Who's Afraid of Epistemic Inequality in the Algorithmic Public Sphere? Defending Deliberation for Digital Misinformation

Massey, Arushi (Rush)

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Rush Massey
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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Thomas Fossen
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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the overlapping democratic concerns underlying diverse paradigms of participation proposed for the contemporary digital public sphere. I present conceptual frameworks in Chapters Two and Three to frame the contested problem of political polarization in the digital public sphere. The research highlights the persistent challenge in framing the problem of political polarization, which necessitates a philosophical reconciliation of competing democratic accounts. In my review, I imply a priority for discursive principles for the digital age. Defending the deliberative-republican analysis of the digital public sphere, I identify specific democratic principles at-risk: *epistemic equality, inclusivity, media pluralism, mediated exchange, relational equality, competent participation*, and *civic solidarity*.

Chapters four and five contain examples to support my core argument, centred on using deliberative processes to counter algorithmic misinformation. I propose three deliberative solutions to enhance formal accountability of social media platforms. At the core of my argument lies the imperative to cultivate a participatory digital culture aligned with citizens' epistemic interests in accuracy and truth, requiring commitment from both governments and citizens. In light of these considerations, I analyse the potential *of citizen juries, deliberative polling*, and *voting advice applications* as mechanisms to debunk misinformation and mitigate amplification risks intrinsic to the digital public sphere. In Chapter Four, I additionally outline three plausible challenges to the empirical assumptions I adopt. While the extent of echo-chambers is debated in various democratic perspectives, I argue that prioritizing improved quality of deliberation is essential. This is particularly important due to the increased susceptibility of some citizens to fake news on social media platforms, largely stemming from intergenerational digital media illiteracy. I maintain that addressing algorithmic misinformation through wider deliberation enhances citizens' knowledge and reduces their isolation.

In concluding Chapter Five, I highlight the connection between democratic accountability, the formal authorization of social media platforms, and the ongoing discussions surrounding digital power. I align with the republican viewpoint that emphasizes involving citizens in processes of authorization and accountability. Furthermore, I outline potential directions for deeper exploration and discuss the broader impacts of my specific proposals aimed at enhancing the digital competence of citizens.

Keywords: civic competence, epistemic equality, digital public sphere, deliberative democracy, information algorithms, political polarisation, social media platforms

Key-thinkers: Elizabeth Anderson, James Fishkin, Jürgen Habermas, and Cass Sunstein

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1.   Introduction

In this MA thesis, I focus on contrasting the varied accounts of the public sphere that exert substantial influence in shaping present-day conversations about the priorities for stable practices and projects of digital democracy. In my analysis, I make it salient that amidst a multitude of distinct democratic viewpoints, a definitive consensus regarding the most salient concepts for the digital era remains elusive. Nonetheless, a palpable interest persists in scrutinizing and refining these divergent concepts to accommodate the transformative impact of social media. The advent of social media has triggered a systemic shift, reshaping the contours of public spaces and discussions. This transformation has ushered in both an array of challenges and novel avenues for the democratic engagement of digital citizens.

Building upon the foundational groundwork laid out in Chapters Two and Three, I carefully contextualize the phenomenon of political polarization as still unravelling but undeniable. I find the persistent challenge of framing the philosophical problem of political polarization necessitates a nuanced synthesis of the often-divergent democratic perspectives. Through a review of updated literature including Jürgen Habermas, Elizabeth Anderson, Thomas Christiano, James Fishkin, Seth Lazar, and Cass Sunstein, I glean insights that hint at the underlying inclination towards prioritizing discursive principles tailored to the uniquely distancing contours of the digital age.

Within this dynamic backdrop, I gravitate towards a robust adoption of the deliberative-republican analysis of the digital public sphere, firmly rooted in the rich tapestry of democratic thought and empirical inquiry. This perspective emerges as a beacon that guides my critical evaluation and illumination of some essential facets that constitute digital democracy. As I navigate through this ongoing philosophical debate, I find specific democratic principles emerging as crucial touchpoints that deserve meticulous scrutiny, positioned at the crossroads of our shared vulnerability due to the evolving dynamics of our digital habitat. Principles such as epistemic equality, inclusivity, media pluralism, mediated exchange, relational equality, competent participation, and civic solidarity take centre stage, echoing as the core elements that inform and underpin my subsequent arguments.

My journey was sparked by the resonating question, "Who's Afraid of Epistemic Inequality in The Algorithmic Public Sphere?" This inquiry was not only a litmus test for democratic intuition but a doorway to a realm of empirical exploration that demanded reflection and rigor. The responses to this question reverberate through the deliberative and republican democratic perspectives, offering echoes of concern. I emerge as a third voice, contributing a perspective shaped by diverse democratic influences, although the landscape teems with numerous other voices that contribute to the ongoing

debate. Among these voices, I cite the influence of epistemic, pluralistic, and pragmatic democrats, each leaving their mark on the tapestry of my reflections. While my research does not encapsulate the entirety of democratic thought, it stands as a testament to the interconnected nature of these diverse voices, all of which contributed to my foundational understanding.

As my discussion spans this expansive intellectual landscape, Chapter Five emerges as the crescendo, a platform from which I illuminate the implications of the deliberative-republican perspective for the vital realm of democratic accountability. I highlight the intricate connection between democratic accountability, the formal authorization of social media platforms, and the ongoing dialogues that unfurl around the enigma of digital power. In harmony with the republican viewpoint, which strongly champions the active involvement of citizens in the processes of authorization and accountability, my conclusions resonate deeply. However, this concluding chapter isn't a curtain call; it serves as a gateway, opening the door to further exploration. It unveils the broader reverberations and ramifications of the specific proposals I put forth: proposals aimed at enhancing the digital competence of citizens. It acts as a prelude to deeper investigations, offering a panoramic view of the myriad potential trajectories that beckon our exploration of the enigmatic realm of digital democracy.

Yet, in my quest for understanding, I must acknowledge the limitations inherent within the contours of this philosophical research inquiry. The intricate landscape of the digital public sphere is as complex as it is dynamic. While the deliberative-republican framework, which I expound upon in detail, provides a robust theoretical foundation to grapple with the challenges posed by algorithmic misinformation, it may falter in the face of the rapidly shifting digital terrain. The application of these principles, though embarked upon with unbridled enthusiasm, may not provide an impervious shield against the insidious influence of ever-evolving algorithms and emerging technologies. Furthermore, the diverse array of democratic viewpoints and theoretical orientations that encircle the realm of digital democracy weave a complex tapestry that my study might not wholly encompass. The scope of my research, though expansive and comprehensive, might encounter certain limitations in fully encapsulating the richness and diversity of thought that characterizes this burgeoning field of inquiry.

In recent years, the design alignment of information algorithms deployed on social media platforms has introduced pressing concerns, particularly the exacerbation of information echo-chambers, the intensification of political polarization, and the proliferation of opportunities for algorithmic manipulation across democratic society. I claim that these clearly divisive trends starkly clash with

the fundamental principles of epistemic equality and competent participation, values traditionally cherished by deliberative and republican democrats as integral to meaningful habits of communicative engagement uniting one national political community and its civic culture. Drawing upon *citizen juries, deliberative polling,* and *voting advice applications*, I advocate for their implementation to oversee extreme content on social media platforms. These processes stand as promising solutions to mitigate the challenges of political polarization. Wherever deployed, deliberative processes demonstrate noteworthy enhancements in discussion quality, individual learning, political opinions, shared understanding, and consensus among unfamiliar voices. These interventions aspire to alleviate our shared predicament of being entrenched within personal opinion bubbles and information echo-chambers on social media.

In my next chapter, I detail empirical facets that make the automated public sphere normatively unique. I cite the well-documented rise of polarization, personalization, and algorithmic manipulation, chiefly within social media platforms. From the deliberative-republican perspective, these characteristics encapsulate undemocratic attributes, underscoring the necessity for deliberative processes that enhance the epistemic competence

2 Deliberative- Republican Concepts for Digital Citizens

> It is hardly possible to overstate the value, of placing human beings in contact with other persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar…Such communication has always been, and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress (John Stuart Mill, 1844).[1]

I start by identifying and prioritising key democratic principles for deliberation and participation, as underscored in deliberative-republican accounts. These principles are (1) inclusivity and mediated exchange, (2) epistemic equality, (3) civic competence, (4) relational equality, (5) mutual respect and civic solidarity, and (6) media pluralism. I offer them as the conceptual grounding for my argument. These principles, I contend, serve as crucial elements for establishing formal mechanisms of deliberation and participation for digital citizens. By institutionalising these mechanisms, we can indirectly enhance the responsiveness of social media platforms to the needs and interests of democratic citizens. This has the additional benefit of cultivating a populace, that is better informed and more critically engaged, on social media platforms. As digital citizens increasingly engage in social media platforms, the erosion of epistemic equality becomes a paramount concern. The prevalence of unprecedented political polarization and the formation of echo-chambers are troubling outcomes, associated with the widespread deployment of information algorithms. My motivation is rooted in the desire to counter these adverse effects. I suggest, institutions promote *some* democratic values that contribute uniquely to the realisation of a more informed, participatory, and equitable digital public sphere.

To delineate the scope of my argument, I focus on demonstrating the suitability of deliberative-republican concepts in bolstering democratic equality. This is because prominent deliberative democrats promote institutional designs that target the mitigation of extreme epistemic harms on social media platforms. Drawing from deliberative, empirical, and republican scholarship, I assume that, combating political polarization and echo-chambers is imperative for the health of democratic discourse. I defend a framework that prioritises informed political opinions and deliberative forms of citizen participation, in the algorithmic public sphere.

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[1] See, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy.* Book 2. Ch. 17. Para. 14.

2.1 Essential Principles in Democratic Deliberation and Participation

2.1.1 Inclusivity, Mediated Exchange and Civic Solidarity: Jürgen Habermas

Deliberative democrats emphasise that, democratic equality and participation requires reasoned and informed communication among citizens. This involves exchanging ideas and opinions, to contribute to mutual understanding and collective decision-making. Mediated exchange is a cornerstone of this process, it values well-informed political discourse and mutually respectful debates among citizens from diverse backgrounds. Habermas (2022) further specifies, that principles like inclusivity, equality, and rational-critical debate should extend to how we reflect on the current design of the digital public sphere. This means, only that, the digital realm should also provide a space for diverse voices and informed discussions.

However, social media platforms introduce significant challenges. These platforms fragment political discourse across various channels, catering to individuals on the default basis. of demographics and interests. This fragmentation can lead to echo chambers, where individuals are hypertargeted, with like-minded viewpoints and information. This constitutes a clear violation of the principle of inclusivity. Elizabeth Anderson and Cass Sunstein echo Habermas's concerns, arguing that social media platforms disrupt the common context necessary for political deliberation and shared agreement. In other words, the algorithmic-driven nature of social media can create informational bubbles, that reinforce our pre-existing biases and prevent the exchange of diverse perspectives.

