pursue regulation designed to mitigate evidence of

inconsistently evident practices. Faced with this puzzle, we turned to the insights of democratic theory, asserting that this rich body of scholarship can be used to inform a more proactive regulatory approach. Building on Habermas' normative model of the coffeehouse, we identified two critical benchmarks for public debate: (1) *diverse communities* that bring together individuals from across society, and; (2) *common, publicly-available knowledge* that allows debate to proceed against a shared set of accepted facts. Considering how these ideals could be promoted in practice, we revisited empirical debates around filter bubbles and echo chambers to reflect on how design and user behaviour could be proactively shaped by policy makers to advance favoured democratic ideals.

In bringing together theory and empirics, our approach is distinctive in many ways. In particular, while there is growing recognition of the need for policy makers and practitioners to draw on empirical insights in determining policy outcomes, there is less emphasis within policy circles on democratic ideals. And yet, as our analysis has shown, in complex information environments in which empirical findings do not reveal singular trends, it is vital for practitioners to be able to identify favoured ideals and understand the conditions under which these are promoted. This is critical in order to be able to prescribe desirable interventions, but also to prevent initiatives advancing potentially contradictory democratic ideals. As a result, we contend that theoretical and empirical insights can be favourably combined to promote responses to societal trends. Although our analysis focused on deliberative democracy and the coffeehouse public sphere, our broader argument regarding the need for cross-fertilisation is not confined to this one tradition, but could fruitfully be used to promote democratic ideals aligned with other traditions in democratic theory.

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