In this context, I offer that the epistemic model of politics, favoured by Habermas, becomes crucial. In the digital age, information (and misinformation) is a click away for all citizens. However, fragmented micro public spheres and epistemic bubbles can lead to deeply held false beliefs that prove resistant to correction. It is important to make clear that information bubbles are not confined to a particular group; they affect everyone equally, regardless of the content of their political beliefs. To address these challenges, deliberative democrats propose deliberative processes as essential components of digital democracy. These processes can counteract the impacts of algorithmic misinformation on the everyday political opinions and choices of citizens.

An example signposting the challenges posed by social media platforms and algorithmic manipulation could be, the spread of the "birther" conspiracy theory during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In this case, certifiably false claims about Barack Obama's birthplace gained traction and persisted, despite years of prior efforts to debunk them. This instance highlights the

difficulty of countering misinformation in the digital age. I underscore, social media platforms and information algorithms can undermine the realisation of specific epistemic and interactive principles, leading to fragmented national political discourses and a lack of shared understanding among citizens.

2.2.2 Relational and Epistemic Equality: Elizabeth Anderson and Thomas Christiano

According to Elizabeth Anderson (2022) and Thomas Christiano (2022), algorithmic communicative mechanisms, such as hyper-nudging and micro-targeting are a threat to political equality. This is because, they generate or worsen, epistemic and relational inequities among citizens on social media platforms. In one political community, some citizens may have the means to fund or deploy these information algorithms to further their own political interest and the sophistication to be immune from attempts at manipulation, while other citizens are vulnerable to manipulation by those who use these means. This constitutes for egalitarian democrats an unacceptable deepening of political inequality.

Anderson and Christiano prominently endorse the goal to try to achieve less manipulation and greater political equality on social media platforms. I support their conclusion, that this can be achieved by deploying, new and updated institutional strategies. A good example she offers is, an updated effort to enforce standards of content moderation for mass media-- a digital equivalent to the Fairness Doctrine in the United States. This was imposed on the networks in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s and was repealed in the late '80s. A digital version would require that social media platforms align information algorithms in explicit ways, to ensure that some diversity of opinion gets to each user.[2]A second strategy, makes the informational needs and epistemic interests of citizens the focal point of institutional investment. The goal is simple, provide citizens more regularly and interactively, with the environment they need to make informed decisions. The intent is to meet epistemic inequalities head on, and engage the political sophistication of citizens by changing the terms of economic life to "strengthen the social bases of the informational power of middle-class and lower-class persons" (Christiano, 2022, p. 121).

Their main point is to clearly improve our resilience to the constant manipulation of the information we consume. Thus, confirming our status as epistemic equals in digital contexts. In American national culture, politically consequential bubbles have formed around two noticeable categories of content on social media platforms. The first type, concerns scientific *claims about risk*,

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[2] Napoli, P. (2020). Lessons for Social Media from the Fairness Doctrine. In *Columbia Journalism Review.* August.

such as, the denial of human activity causing global warming or, the viral belief that vaccines cause autism. The second, more explicitly 'political' type of content, concerns *delegitimizing claims* about government, public policy, politicians, and influential people. Such as, the belief in "the deep state" plotting against President Trump or, the belief that President Bush was complicit in the 9/11 attacks. Anderson suggests that epistemic bubbles threaten both sound policymaking and democracy itself. (Anderson, 2021, p. 11). She argues that groups inside bubbles are vulnerable to manipulation by "charlatans, propagandists, and demagogues, which disables them from contributing productively to the epistemic functions of democracy (p. 12). I agree that acknowledging the presence of "epistemic bubbles" is crucial. However, it is equally important to emphasize that addressing them requires a thorough social investigation into the mechanics of information algorithms and the formation of epistemic echo-chambers on social media platforms. I think that deliberative democrats correctly emphasize that our effectiveness as citizens and our ability to foster an open and inclusive digital society depends, on our collective willingness to engage with diverse viewpoints and critically assess factual assertions.

2.2.3 Civic Competence and Media Pluralism: Robert Dahl and Cass Sunstein

The works of pluralist and republican democrats Cass Sunstein (2017) and Robert Dahl (1992) converge in two key principles that hold significance in shaping the democratic public sphere. Sunstein is explicit in his treatment of how for citizens competence and pluralism is undermined by design on social media platforms. I use Dahl's explicit articulation of civic competence in the American political tradition, to imply the enduring resonance of reforming the ways citizens politically engage in line with their immediate landscape and dominant form of mass communication

Firstly, the notion of civic competence stands as a pivotal concept endorsed by pluralistic, republican and deliberative democrats. It is widely acknowledged in all three traditions that the buck and bulk of democratic self-governance stops with civic competence. Robert Dahl, observes the under tapped potential of mechanisms in 'modern' American political life that invest in the competencies of citizens beyond cyclical participation in electoral processes:

> Nevertheless, more information does not necessarily mean greater competence or heightened understanding. As we have seen, the scale, complexity, and sheer volume of information imposes ever stronger demands on the capacities of citizens. And although changes in communications techniques have not led ineluctably toward centralized domination by Orwell's Big Brother, their potentialities can still be used either way--toward impairing or improving the competence of ordinary citizens. So

far, regrettably, their possibilities for improving civic competence have barely been tapped (1992, p. 51).

Second, I find that the fundamental democratic principle of equal influence serves as another good reason to invest in improving the competence of ordinary citizens in line with use of digital media. This principle strives to prevent any individual or group from holding excessive power over political discussions, ensuring that collective discourse reflect the concerns and interests of the entire society. When I apply the overlapping principles of civic competence and equal influence to the algorithmic public sphere, it becomes apparent that both republican and deliberative theorists' express concerns about the absence of media diversity and the potential for the impaired 'discursive' competence of digital citizens.

However, they go beyond mere examination and diagnosis. They advocate for prioritizing epistemic virtues in the design of institutions governing the digital landscape. Within deliberative-republican perspectives, fostering a multitude of validated perspectives helps reduce the risk of dominance and control. As a result, citizens are empowered to regard epistemic virtues—such as a demonstrated willingness to reconsider their viewpoints—as indicators of competent participation. Consequently, for the sake of my argument, I deduce that deliberative and republican theorists converge in their commitment to democratic ideals of citizens' freedom and equitable opportunities to engage with perspectives that are reasonable yet differ from their own.

2.2 A Tale of Many Democrats: Competing Goals for Public Sphere

In this chapter, I have clarified the conceptual foundation of my main assertion that there is an inherent contradiction between the algorithmic public sphere and six essential principles of democratic equality and participation. I argue that the presence of epistemic bubbles, specifically concerning conspiracy theories on social media platforms, endangers citizens' core discursive capabilities and equitable epistemic status within democratic societies. Thus, the concerns surrounding the negative impacts of political polarization on digital citizens serve as a common thread connecting the deliberative and republican democratic accounts I offer.

I advocate for the practical implementation of deliberative-republican principles in the algorithmic public sphere. Utilizing deliberative processes to enhance citizens' epistemic capabilities and standing offers numerous benefits. These processes directly involve citizens, bypassing representative intermediaries through scientifically random sampling. They provide an efficient

avenue for citizens to access reliable information by bringing together diverse democratic stakeholders—experts, citizens, and politicians—through a shared procedure.

I further speculate that allocating public funding for deliberative processes in national and local politics can signify a proactive institutional commitment to fostering proficient digital citizens with a better grasp of complex political issues. Notably, I refer to deliberative polling, citizen panels, and voting advice applications as illustrative experiments being deployed in American and European politics. All these deliberative processes prioritize the cultivation of informed public opinions and a culture of meaningful discourse, aiming to counteract the risks of self-segregation and echo chambers.

In the next chapter, my overarching aim is to explain why the issue of polarization within the context of an algorithmic public sphere warrants heightened moral consideration. I suggest a strong imperative to develop more capable digital citizens in the present moment, even as we continue to democratically debate the structure of a digital public forum for discussions.

I highlight a notable yet addressable tension within democratic theory. Namely which concepts of equality, freedom, and participation should be used to justify participatory or regulatory interventions in the circulation of political misinformation on social media platforms. For example, some agonistic democrats may resist the idea that social media platforms should be realigned to prioritize consensus over political contestation due to algorithmic polarization. Additionally, certain epistemic democrats might raise empirical objections, suggesting that overstating the extent of political polarization on social media platforms in some accounts prematurely condemns them for intolerable epistemic inequalities. In Chapter Four, I dedicate my discussion to elucidating various democratic objections to my proposal of prioritizing the quality of political opinions over the broader dissemination of misinformation on social media platforms.

In this upcoming chapter, I specifically address the empirical dimensions and subsequent normative concerns relevant to my formulation of the problem of polarization stemming from the algorithmic propagation of misinformation on social media platforms. My primary task involves explicitly articulating the empirical assumptions I share with deliberative and republican democrats. This effort is aimed at supporting my argument in Chapter Four, where I contend that despite documented challenges in contemporary democratic discourse, addressing viral misinformation on social media platforms is fitting for formal deliberation among disagreeing democratic citizens.

3. Algorithmic Public Sphere: Democratic Characteristics and Limits

> The increase in the number, variety and cheapness of amusements represents a powerful diversion from political concern. The members of an inchoate public have too many ways of enjoyment, as well as of work, to give much thought to organisation into an effective public. Man is a consuming and sportive animal as well as a political one. (John Dewey, 1927) [3]

In today's digital age, false information can spread rapidly and is disproportionately promoted through social media and online platforms. It is increasingly important for individuals, to critically evaluate the information they encounter and to verify its accuracy; before accepting it as truth in a political context. As responsible digital citizens, I argue that our democratic intuitions support us combating the spread of proven falsehoods. I also imply that requiring social media platforms to promote and disseminate reliable information promotes the epistemic interests of all citizens.

My goal in this chapter is to explain why, the problem of polarization in an algorithmic public sphere invites special moral concern and demonstrates a need for deliberative processes that can make us more competent digital citizens now. I will do this by reconstructing three prominent accounts of the digital transformation of the public sphere, offered by legal and political philosophers Jürgen Habermas (2022), Frank Pasquale (2015, 2017, 2020) and Cass Sunstein (2017). These accounts consciously represent deliberative, constitutional and republican concepts of democratic accountability and participation. Crucially, they aim to identify the urgent threats but also viable solutions for digital citizens following years of ubiquitous use of information algorithms and social media platforms. Most of us, for most of our time, seek social media platforms for the wider circulation of our political intuitions and opinions. Digital platforms are evident as the primary conduits for political activism, campaigns, debates and news in most democratic societies.

This chapter identifies distinct characteristics of the algorithmic public sphere, highlighting the absence of enforceable editorial norms and the potential for algorithmic manipulation. I review current debates about whether social media platforms should be held liable for user-generated extreme content, considering a 'cyberlibertarian' argument against liability and underscoring the necessity for alignment with democratic values. Central to the debate is Habermas' concept of the public sphere, which is challenged by the fragmentation brought about by digital technologies. The personalization of information (and misinformation) through algorithms has led to echo chambers

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[3] Dewey, J. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry.* Reprint. (2016). Ohio University Press. P. 167.

and filter bubbles, hindering exposure to diverse perspectives. While algorithmic public spheres offer advantages, the chapter surmises that careful consideration is necessary to address their limitations and promote inclusivity. I believe the problem of polarization in the algorithmic public sphere remains philosophically relevant due to its implications for skewed relations of epistemic inequality among members of *one* national community engaged in democratic discourse on *many* social media platforms. I close the chapter by asserting that while deliberative processes may not completely eliminate algorithmic manipulation, they serve as vital interventions to enhance the quality of democratic discourse in the digital age. By fostering critical assessment, engagement with diverse perspectives, and informed decision-making, these solutions offer a promising path to address the challenges of polarization and misinformation in the digital public sphere.

I begin my discussion by asking, what is normatively unique about the use of information algorithms and the tech corporations that own them? I invite my reader to think of the notable absence of public interest values, informed political opinions and gatekeeping (such as content moderation and liability) on social media platforms as an unresolved question in both democratic theory and practice. For example, the upcoming cases before the US Supreme Court require the scrutiny of arguments and laws, that currently shield the content moderation practices of social media platforms:

> Since 1996, a law known as Section 230 of the Telecommunications Act has allowed tech companies to avoid liability for content that users create and post on their platforms. Now, Section 230 might be on the chopping block in a pair of cases being heard by the Supreme Court, *Gonzalez v. Google* and *Twitter v. Taamneh*. Both involve lawsuits against tech companies for hosting — and even, thanks to display algorithms, promoting — content that plaintiffs claim radicalized people and led them to commit acts of terrorism that resulted in the deaths of their loved ones. In response, the tech companies argue they are shielded from liability under Section 230. [4]

The strongest arguments against holding social media platforms liable for user-generated content are, the innovation and cyberlibertarian arguments. These posit that, society has greatly benefited from the technological innovation and global advancements brought about by social media platforms. Imposing liability could stifle their ability to innovate and create, ultimately hindering progress in the digital realm. In this account, the corporation that own social platforms should be granted the freedom to operate without excessive legal constraints. The arguments imply an unfair burden in

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[4] See Reed, R. (2023). Supreme Court considers how far Section 230 should go in Shielding Google, Twitter and Other Tech Companies. In *Harvard Law Today*

holding social media platforms directly liable for extreme content. They say, such content is created by a global number of users, and missed in real-time because of the sheer volume of data.

Deliberative and republican democrats might reply that tech corporations should be subject to the same legal standards as other types of companies. Habermas would remind us that our current legal framework creates an unfair double standard where traditional media outlets are held accountable for publishing harmful content, while social media platforms often escape liability. The arguments for content liability, I find most compelling, highlight the potential for harm and exploitation that can arise from unchecked content on social media platforms. Instances of violence, hate speech, misinformation, cyberbullying, and illegal activities has been successfully linked to these platforms in prominent cases. It is entirely reasonable to assume that due to their immense influence and reach, social media platforms have a responsibility to prevent and address such harmful content. They have a duty of care, however mild, to ensure the basic safety and public interests of their users. Moreover, extreme content is not always generated by human users. This is a grievously misleading assumption, in an algorithmic system of mass communication. But we can still conclude that, viral extreme content is certainly amplified and promoted by information algorithms; to maximise the commercial potential and profitability of all social platforms. Because of a demonstrable lack of social alignment with the epistemic needs of citizens, tech corporations remain justifiably under fire for not doing much to prioritise verified information over viral content for democratic citizens. Questions of state authority to regulate online platforms are increasingly raised by EU and US regulators and political representatives:

> In our time, for better or worse, vast conglomerates like Facebook and Google effectively take on the role of global communication regulators. They must take responsibility for this new role or be broken up in order to make way for human-scale entities capable of doing so. The public sphere cannot be automated like an assembly line churning out toasters. The journalistic endeavour is inherently human, so, too are the editorial functions necessarily reflective of human values (2020, p. 115).

Frank Pasquale's sharp rebuke, noted above, is Habermasian because it places a premium on what enables democratic will formation in voters and governments. His point is that, in the algorithmic public sphere, the line between human generation and counterfeit content is blurred by design. I agree that, this directly undermines our efforts to deliberate as epistemic equals.

Whether algorithmic promotion changes the nature of an online platform and contributes to political polarization is visibly under empirical study, public scrutiny and national judicial deliberation. The need for regulation of social media platforms remains, widely acknowledged in the EU and US. For now, we are all in the *collective-action* waiting room, while the morally urgent

national regulation of social media platforms becomes politically feasible. There are other rooms, and there is time. I recommend that, projects of digital democracy that directly involve diverse citizens in formal deliberation and discursive norms, are plausible *now*. We must remember, that while citizens have intrinsic capabilities to be competent members of their political community, we acquire a taste for informed political opinions by conscientiously interacting with others. A keen frontrunner of the American deliberative tradition, philosopher John Dewey (1927), recasts our epistemic virtues as democratic *habits* taught in social groups, - "faculties of effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers" (p. 183). Motivated by this need for habits of social reflection in the digital democratic community, I argue for deliberative processes that narrowly focus on including citizens in the process of becoming aware of their epistemic needs. Such processes leave citizens, better inoculated against the algorithmic manipulation of their everyday political beliefs, habits and choices.

3.1 Characteristics of The Algorithmic Public Sphere

An important departure is debated, when comparing the algorithmic public sphere of social media to the journalistic landscape of the 20th century. This debate cites the absence of enforceable editorial norms, responsibility, and design alignment with the public interest in the algorithmic realm. A lack of legal limits on social media platforms is viewed as linked to issues of alienation, fragmentation, and echo chambers.

It is correct to point out that, social media cannot entirely replace professional journalism or televised public news options because they each serve distinct purposes. It is also fair to contend that social media's blurring of personal, social, commercial, and political spheres is uniquely potent. We are drawn into an algorithmic agora more intensely than any number of traditional forums like; public radio, local news or open municipal town halls. This transition is exemplified by the work of a chorus of scholars, who remind us how social media's 'news headlines' are tailored to every inch of our online behaviours. So, we get news reels that masterfully manipulate emotions often at the expense of factual accuracy and public discourse.

A second objection, stems from the assertion that traditional news media *also* carries extreme content and is competitively driven *into* profit motives rather than norms of public interest. This argument draws attention to polarization-inducing content abundant in most places. Extreme content thrives on traditional forums, such as on Fox News in the US or, within UK tabloid culture. This questions if the focus on social media's distinctiveness is justified. After all, misinformation,

propaganda, and distraction can permeate various media platforms, not solely social media. I concede that there is nothing new about extreme political opinions. An optimistic observer of his own time, Dewey could be describing public policy debates on Twitter when he notes:

> Opinions and beliefs concerning the public presuppose effective and organised inquiry. Unless there are methods for detecting the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequences, what passes as public opinion will be "opinion" in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is (p. 199).

I counter the noted objections by highlighting a different normative concern about going viral in the algorithmic public sphere. Human-to-human deception is often intensified by automated bots on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This is a clear violation of the democratic principle of equal influence among individual persons within the public sphere. The algorithmic manipulation of our social media interactions disrupts the notion of an equitable democratic discourse among equal members of one political community. My intuition is that, for now, bots should remain uninvited from a national dialogue about the fundamental epistemic and political interests of human citizens.

I suggest that, traditional journalism, which, although not without flaws, often upholds certain *enforceable* editorial standards, civil society norms and more widely understood aims for balanced reporting. Information algorithms, on social media platforms, have the global power to amplify specific narratives. Thus, they shape the contours of public opinion and interactions beyond the magnitude of mere dissemination in one political culture. More problematically, they lack alignment with the epistemic virtues, of accuracy and verification, in the public interest of most democratic societies. For deliberative and republican democrats, the risk to democratic ideals within the 'boundaryless' algorithmic public sphere necessitates our critical examination and thoughtful interventions that include citizens in processes of evaluating the veracity of their digital discourse.

3.2. Habermas and The Digital Fragmentation of the Public Sphere

> The point of deliberative politics is, after all, that it enables us to improve our beliefs through political disputes and get closer to correct solutions to problems. (Jürgen Habermas, 2022) [5]

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[5] See Habermas. (2022). p. 152

Habermas' concept of the public sphere refers to a space where individuals can come together, to discuss and form opinions on matters of national importance. However, he argues with the advent of digital technologies the public sphere has become fragmented. Online platforms and social media algorithms, have led to echo-chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are mostly exposed to like-minded opinions. Habermas' ideas are relevant today as we grapple with the challenges and implications of digital fragmentation on democracy and public communication.

According to Habermas (2022), social media platforms have normatively unique features and limits. One unique feature is, the ability of algorithms to customise content; tailoring it to individual preferences. This personalization can foster engagement and increase relevance for individuals while encouraging social segregation and fragmented public forums of discussion. The democratic limits of social media platforms are located in the alignment of information algorithms that create filter bubbles, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Moreover, commercial interests can influence the content displayed, potentially shaping public discourse, political opinions and agendas. Another limitation is the risk of algorithmic manipulation, as algorithms may not be designed to explicitly prioritise accurate information.

Habermas thinks that an algorithmic public sphere has advantages, but careful consideration is needed to mitigate its limitations. The aims should always be to ensure a more inclusive and epistemically equal structure for political discourse. For instance, commentators agree that, social media platforms have earned their current reputations in the EU and US- as breeding grounds for extreme cases of political conspiracy theories, hate speech, and misinformation. The clear role of algorithmic promotion, in facilitating the spread of extreme content, has raised concerns and sparked debates around the need for stronger content moderation practices.

3.3 Problematic Political Polarization in the Algorithmic Agora

Within the context of American and European debates, the issue of polarization on social media platforms has lingering philosophical ramifications. It challenges our known foundations in democratic discourse about epistemic equality and generating normative claims based on active empirical lines of inquiry. My sole contestation in this debate is that, I assume information algorithms have created a hostile epistemic environment by clearly promoting viral misinformation and reducing some citizens to an echo-chamber of their own worst intuitions. Sometimes, to their complete disenchantment with any reasonable alternatives. I introduce, concrete solutions that formulate deliberative limits for algorithmic misinformation. I argue that positive epistemic

interventions should augment, our self-segregated lives on social media platforms. These solutions—citizen juries, national deliberation day, and voting advice applications include citizens in a reflective process of engagement with expert opinions and diverse perspectives.

I assert the intuition that there is no good information without good gatekeeping, to highlight the need for effective content moderation and verification on social media platforms. I propose that better information is attainable through deliberative processes because they assemble, a small but diverse selection of citizens, from all walks of life. By engaging in informed discussions, and mindful of various viewpoints, citizens can form habits to resist political manipulation by viral conspiracy theories and extreme speech. I propose to conceptually reconstruct our roles as digital citizens to include our coordinated function as competent gatekeepers, vigilant against misinformation gone viral and stronger for our efforts to debunk extreme content on social media platforms by reflecting together. In my view, this would imply, stronger civic duties to participate in deliberative processes; designed to publicly debunk extreme cases of misinformation.

Noticeably, not all citizens or governments possess a comprehensive understanding of algorithmic mechanisms, yet all citizens are susceptible to such manipulation in our daily lives. This lack of transparency and epistemic oversight challenges the democratic principles of accountability and equality. I assume that the problem of polarization on social media platforms in the EU and US holds continued philosophical significance; it requires us to choose some deliberative concepts in epistemic equality, relational competence and informed participation over other competing ways of organising debates in a digital democracy.

I conclude that, deliberative processes may not completely eradicate algorithmic manipulation but they serve as necessary epistemic interventions. Ultimately, they enable citizens to critically assess information, engage with diverse perspectives, and navigate the algorithmic public sphere more effectively. These solutions, grounded in both democratic theory and practice, offer a way forward to counter the challenges posed by political polarization and algorithmic manipulation in the digital age.

I address in my next chapter, potential objections to an ultimately empirical claim about the perils of algorithmic polarization, represented in a wide range of accounts situated within the diversity of democratic scholarship and disagreements about the digital public sphere

4. Desirable and Undesirable Ways of Democratising the Algorithmic Agora

> The essential need, in other, words, is the improvement of methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That *is* the problem of the public. (John Dewey, 1927)[6]

In this chapter, I will not be explicating in great detail the many valid challenges Cass Sunstein (2019) and Jürgen Habermas (2022) have invited over the many years of their analysis of undemocratic political polarisation on social media platforms. I will simply try to make the point that such challenges demand a diversity in the democratic values that we cherish in procedures for digital or discursive engagement. As such, demands that deliberative democrats be mindful of asymmetries of power and creating avenues for contestation, are readily accommodated by modifications in how we design formal deliberations.

Most importantly, I believe that the *epistemic, empirical* and *agonistic* objections I outline, do not impact the narrow normative role I have in mind for deliberative processes in this thesis. By suggesting we debunk viral cases of misinformation on social media platforms in small groups of citizens, I do not have unrealistic expectations for rational discourse or achieving consensus. A citizen panel or deliberation day focussed on achieving shared agreement on verifiably false conspiracy theories is an attempt to improve the conditions of political debate for everyone present in the room. It allows for contestation within parameters of accuracy, fair exchange and revising opinions based on better information. I counter this broader challenge with two arguments and several concrete proposals in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

Argument 1 asserts that, current institutional practice cannot afford to overlook the unprecedented levels of epistemic inequality on social media platforms. Argument 2 states the insular nature of social media deepens relational silos and undermines the fundamental competence of digital citizens to comprehend, engage with, and participate in complex policy debates. All citizens are at risk of exposure to extreme views, misinformation, and echo-chambers on social media. This erodes our ability to assess accurate sources of information, consult experts, and engage in discussions with diverse political peers.

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[6] See Dewey, J. reprint. (2016). p. 225.

4.1 Many Democratic Concepts of the Digital Public Sphere

The vibrant landscape of democratic theory offers a plethora of perspectives when it comes to the design of digital discussion forums and public spheres. Within this realm, my focused review has revealed a distinct lack of consensus on fundamental epistemic assumptions and design objectives concerning the alignment of citizens' socio-political aspirations with the realm of social media platforms. To embark on a comprehensive analysis of my chosen deliberative-republican framework and its underlying concepts for addressing the unique challenges faced by digital citizens, it is essential to acknowledge potential objections that can arise from a diverse array of democratic accounts.

A pivotal dimension of this debate revolves around the idea that fragmented cyber-publics hold the potential for antagonism, serving as a counterpoint to the conventional view of the public sphere as a realm for deliberative consensus. This perspective is eloquently articulated by Lincoln Dahlberg, who in 2007 emphasized the antagonistic capacity of fragmented cyber-publics (2022, p. 117).

Drawing inspiration from sociologist Timon Beyes, I offer the continuing influence of Jürgen Habermas is evident in generating responses from various strands of democratic thinkers. Beyes' assertion that engaging with Habermas' work requires a balance between normative assumptions and empirical descriptions is particularly illuminating, suggesting that Habermas lays the foundation for subsequent inquiries, even if some scholars choose to diverge from his choice of empirical assumptions (2022, p. 118).

Central to my analysis are the *epistemic, empirical*, and *agonistic* objections that I delineate. These objections not only describe the challenges that the digital public sphere presents but also highlight the differences in diagnosing the extent of the problem of political polarization on social media platforms. Moreover, these objections prompt an exploration of the primary discursive goal—whether it should be consensus or contestation—that should guide the design of robustly democratic digital public spaces.

Ultimately, my endeavour is to clarify the implications of these objections for my reliance on deliberative-republican concepts and the narrow solution I propose for countering misinformation. By delving into these objections, I aim to enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between democratic theory, digital communication, and the challenges of fostering informed and participatory digital citizenship.

Hypothetical Epistemic Objection, David Estlund*:* Engaging in a discourse on the possible epistemic objections that arise within democratic theory, I turn my attention to a hypothetical epistemic objection posed by David Estlund. Within my argument, I elucidate that Estlund (2000, 2008) offers compelling democratic reasons to regard social media platforms as procedurally fair. While my analysis involves a reconstruction and application of Estlund's work, which does not directly address information algorithms and social media, it becomes apparent that his viewpoint can help flesh out critical concerns. Specifically, Estlund's perspective might help challenge the conventional assumption that algorithmic operations on social media platforms are inherently undemocratic simply because they contribute to epistemic harms, such as the amplification of misinformation.

As an epistemic democrat, Estlund's stance is narrowed down for illustrative purposes in my argument, highlighting the contention that the algorithmic workings of social media platforms might be deemed fair based on procedural criteria. Estlund's perspective does not negate the fact that information algorithms can indeed lead to epistemic harms. Instead, he introduces the notion that epistemic inequities must surpass certain empirical and democratic thresholds before a declaration of the digital forums causing epistemic injustice can be made, or before advocating for state-led interventions in privately-owned social platforms.

This perspective opens up the possibility that social media platforms can, under evolving empirical circumstances of reform, be deemed procedurally fair. According to Estlund's conceptual framework as applied in my analysis, information algorithms could be seen as democratically legitimate due to their facilitation of equal opportunities for each individual to engage in extensive and varied political discourse. Moreover, individuals retain their freedoms to enter and exit diverse discussions on the platform of their choice. However, I argue that Estlund's perspective, as tailored for my argument, falls short of imposing fundamental epistemic standards on social media platforms.

In Estlund's view, unequal influence and algorithmic manipulation on social media might be tolerable from an epistemic standpoint only if they "provide more input opportunity for everyone and it is not too unequal" (2008, p. 196). While it is evident that social media platforms amplify the volume and intensity of engagement among democratic citizens, aligning with Estlund's first epistemic condition, the significance of his second condition becomes particularly noteworthy.

This condition introduces a distinct threshold for epistemic inequality among citizens, one that appears to remain imprecisely determined. In light of this, I argue that Estlund's perspective might not adequately disqualify the amplified inequities observed on social media platforms from an epistemic standpoint. My contention is rooted in the premise that information algorithms, through

their promotion of extreme political opinions, misinformation, and self-segregation among citizens, indeed lead to serious epistemic harms.

Empirical Objection: Echo-Chambers Only Compromise a Small Number of Citizens*:* As I delve into addressing plausible democratic challenges to the concepts and empirical assumptions, I have integrated from scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Cass Sunstein, one pertinent empirical objection warrants consideration. Within my analysis of the echo-chamber phenomenon, an idea I've drawn from the insights of Elizabeth Anderson and Cass Sunstein, a noteworthy counterargument emerges. Anderson and Sunstein posit the echo-chamber phenomenon as a condition in which individuals confine their media consumption to reinforce pre-existing beliefs, culminating in the polarization of opinions along partisan lines.

However, Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank (2018) introduce a compelling empirical dimension to this notion. They challenge the prevailing assumption of "widespread echo-chamber effects" by contending that only a fraction of citizens might find themselves ensnared within such extreme isolation of ideas. Instead, Dubois and Blank advocate for a more nuanced understanding, asserting that examining citizens' engagement with multiple media sources, rather than focusing solely on individual platforms, provides a more accurate representation of their informational exposure. This empirical objection bears relevance to both the epistemic objection discussed earlier and my broader argument. It aligns with the contention that a relatively small subset of citizens may be severely affected by echo chambers, shedding light on the diverse media consumption patterns exhibited by a larger portion of the population.

Nonetheless, the objection underscores a more profound issue I value more: the varying degrees of digital media literacy prevalent among individuals. Echo chambers, as Dubois and Blank imply, have implications beyond the immediate confines of isolation. The wider gap between politically engaged individuals and those indifferent to politics raises concerns about the amplification of divisions and potential repercussions for democratic discourse (Dubois & Blank, 2018, p. 730).

This empirical objection resonates with the foundational work of scholars such as Elizabeth Anderson and Thomas Christiano, who I previously cited to defend the importance of addressing even the smaller subset of citizens caught in echo chambers. It further bolsters my contention that despite the relatively modest numbers, the consequences of leaving some citizens behind for the broader democratic landscape are substantial, aligning with my overarching argument about the role of deliberative processes in mitigating such challenges.

On Algorithmic Polarisation: Dahlberg's Diagnostic Challenge for Habermas and Sunstein:

Th The discourse on algorithmic polarization unveils a vigorous debate among democratic scholars – Lincoln Dahlberg, Jürgen Habermas, and Cass Sunstein – revealing divergent empirical assumptions and principles inherent in the digital public sphere, an ongoing theme in democratic theory. Some agonistic democrats seem to adopt a consequentialist stance regarding political polarization, arguing that algorithmic polarization on social media platforms becomes unjust only if epistemic inequities reach an excessive level.

Contrarily, they don't necessarily align with the reflections of deliberative democratic solutions and assumptions for digital public projects. For them, it suffices if digital citizens are willing and capable of engaging in political discourse even with those they ideologically differ from on social media. While agonists indeed value disagreement more than most deliberative democrats, it's essential to clarify that most agonistic perspectives emphasize the importance of diverse viewpoints engaging in productive dialogue. Within this context, the debate featuring Lincoln Dahlberg's agonistic viewpoint, Jürgen Habermas's deliberative stance, and Cass Sunstein's republican perspective centres on their contrasting evaluations of the extent of political polarization on social media platforms. Additionally, it addresses the primary discursive goal – whether consensus or contestation – that should guide the design of democratic digital spaces.

In light of this debate, my argument suggests that the agonist critique signifies that the digital public sphere's orientation should not prioritize consensus over contestation, even if a small number of citizens find themselves trapped in a self-segregation loop on social media platforms.

My contention is that some agonistic accounts potentially underestimate the significant levels of self-segregation among citizens, along with group bias and resistance to altering false beliefs. Aligning with recent empirical research, I assume that all digital citizens face an elevated algorithmic risk when shaping moderate political opinions – a fact often overlooked.

This implication resonates with the idea that the collective political will, rooted in a shared understanding of political reality and discursive context, is also under threat. In engaging with Habermas and Sunstein's portrayal of the issues within the public sphere, Dahlberg critiques their representation of undemocratic fragmentations. In this regard, Dahlberg asserts, "Much online interaction simply involves the meeting of 'like-minded' individuals… Thus, expanding the public sphere" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 829).

Furthermore, Dahlberg directly engages with Cass Sunstein's empirical assumption, challenging the notion that epistemic interventions provide a desirable solution to address polarization.

Deliberative theorists stress the significance of shared understanding and rational discourse in mitigating such polarization during constructive policy debates. Dahlberg argues that deliberative democrats might overlook the intrinsic conflicts, power contestations, and political disagreements integral to democratic societies. He highlights that conflicts and contestations aren't limited to digital spaces. In this context, Dahlberg suggests that algorithmic disagreements might indeed be democratically legitimate, urging their accommodation in the design of digital public spaces rather than their mitigation or de-prioritization.

Acknowledging the ongoing dialogue between agonistic and deliberative critiques, it becomes apparent that polarization doesn't solely result from algorithmic amplification; it's equally a product of underlying power dynamics. This perspective introduces nuance to debates concerning the effectiveness of epistemic interventions, emphasizing the necessity of considering the broader socio-political context in which these interventions operate.

In this account, algorithmic disagreements might be regarded as democratically legitimate. In a different essay Dahlberg makes explicit they should be accommodated in the design of digital public spaces rather than mitigated and de-prioritised:

> The general feeling is that, as things stand, the future of Internet politics will not be the strong democracy of the deliberative model but 'politics as usual': ideological distortion and coercion, partisan rhetoric, dogmatic enclaves, activist disruptions and destabilizing conflict ....The alternative that deliberative democrats advocate to this colonization of online politics by interest group competition is for universities, civic organizations and governments to develop online deliberative public spaces, and for government policy initiatives that limit state and corporate colonization of online politics while encouraging citizen deliberation. This seems to all make good sense. However, before advancing such initiatives we need to examine critiques of the deliberative public sphere that argue that it fails as a model of strong democracy, and that any deliberative projects at best support weak democratic practices. (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 51)

4.2 My Criticism of Undesirable Ways of Democratising the Digital Agora

I present two arguments that object to the underestimation of the severity of political polarization within the algorithmic agora and democratic theory. These arguments draw inspiration from debates in the European Union and the United States about the regulation of social media platforms. Conceptually, I remain true to the empirical assumptions I find upheld explicitly by American democratic scholars - Elizabeth Anderson (2021), Cass Sunstein (2017), and James Fishkin (2004, 2019). I don't mean to suggest that what is true based on the empirical experiences of the American polity carries over and transmits to mechanisms I summarily expect should work in the European

context. I do mean that the self-consciously comparative and experimental spirit of the scholarship offered by Anderson, Sunstein, and Fishkin continues to normatively make the case for epistemic investments directly aimed at digital citizens across the varied polities in which they are effectively deployed.

Argument 1: The Perils of Hyper-Polarized National Political Cultures

I argue that, social media platforms have become the predominant public spaces for political discourse. This generates an imperative to ameliorate, the propagation of extreme content within these spaces. For example, Birtherism, an enduring conspiracy theory for the American public, highlights how misinformation can morph into an entrenched ideological movement. This example underscores the challenges of debunking conspiracy theories and chilling persistence of extreme content on social media:

> Birtherism is the baseless conjecture that the 44th president of the United States not only was born abroad and was therefore ineligible for the presidency, but also was a secret Muslim planning to undermine America from within…Birtherisms's explanatory power was negligible, but as a worldview, its appeal to conservatives was enduring. By 2011, about half of Republican voters believed Obama was born abroad (2021, The Atlantic) [7]

Some agonistic democrats might say that, the algorithmic amplification of the beliefs of some Republican voters should not be deemed undemocratic. All American voters have an equal opportunity to voice their own world views and contest the world view of fellow citizens on social media platforms.

I say, that the issue is, the erosion of the American electorate's ability to uphold the virtues of accuracy in political communication. Equal participation in the algorithmic public sphere presumes the basic competence and discursive capabilities of citizens. I conclude that, the prominence of extreme content in the algorithmic agora, necessitates investigation into the erosion of the epistemic virtues of accuracy and truth in social debate and inquiry.

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[7] Serwer, A. (2021). Birtherism of A Nation. In *The Atlantic*. May.

Argument 2: The Problematic Losses of Civic Competence and Epistemic Equality

My second argument addresses the erosion of civic competence and epistemic equality resulting from self-segregation on social media platforms. This phenomenon uniquely undermines citizens' capacity to change their beliefs, engage with expert findings, develop informed policy opinions, and participate in diverse discussions. This issue is empirically unprecedented, but also directly linked to information algorithms on social media platforms.

The importance of addressing this erosion of competence becomes clear in my example. I consider a hypothetical deployment of deliberative processes to counter the spread of conspiracy theories. In 2014, a deliberative process focused on Birtherism could have included a small group of Americans and forensic experts in debunking the viral conspiracy theory between election cycles. This exemplifies the potential efficacy of epistemic interventions in fostering critical thinking. Deployed regularly in national political cultures, they would help counter misinformation by producing more discerning citizens. Agonistic democrats might continue to extol the virtues of intense disagreement in political opinions on social media platforms. However, the erosion of citizens' capabilities to engage constructively makes necessary interventions that empower citizens to navigate the algorithmic public sphere more effectively. I underscore the persistence of the problem of political polarization within democratic theory. I imply the importance of establishing clear institutional priorities. My proposed solutions are deliberative processes, including *citizen juries, deliberative polling*, and *voting advice applications.* These processes engage citizens directly, elevating the quality of discussions, promoting individual learning, and enhancing the quality of political opinions. Overall, they increase the likelihood of one political community reaching shared understanding and resilience towards viral misinformation.

The works of Elizabeth Anderson and James Fishkin bolster my argument for cultivating the competency of digital citizens. Our common objective is to fortify citizens against manipulation and provide them with diverse expert perspectives. I assert that deliberative processes represent systemic solutions to the issue of political polarization. This is because they make necessary regular interactions between citizens and existing civic-political institutions. This approach opens up avenues that promote digital media literacy and relational equity among digital citizens.

I argue that the deployment of deliberative processes is one solution to combat extreme misinformation on social media that directly includes citizens. These processes augment the quality

of information we consume and foster participation among citizens from diverse backgrounds. They provide us with epistemic tools to navigate the challenges of misinformation prevalent on social media platforms. By prioritizing the development of competent digital citizens, I believe this approach contributes to improving the quality of democratic participation in projects of digital democracy. However, I emphasize the evolving nature of deliberative democracy. Political philosophers Elizabeth Anderson, James Fishkin, and Markus Patberg advocate experimentation in the deployment of discursive-formal mechanisms:

> Political theorists who identify problematic changes in democratic politics as a result of digitalization will offer also ask what constructive steps could remedy the situation, while those who contemplate ideas for new forms of democracy also need to consider how digitalization has affected the political processes we have so far and what these empirical developments imply with regard to possible future paths (Patberg, 2023, p. 4).

The clear upshot of implementing deliberative processes in alignment with systemic guidelines is the potential to rectify the grievous cases of misinformation consumed by citizens. Deliberation also introduces novel avenues for participation, involving individuals from various backgrounds. My contention is that we require the unique epistemic tools inherent in discursive models to collectively address the prevalent misinformation on social media. This supplementation enhances existing political practices without supplanting the digital context in which we privately consume information.

Deliberative polling and voting advice applications can equip us with the epistemic tools needed to combat the misinformation encountered while navigating social media. These distinct epistemic tools of discursive models are essential for collectively confronting the widespread misinformation found on social media platforms. Through a scientific selection process, citizens from diverse walks of life convene in a single space for the explicit purpose of engaging in political debate alongside a variety of peers. Deliberative polling facilitates individuals in attaining a deeper comprehension of intricate subjects like algorithmic deep fakes, chat bots, and content moderation, achieved through structured discussions encompassing diverse perspectives, including those of digital forensic experts.

4.3 Choosing Better Deliberation Over More Algorithmic Polarisation

No man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone (John Dewey, 1927). [8]

My stance in this section is: when misinformation goes viral on social media platforms, it can trigger a kind of epistemic epidemic that impacts all democratic citizens. Falsehoods that gain prominence on social media can reverberate through local groups, communities, and even specific politicians and citizens they target. Consequently, addressing and debunking a specific yet insidious set of content that gains algorithmic traction becomes a concern for both the tangible and virtual realms of socio-political existence. The small subset of citizens who may choose to freely harbour and propagate their most extreme viewpoints on social platforms cannot be left to self-isolate within their echo chambers. Periodically, they ought to don their citizen hats and collaboratively assess the viral falsehoods they opt to embrace as deeply-held political beliefs.

It is important to clarify that these requisites can manifest in a variety of adaptable formats to ensure citizens' freedom of choice. Citizens might be chosen at random, provided incentives for their time, or even offered the opportunity to volunteer for or opt out of deliberative processes when called upon to engage in reflective discussions with their peers. In Fishkin's model, they are monetarily compensated for their time, participation and energy.

My argument underscores that the heightened epistemic responsibilities imposed on citizens within the realm of social media correspondingly entail incentives and duties of participation and engagement. These are ultimately open invitations to collectively address misinformation and enhance the quality of political discourse.

In this context, I put forth the proposition of adopting deliberative processes as a pragmatic solution to counteract political misinformation among citizens both in the EU and the US. These processes do not eradicate the algorithmic promotion of extreme content on social media platforms. Instead, they furnish citizens with tools to navigate the intricate terrain of online and offline policy discussions. Their objective is to bolster citizens' resilience against the algorithmic manipulation of their political opinions and choices.

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[8] See, Dewey, J. reprinted. (2016). *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry.* p. 191

***Proposal 1*: Citizen Juries for Content Moderation**

An effective strategy involves the narrow deployment of citizen juries for content moderation, an approach that brings together a diverse group of approximately twenty randomly selected citizens. These jurors are presented with expert opinions and evidence regarding the content moderation strategies employed by social media platforms. By engaging in informed discussions grounded in comprehensive briefing materials, citizen jurors formulate well-founded recommendations for local authorities, government representatives, and regulators. This successful method, previously tested in Scotland for local governance matters, holds potential to be extended to broader dialogues concerning the regulation of social media content.

For instance, consider a hypothetical scenario involving a Dutch citizen jury convened to deliberate upon and debunk viral conspiracy theories (2020-2022) that have plagued their town. This endeavour would represent a nationwide effort to ensure that residents directly engage in reflecting upon Dutch regulatory decisions for social media platforms, which, as seen in actual news headlines, led to a notable lawsuit against Twitter:

> Bodegraven-Reeuwijk, a town of about 35,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Netherlands, has been the focus of conspiracy theories on social media since 2020, when three men started spreading unfounded stories about the abuse and murder of children, which they said took place in the town in the 1980s.[9]

This extreme conspiracy theory had demonstrably caused public disturbances and local harm. By convening a civic jury, the community would be demonstrating a proportional commitment to addressing misinformation that negatively impacts its residents. A range of experts would be invited to present evidence-based testimonies to the jury. This panel of experts could encompass local historians and journalists to shed light on the historical accuracy of the claims, psychologists to delve into the psychological mechanisms underlying conspiracy theories, and fact-checkers to assess the credibility of the allegations.

A jury composed of fellow citizens would actively engage with the local community, attentively listening to residents' concerns, opinions, and personal experiences related to the conspiracy theory.

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[9] (2022). Dutch town takes Twitter to Court over Unfounded Satanic Paedophile Claims. In *The Guardian*. February.

This participatory approach would aid the jury in comprehending the emotional ramifications of algorithmically amplified inflammatory falsehoods within the community, especially concerning their hometown. It is my contention that such a process would contribute to rebuilding trust within the community, equipping residents with tools to recognize and counteract conspiracy theories, and setting a precedent for informed civic engagement in confronting instances of severe online misinformation.

*Proposal 2***: National Deliberation Day for Debunking Conspiracy Theories**

Let's envisage a hypothetical national deliberation day tailored to debunking viral conspiracy theories within the United States. The primary objective of this event would be to engage a diverse group of citizens from varying backgrounds and perspectives in a deliberative process aimed at countering the proliferation of misinformation. Here's how the operational framework of this experimental day is articulated by Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin:

> Deliberation Day—a new national holiday. It will be held two weeks before major national elections. Registered voters will be called together in neighbourhood meeting places, in small groups of fifteen, and larger groups of five hundred, to discuss the central issues raised by the campaign. Each deliberator will be paid $150 for the day's work of citizenship. To allow the rest of the workaday world to proceed, the holiday will be a two-day affair, and every citizen will have the right to take one day off to deliberate on the choices facing the nation (2004, p. 3).

For this initiative, a representative cross-section of Americans would be randomly chosen to partake in the deliberation day. Ensuring diversity across demographics, political affiliations, and social backgrounds, the selected sample would encompass a wide spectrum of viewpoints. To provide participants with accurate, well-researched information, experts proficient in relevant domains would furnish evidence-based insights on the conspiracy theories under scrutiny.

During the event, citizens would engage in in-depth discussions, posing queries and exchanging perspectives while following up with both experts and fellow participants. This process would foster the virtues and skills of critical thinking, fact-checking, and collaborative analysis of the conspiracy theories. The ultimate aim of these deliberations is to ascertain the credibility of the theories. This setting serves as a space where democratic citizenship's responsibilities expand to encompass our epistemic obligations to critically evaluate information, ultimately enhancing our capacity to distinguish between substantiated claims and unfounded rumours on social media platforms.

Thomas Christiano's explicit endorsement of the "interactive relationship" between experts and citizens could align with my proposal for combatting misinformation within automated systems. Our shared perspective underscores that assembling ordinary citizens and experts for collective discourse could provide our most robust arguments to debunk conspiracy theories:

> In the account of the democratic division of labour I have sketched, citizens rule over the society by choosing the aims of the society and experts, along with the rest of the system, are charged with the tasks of implementing these aims with the help of their specialised knowledge. Democratic deliberation proceeds through citizens' discussion concerning the aims and the various legitimate trade-offs among the aims and then through the deliberations of experts and policy-makers in crafting legislation designed to achieve those aims (2022, p. 51).

Following a few intensive days of deliberations, participants would collaboratively work toward consensus or a shared comprehension of the targeted conspiracy theories. This process would involve identifying common ground and points of accord based on the evidence presented following initial surveys. The outcomes of each deliberation day—including expert presentations, opinion surveys, notable discussion points, and shared conclusions—would be documented, published, or televised yearly for broader dissemination within national cultures. The intention is to contribute to a formal and recurring practice of integrating well-informed perspectives on these conspiracy theories. While the immediate effect of the deliberation day might not entirely eliminate misinformation within the political landscape, it would certainly succeed by equipping participants with pedagogical skills and tools for critically assessing information and engaging in meaningful discussions. Over time, the informed opinions of these small citizen groups could influence their online interactions, eventually leading to a more enlightened and discerning digital citizenship.

In conclusion, the active inclusion of ordinary citizens in the process of debunking conspiracy theories through a national deliberation day aligns seamlessly with the principles of epistemic equality and interactive democratic participation. As such, these discursive encounters with fellow citizens generate incremental advancements in social habits, education, and the development of all individuals. Such an approach presents a promising path towards fostering a well-informed and participatory democratic culture.

Proposal 3: Voting Advice Applications for Viral Misinformation

I suggest that, voting advice applications (VAAs) can be effectively deployed to counteract viral misinformation. Inspired by ongoing European experiments, the promise of this approach goes beyond addressing political misinformation. It can be adapted, to encompass a broader range of public misinformation; such as climate change, hate speech, immigration demographics, and vaccines. VAAs offer personalised recommendations to citizens based on their values and policy preferences, but crucially for my argument uphold the value of epistemic accuracy and informed decisions. They typically rely on, verified sources information and peer-reviewed research. This approach empowers citizens to browse bravely, but resist the sway of misinformation.

As we reach the culmination of this chapter, the amalgamation of three distinct proposals intertwines with a resounding argument: the battle against misinformation demands multifaceted solutions that encompass personalized engagement, deliberative empowerment, and democratic accountability.

Delving deeper into the realm of deliberative processes, I uncover a transformative potential that extends beyond conventional political discourse. While these processes may not eradicate the systemic challenges posed by algorithmic manipulation on social media platforms, they emerge as catalysts for nurturing a media-literate, critically-thinking citizenry. This era calls for a shift in participation dynamics, enabling citizens to engage more consciously and effectively in their digital lives. The concept of democratic accountability finds new dimensions, encompassing not only political forums but also the epistemic tools needed to make informed decisions across diverse facets of life:

> It is about ideas and their shaping. Deception, propaganda and indoctrination gave always played a role in the rough and tumble of actual political life, but they take on a new, disturbing dimension in our age of electronic media and satellite surveillance, of 'hype', 'spin', and the 'infomercial', of 'image', 'credibility' and 'virtual' reality. Watching television from infancy, people not only acquire misinformation; they become habituated to the role of spectator. (2004, p. 341)

As Hannah Pitkin aptly cautions, the electronic age can warp our participatory habits, elevating misinformation and transforming citizens into passive spectators. In the digital landscape, where the threat to epistemic competence is elevated, our approach reverberates as a countermeasure, democratizing the curtailment of algorithmic manipulation and safeguarding the fundamental right to accurate information.

The ripple effects of embracing deliberative-republican equality resonate far beyond the sphere of voting behaviour. The propositions encapsulated in this chapter not only empower citizens to discerningly navigate the algorithmic currents of social media platforms but also extend their influence into daily decisions. From financial choices to medical treatments, the principles championed here foster an informed citizenry, capable of engaging in well-rounded discussions and making choices rooted in evidence, rather than succumbing to misinformation-driven trends.

In recapitulation, I discussed through Chapter Four, the challenges posed to empirical assumptions, yet the beacon of prioritizing quality of deliberation for digital citizens shines unwaveringly. The vulnerability of certain citizens to fake news in the digital realm, stemming from intergenerational digital media illiteracy, accentuates the importance of fostering deliberative spaces that enhance knowledge and alleviate isolation.

In Chapter Five, I offer a parting reflection on the relationship between democratic accountability, formal authorization of social media platforms, and the contemporary discourse on digital power. Embracing the republican perspective, which underscores citizen involvement in the realms of authorization and accountability, I propel my reader towards a democratic landscape where citizens are not merely spectators but active architects of their digital environment.

5. Domination *of* the Citizens, *by* the Information Algorithms, *for* Profit

> The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people; public discussion is a political duty; and this should be a fundamental principle of American government.
> (Justice Louis Brandeis, 1927) [10]

In my analysis so far, I have explained that the algorithmic promotion of misinformation on social media platforms clearly compromises the epistemic quality of public deliberation and the epistemic competence of democratic citizens. I have made it clear in my approach that I favour formal (regulatory and participatory) intervention in the algorithmic misinformation of democratic citizens. As such, I believe that tech corporations, by virtue of designing and maintaining these platforms, lack proper democratic oversight from governments. Thus, I have implied, but now hope to make clear that the 'power' of tech corporations in setting up and maintaining these platforms is politically under-justified and lacks democratic authorization. I do this by flagging the normatively bigger concern of the democratic authorization and political justification of digital power in contemporary democratic theory.

In this chapter, I clarify that the secondary problem (democratic authorization) identified in my thesis is helped by the republican standpoints I outline. However, it functions only as a sub-question for my central problem: the epistemic quality of misinformed deliberation on social media. In other words, a detailed republican analysis of democratic authorization would support my narrow use of deliberative processes for democratic accountability for social media platforms but remains outside the scope of my thesis and discussion here. For my analysis, it is sufficient to note that the republican and deliberative democrats I cite object to 'epistemic interference' by information algorithms and would endorse the inclusion of citizens in participatory processes to alleviate grievous epistemic harms on social media.

In our time, tech corporations wield significant power by virtue of their ownership of information algorithms. However, they do so without responsibility or liability for the extreme content that algorithms promote on social media platforms. This signals a lack of responsiveness to the epistemic needs of citizens and demonstrates clear gaps in the democratic authorization and accountability of social media platforms. As such, I offer deliberative processes as *one* way to alleviate some of the concerns about the lack of formal accountability.

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[10] In (Sunstein, 2017, p. 269)

Deliberative democrats defend the intuition that there is no good information without good gatekeeping. I adopt this view that good gatekeeping includes adapting the editorial norms of professional journalism for social media platforms. Such adaptation implies a basic quality of information for all citizens. Gatekeeping can be thick or thin but acts essentially as an accuracy filter, keeping out misinformation, extreme biases, and unreliable sources. Without sufficient gatekeeping, the internet can become stamping grounds for extreme speech and harmful content. On social media platforms, gatekeepers can be human, or they can be automated editors, fact-checkers, and moderators. They still play a vital role in verifying and validating political opinions that are amplified and promoted. Habermas draws a sharp distinction between the traditional and digital gatekeepers of the public sphere.

> Social platforms, unlike traditional media, do not want to assume liability for the dissemination of truth-sensitive, and hence deception-prone, communicative contents. The fact that the press, radio and television, for example, are obliged to correct false reports draws attention to the fact of interest in the present context. Because of the special nature of their goods, which are not mere commodities, the platforms cannot evade all duties of journalistic care…They, too, are responsible and should be liable for news that they neither produce nor edit; for this information also has the power to shape opinions and mentalities (2022, p. 167).

Deliberative and republican democrats argue, social media platforms uniquely threaten public will and political will formation. They converge in suggesting, that epistemic inequities also constitute a political unfreedom of citizens. Cass Sunstein clarifies:

> Freedom, properly understood, consists not simply in the satisfaction of whatever preferences people have, but also in the chance to have preferences and beliefs formed under decent conditions. In the ability to have preferences formed after exposure to a sufficient amount of information as well as an appropriately wide and diverse range of options (2017, p. 58).

5.1 Undemocratic Digital Power and Interference on Social Media Platforms

I posit that the political misapplications of information algorithms lack democratic oversight and accountability from citizens, governments, and judicial bodies of the EU and US. My view is echoed in contemporary democratic theory by scholars who highlight that the mere ownership and operation of information algorithms by tech corporations grant them unjustified power to intervene in the economic, political, and social spheres of individual and collective citizen life.

Prominently undertaking a systematic philosophical evaluation of the nature and justification of algorithmic power, Seth Lazar articulates that the democratic principle of collective self-determination is at stake precisely because the powers of tech corporations over shaping both social relations and structures are a matter of significant private authority:

> Even if we focus on primary goods, governing the digital public sphere still involves making and imposing *significant* value judgments on a population about what counts as realising those goods. What gives the *private companies* behind algorithmic intermediaries the right to exercise this kind of governing power? (Lazar, 2023, p. 9)

In complete conceptual agreement, Phillip Pettit (2018) posits that the hallmark of newly minted digital power is its all-encompassing implications for democratic society and a decisively commercial orientation:

> Does it matter that there are a number of companies in operation, not just a monopoly firm, and that we can exercise a power of exit by leaving one and joining another? No, it does not. None of the enterprises offers us personal security against their capacity to target us. Nor have any of them got an incentive to provide such security, since their ability to target is essential for attracting commercial advertising. [11]

Ownership and control over information algorithms on social media platforms, which involve democratic citizens globally, I think should be viewed as a threat to the republican freedoms of citizens everywhere. This argument maintains the assumption that the mere potential for algorithmic interference compromises the liberty of citizens, regardless of whether such interference is abused. This means that dominion stems from our growing web of dependence on digital devices, marking a shift toward the domination of citizens in the digital realm. I conclude, like many commentators, that our dependence on social media platforms does not absolve them of responsibilities towards the epistemic needs of democratic citizens.

Opting out, as Pettit reminds us, is not an option in social relations characterized by dominance. We are all vulnerable to the algorithmic manipulation of our political opinions and choices and shaped by their ability to target us wherever we go. This raises many difficult questions about who has the democratic authority to require the political alignment of social media platforms. Citizens and governments, by formal procedures and substantive law, is always the ideal answer.

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[11] Pettit, P. (2018). Is Facebook Making Us Less Free? In *The Institute of Art and Ideas News.* March.

However, the absence of regulatory oversight from governments and responsiveness towards citizens shows that information algorithms clearly lack democratic accountability. I argue this justifies both participatory and regulatory interventions for digital platforms to vindicate the long list of political harms already caused to citizens. While we wait for the democratic determination of regulation, I recommend we seize the more inclusive opportunities for deliberative-accountability. I am supported in reaching this conclusion by Seth Lazar, who situates his own preferred solutions in a similar vein:

> Democratic polities should articulate norms of communicative justice (both procedural and substantive) to guide algorithmic intermediaries, and then provide appropriate systemic oversight to ensure that they are being met—without unduly interfering in the digital public sphere themselves…In the meantime, however, platforms cannot afford to wait for democratic authorisation. And they can't evade responsibility by giving users illusions of choice or neutrality. They must instead stop optimising for user engagement and profit, and start optimising for communicative justice (2023, p. 39).

The claims I make in this chapter come with an important caveat. Like most constitutional-democrats reviewed here, I espouse equally the idea that social media platforms require both participatory and regulatory interventions. My own efforts are dedicated to formal participatory processes that go directly to citizens, to arm them with the virtues of vigilance and competence on the frontline of epistemic harms. The priority of deliberative-accountability does not, in any way, make the regulative-authorization of social media platforms less necessary. It is, after all, the higher order concern for deliberative-democratic systems.

As such, I ask but fail to adequately explain to what extent tech corporations are authorized to be gatekeepers of digital media. This is because my analysis is limited to extrapolating this answer from the worsening of our epistemic harms and inequities. The absence of epistemic justice alerts me to the normative illegitimacy of social media platforms as gatekeepers. However, claiming that information algorithms are not democratically authorized is not the same as explaining how to authorize social media platforms.

This is a clear limitation to the success of my second claim. But it is also consciously beyond the scope of my argument for participatory interventions for social media platforms, based on epistemic harms to citizens. My clear goal is to propose processes for the formal accountability of social media platforms. I seek a deliberative indictment of algorithmic misinformation on epistemic grounds in rooms where ordinary citizens and experts assemble.

5.2 My Claim: Algorithmic Public Sphere is Unaccountable to Citizens

Prominent in my argument is the absence of formal accountability for the widespread dissemination of extreme political speech on such platforms in violation of norms of civil society. This consequently implies concerns about the domination of some citizens, most vulnerable within national political cultures, are raised. What is revealed are conditions of stark epistemic and income inequalities among democratic citizens. For example, in American debates, most funding for political information algorithms stems from a small fraction of wealthy individuals and corporate citizens, creating an imbalance that grants disproportionate influence to these entities (Christiano, 2022, p.117). Under these circumstances, national political life is vulnerable to algorithmic misinformation and bestows asymmetric bargaining power upon those who control algorithmic deployment.

Although information algorithms on social media platforms are not exclusively deployed for political ends, their unintended political implications are significant. This discrepancy arises due to the lack of explicit alignment with the public interest and social goals. For instance, Cass Sunstein (2017) argues that social media algorithms *drive* user behaviour and have successfully created "echo chambers" in which people are exposed mostly to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, and in some cases, produce unexampled degrees of extremism and isolation.

More difficult perhaps is the reality that information algorithms are shrouded in levels of complexity. Frank Pasquale's (2015) notion of algorithms as "black box systems" underscores the opacity surrounding the design details of information algorithms. To make matters worse, epistemically, the business models of tech corporations are effectively protected trade secrets. A lack of transparency impedes public scrutiny, leaving academics, journalists, researchers, and citizens similarly struggling to grasp, in real time, the mechanics of legally protected information algorithms and their varied but also still unfolding political uses.

Amidst this dynamic landscape, reactive hope emerges from independent researchers and whistle-blowers in support of efforts to produce responsible inquiry and wider 'public' forms of close scrutiny. A good example is how document leaks (2021) aided by former employees of social media platforms (here, Facebook) are shedding light on the profit-driven alignment of information algorithms and the absence of substantial content moderation. As such, Philip Pettit (2018) would repeat his recent warning that two republican concepts are directly relevant to all citizens on the matter concerning their futures in democratic digital governance: their non-domination and innate equality in the co-authorship of digital media norms and laws. A concern for non-domination

highlights the precarious power dynamics facilitated by algorithmic interference, while a concern for participatory co-authorship affirms for citizens duties of active involvement and vigilance in shaping the regulatory framework of their shared digital informational landscape.

I have emphasized that social media platforms have successfully gained significant new forms of power over citizens, largely owed to information algorithms. This potentially undemocratic power is a form of private authority that raises concerns about political power, democratic accountability, and transparency in my argument. I conclude that platforms can dominate because they control the degree and types of misinformation citizens receive. I maintain that both citizens and social media platforms need deliberative paths to counter misinformation. Citizens need deliberation paths to have a fighting chance to operate as epistemic equals on digital forums. I speculate that social media platforms need deliberative-accountability to reform their operations and realign their algorithms beyond their self-affirmed incentives of advertising and profitability.

In recent years, institutionalising the concept of citizen empowerment, is gaining traction as a means to enhance accountability. Discussions often revolve around, how to empower citizens, to understand and navigate, the algorithms and content curation on social platforms. A good recent example, is the EU's proposed Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA). This represents ongoing efforts, to establish a regulatory framework, that holds social media platforms, explicitly accountable for their content and practices to wider groups in democratic society.[12]

I conclude that, the perception of social media platforms as unaccountable, to democratic citizens and governments, has deep roots in complex global challenges, opacity of algorithms, and profit-driven priorities. The debates about regulation, reflect concerns about fairness, transparency, and the alignment of digital practices with democratic values. The debates about participation, continue to pit the digital freedoms of citizens, against their roles, as effective co-authors of digital laws.
As the digital landscape continues to evolve, I believe striking a harmonious balance between digital freedom and democratic accountability remains a pivotal challenge in ensuring a healthy and thriving information ecosystem.

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[12] Milmo, D. (2022). Digital Services Act: Inside the EU's Ambitious Bid to Clean up social media. In *The Guardian.* December.

5.3 My Solution in Context: Deliberative-Accountability for Social Media Platforms

In Chapter four, I defended the use of deliberative processes to directly address the improvement of citizens' epistemic competence with digital misinformation. I implied that deliberative processes serve as meaningful social experiments, involving active stakeholders in enhancing the quality of public opinion. However, as Lisa Herzog and Robert Lepenis (2022) remind us, while deliberative processes can enhance democratic participation and the epistemic equality of citizens, they cannot be solely relied upon as the exclusive strategy. The digital reform of deliberative systems must be integrated into the broader national deliberative system (p. 503). My proposal is to implement a set of regular deliberative processes specifically aimed at debunking digital misinformation. Thus, my focused solution against digital misinformation cannot single-handedly achieve the overarching goals of fostering higher-quality democratic discourses or improving public trust in deliberation. I strongly agree that there is a risk in expecting one experimental intervention to address all challenges, especially when addressing a narrow aspect of epistemic inequality arising from the amplification of political misinformation on social media platforms.

So, in response, I emphasize that the concrete proposals I discussed do not intend for deliberative processes to replace participation on social media platforms. Instead, I underscore the unique contribution that deliberative processes can demonstrably make in enhancing our collective ability to shape a democratic will as citizens. Deliberative processes should be seen as complementary mechanisms, serving as necessary and suitable supplements to the information landscape of every digital citizen. To support this viewpoint, let's revisit the positions of two proponents of deliberative processes for formal accountability. The recent insights from Elizabeth Anderson (2022) and James Fishkin (2019) converge to endorse equal epistemic opportunities and ground my solution of deliberative processes as a necessary addition to unmediated digital interactions.

Prominent as an egalitarian democrat, Anderson notably stresses the importance of Fishkin's experiments that successfully foster conditions and incentives enabling individuals to engage as equal participants in "constructive discussion," despite years of national political debate marked by division, fear, and mistrust among American citizens:

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> When diverse people from different walks of life come together to discuss politically fraught issues in contexts that facilitate discussion that discourages toxic discourse and follows a democratic ethos, ordinary people do engage in constructive discussion…..In a 2019 experiment, his research team brought together a random sample of 523 US voters to discuss controversial topics such as immigration and the minimum wage, which voters indicated were high priority. Participants received policy briefings from experts from both political parties but without party labels attached…Pre- and post-meeting polls showed that, after four days of deliberation, participants tended to move away from

the most polarizing policies on their own side and move closer together. Perhaps more importantly, their confidence in democracy increased, and almost everyone agreed that they learned a lot about people different from themselves and about what their lives are like. Mutual understanding reduces distrust and division (2022, p. 88).

This means that in my argument, deliberative processes can significantly enhance epistemic equality by effectively dismantling viral misinformation and conspiracy theories. It is valuable that deliberative processes, both in theory and increasingly in political practice, can burst our customized epistemic bubbles, pulling us out of our digital echo chambers and fostering engagement with the opinions of diverse others. Additionally, I believe that deliberative processes act as potentially valuable mechanisms to ensure ongoing engagement with citizens' epistemic needs and interests. This aligns well with Hannah Pitkin's notion that meaningful political representation and participation go beyond casting an individual vote:

In shared deliberation with others, the citizens revise their own understanding of both their individual self-interest and the public interest and both together (Pitkin, 2004, p. 340).

From this, I conclude that 'meaningful' democratic accountability and participation presupposes, in digital deliberation, a shared understanding of issues and engagement in constructive debates. Social media platforms often affirm the intuition that contentious or contrarian comments and discussions do not necessarily contribute to constructive exchange or stem from considered reflection. Democratic discussions require a constructive and reflective orientation that fosters the ability to change our beliefs. This insight into the constructive engagement of democratic citizens leads me to assert the desirability and necessity of formal deliberative accountability within the algorithmic public sphere. My argument proposes a focused approach that supplements the epistemic equality of citizens amid ongoing systemic changes. This is because the broader scope of the deliberative project, bridging the gap between algorithmic systems and existing institutions of democratic governance, extends beyond their political misuses on social media.

It extends to incorporating digital citizens into an accountability framework responsive to our best-known facts about the structural workings of social media platforms. This means citizens aren't just debunking viral conspiracy theories to improve their own understanding of how digital media influences national deliberation. They are also consciously addressing systemic issues related to the ownership, funding, and responsibility for the content promoted on social media platforms.
I speculate that involving citizens in these democratic processes is in the collective interest, guiding their co-authorship of the norms and rules of national digital communities.

In this chapter, I have delved into profound concerns surrounding the dominance of citizens by profit-driven information algorithms. I have established that algorithmic misinformation on social media platforms significantly undermines the epistemic quality of public deliberation and the competence of democratic citizens. My stance leans towards regulatory and participatory interventions to counter algorithmic misinformation, highlighting the lack of democratic oversight over tech corporations in designing and maintaining these platforms. I have speculated that there are good reasons to believe the power they wield lacks proper authorization and accountability.

Republican perspectives align with my analysis, emphasizing the need to involve citizens in participatory processes to mitigate severe epistemic harms that compromise civic competence. Republican democrats express concern that tech corporations wield considerable authority through information algorithms, operating without liability for extreme content promoted on their platforms. I share and emphasize this concern. The lack of responsiveness signifies gaps in democratic authorization and accountability, to me. Deliberative processes emerge as a way to address these issues and enhance formal accountability. The diverse democratic accounts I have reviewed concur that social media platforms jeopardize public and political will formation, necessitating mechanisms to counter epistemic inequities.

I conclude that tech corporations' power, granted by information algorithms, lacks democratic legitimacy and accountability. This private authority raises further questions about their role in shaping social structures and political agendas. The emergence of new concentrations of digital power underscores the need for democratic authorization and oversight involving citizens and governments. I must clarify that my arguments have direct implications for the democratic authorization of social media platforms, but this remains beyond the scope of my research. In this thesis, I find it sufficient to flag that the regulation and authorization of social media platforms from diverse democratic perspectives is a worthy and ongoing scholarly endeavour.

My proposal involves deploying deliberative-accountability processes for digital misinformation on social media platforms. I acknowledge the limitations of expecting deliberative interventions to solve all challenges, but I view them as a necessary supplement to specifically address severe cases of algorithmic misinformation. Deliberative processes provide citizens with epistemic situations that break them out of echo chambers and enhance the quality of their everyday engagement in democratic practices. My hope is that by involving citizens in shaping norms and laws for digital communities, we can foster both democratic accountability and participation, ensuring a healthier information ecosystem.

6. Conclusion:

I close my arguments by emphasizing the critical importance of ongoing research in democratic theory and political practice to effectively address the 'collective' task of democratizing digital systems. This underscores a clear and present need for continued experimentation with innovative digital mechanisms. I have argued that all deliberative experiments should be aligned with citizens' epistemic interests in accuracy. This means that the point of deliberative-accountability for social media platforms is to *nudge* citizens away from their habitual preferences for customized misinformation.

Through my analysis, it becomes evident that the presence of epistemic bubbles and disparities in influence within social media platforms can result in a breach of epistemic justice when dealing with the dissemination of viral misinformation. This erosion of accuracy and truthfulness directs citizens towards paths of self-isolation and disengagement, creating a notable epistemic divide between them and their democratic communities. In the realm of social media, it often feels as though our political identities are constructed based on the information we encounter. I pose a crucial question: Can we effectively address these troubling epistemic disparities by implementing deliberative processes to complement our personalized digital information consumption?
To counteract the deepening impact of these trends, I answer that it is imperative to cultivate more inclusive and deliberative conversations that extend beyond the digital realm to encompass face-to-face interactions and shared experiences. Achieving this could involve ensuring that all individuals are randomly exposed to a diverse array of viewpoints, fostering an environment conducive to respectful and constructive dialogues.

Thus, I conclude that democratic institutions must adapt by developing new tools and strategies for engaging citizens, ensuring transparency, accountability, and active *public forms* of participation in the reconstruction of social media platforms. In my research, the deliberative-republican concept is *one* normative framework that emphasizes the importance of strong concepts of equality of influence, competence, and participation in the public sphere. There is a healthy plurality of concepts of the digital public sphere within democratic theory that I believe can be reconciled by the flexibility inherent in the design and deployment of any process that seeks to be useful to citizens as an adaptive tool. So, I see deliberative processes as inclusive mechanisms that provide a formal set of discursive practices that mitigate our lived experiences of the negative effects of extreme levels of political misinformation, polarization, and the formation of echo-chambers on social media platforms.

My focus has been drawn specifically to the normatively divisive challenges posed by echo-chambers and the imperative to adapt participatory processes for the digital realm, encompassing direct and regular citizen involvement. While the empirical extent of echo-chambers is seriously debated among different democratic perspectives, I advocate for placing a priority on enhancing the quality of deliberation. This is particularly crucial due to the susceptibility of *some* citizens to fake news and manipulation stemming from their limited digital media literacy. I assert that addressing algorithmic misinformation through deliberation can lead to improved epistemic conditions for *all* citizens and counteract feelings of isolation from their political community. In the context of the digital era, where information travels rapidly, the necessity to critically assess accuracy and combat misinformation is paramount.

I am intentionally positioning the state as a cultural investor in reshaping the underlying background culture of mutual respect. My aspiration is that this promising trajectory toward a more socially beneficial alignment of deliberative democratic initiatives will extend beyond theoretical discussions and manifest in concrete aspects of our shared national political cultures. In addressing objections from within democratic theory, I acknowledge that various viewpoints present differing analyses and objectives for the digital public sphere, particularly with regard to the perceived extent of polarization on social media platforms. My specific focus, however, remains narrower; I assert that fostering a participatory digital culture is integral to establishing an accountable digital environment. This entails the implementation of numerous experimental deliberative-digital endeavours to complement our adaptation to the epistemic challenges of the digital era.

I operate under the assumption that state investment in participatory and regulatory interventions for social media platforms necessitates enforceable mechanisms to realign these platforms with our basic epistemic interests. This lack of explicit socio-political alignment is a concern I adopt from both deliberative and republican democrats. I have argued that deliberative processes serve as a direct means to cultivate a sense of community and shared understanding. These processes empower citizens to formulate new ways of expressing strongly held private beliefs, desires, and opinions, all while allowing room for the revision of their public reflections and choices through close consultations within their community.

One limitation to consider within my argument pertains to the practical application of deliberative solutions, which necessitate citizens to actively embrace lifelong learning of epistemic virtues. This extends beyond traditional educational settings and encompasses engagement in various civic

contexts, including town halls and dedicated civic-deliberation spaces. However, the challenge arises from the reality that our tendencies toward screen-segregation remain ingrained, imposing limitations on the extent to which we can break free from these habits. This realization is drawn from my reflection on the many lines of empirical inquiry that unpack the extensive interactions among a multitude of users on social media platforms and the collective content consumption patterns we exhibit. It is important to clarify that incorporating deliberative-accountability processes into existing political structures hinges on the mutual agreement of citizens across all levels of the community to adopt these practices.

Deliberative forums have demonstrated viability at local, municipal, state, and national levels. While scientific population sampling is not a significant obstacle, the challenge lies in persuading individuals to recognize the intrinsic value of more frequent and diverse interactions. The key lies in creating consistent incentives for both governments and citizens to invest their time and energy in civil culture, thereby surmounting potential resistance to the transformative changes required for acquiring new habits to navigate both digital media and national political discourse. I concede that my proposal may encounter significant difficulties in garnering public funds for support in many diverse democratic cultures.

In the examples I have presented, the continuity of deliberative processes necessitates unwavering commitment from both American and European governments, as well as their respective citizenry. This commitment surpasses mere regulatory approaches; it necessitates a comprehensive reformation of available solutions. Central to this transformation is a prioritization of citizen engagement through targeted epistemic interventions. This holistic approach acknowledges the complexities of fostering a culture of deliberative participation, requiring continuous efforts to establish a robust and resilient democratic ecosystem that values equally open dialogue and informed discourse. In my account, ideal deliberative processes and systems are those that synthesize specific democratic values with the particular realities of the digital age. Their goal should always be to proactively include citizens in the normative shaping of the future democratic landscape. I have discussed proposals for *citizen juries, deliberative polling, national deliberation day,* and *voting advice applications*. I deploy these formal processes of deliberation for the purposes of debunking viral misinformation that all citizens encounter on social media. By actively involving citizens in well-designed deliberative processes, we can mitigate the risks posed by unchecked algorithmic manipulation, echo chambers, and polarization in the digital public sphere.

I underscore for my reader the significance of our collective and collaborative efforts to ensure a democratic politics that is responsive to technological shifts while upholding core principles of *epistemic equality, mutual respect, participation,* and *informed discourse* among citizens. I firmly believe that achieving digital accountability requires a consistently formal commitment from both governments and citizens. We are all to strive for variation in expanding our toolkit of solutions beyond a mere slouching towards regulation.

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