

Is a successful democracy compatible with social media?

The Gatekeeper's Dilemma: Social Media and Democracy

"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."¹ Herbert Simon's observation captures the central democratic problem produced by social media. By replacing legacy media's few-to-many structure with many-to-many communication, social platforms allow citizens to publish, circulate and contest political claims without first obtaining editorial permission.² Yet this generates more political content than can be consumed, making algorithmic selection necessary.

The question of gatekeeping political content is no longer what can be published but how visibility of published content is distributed. Algorithms have personalized what gets visibility. Algorithms can preserve a plurality of voices by constructing different feeds for different users, but they risk fragmenting the common agenda through which political disagreement becomes collectively intelligible. A shared feed can restore common attention, but only when a central authority is empowered to determine which issues deserve public visibility thereby creating commonality. This essay argues that the democratic problem of social media arises from this inescapable tension between plurality and commonality. Social media confronts democracy with a choice between a common public without pluralism and plural publics without commonality.

The traditional model of mass communication was organised around a few-to-many structure in which a small number of media institutions exercised authority over public visibility. Through agenda-setting, they influenced which issues acquired public salience; through framing, they shaped the interpretative categories through which those issues were understood.³ Citizens were recipients rather than producers within the dominant communications system. C. Wright Mills accordingly distinguishes between a democratic "public," in which recipients can answer, and a "mass," in which far fewer people express opinions than receive them.⁴ Legacy gatekeeping constrained pluralism by filtering actors and perspectives through professional, commercial and ideological criteria of newsworthiness.⁵ Nevertheless, it also generated what Sunstein describes as

¹ Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 40–41. Simon's full sentence continues by stressing "a need to allocate that attention efficiently."

² Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 1–34, 212–272.

³ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87, <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>; Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

⁴ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 303–4.

⁵ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1–18.

common experiences capable of functioning as democratic “social glue.”⁶ Large sections of the population encountered overlapping events, institutions and controversies, producing a recognisable agenda around which disagreement could be organised. The same structure that narrowed participation in communication therefore supplied the informational preconditions for the public political deliberation.

Social media weakened this institutional monopoly by lowering the costs of political publication and circulation. Its many-to-many structure allows potentially every recipient to become a producer, but it also intensifies Simon’s “poverty of attention” amid a wealth of information.⁷ Since no citizen can consume more than a fraction of available content, abundance makes selection more consequential. Algorithms, understood by Gillespie as “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output,” perform this task.⁸

Under the prevailing commercial model, many recommender systems use past engagement to predict which content is most likely to retain attention. Because attention can generate advertising exposure and behavioural data, platforms have strong incentives to optimise ranking for engagement and user retention.⁹ The result is individualised gatekeeping: past interactions help predict future attention, giving each user a different hierarchy of political relevance. This appears to preserve pluralism because no editor determines one agenda for all. Yet personalisation creates Sunstein’s “Daily Me”: an information environment organised around predicted preferences rather than unchosen encounters and common experiences.¹⁰ Cardenal, Galais and Majó-Vázquez accordingly found that respondents for whom Facebook was a relevant source of news referrals were less likely to identify the problems most widely regarded as nationally important.¹¹ Personalisation may therefore fragment agenda-setting before ideological disagreement begins: citizens remain politically communicative but increasingly attend to different events, threats and grievances.

For Habermas, the public sphere is a communicative structure through which citizens address matters of common concern and form public opinion capable of influencing political decision-

⁶ Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7–8.

⁷ Simon, “Designing Organizations,” 40–41; Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 1–34.

⁸ Tarleton Gillespie, “The Relevance of Algorithms,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 167.

⁹ Natali Helberger, “On the Democratic Role of News Recommenders,” *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 8 (2019): 993–1012, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1623700>; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8–10, 93–100. These sources support the commercial incentives surrounding attention, data and prediction; the precise workings of recommender systems vary across platforms and over time.

¹⁰ Sunstein, *Republic.com*, 3–9.

¹¹ Ana S. Cardenal, Carol Galais, and Silvia Majó-Vázquez, “Is Facebook Eroding the Public Agenda? Evidence from Survey and Web-Tracking Data,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 31, no. 4 (2019): 589–608, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edy025>.

making.¹² Its democratic value depends not on agreement, but on an inclusive arena in which competing claims remain mutually visible and answerable. Habermas later applies this framework to digital communication, describing an “expansion and fragmentation” of the public sphere as platform users become potential authors while communication separates into increasingly self-contained spheres.¹³ The problem is thus not simply that citizens encounter different opinions, but that they may lack a shared communicative space in which disagreements can be converted into public opinion. Social media may multiply political expression while weakening the connective structure through which expression acquires collective democratic significance.

A seemingly obvious solution would be to replace personalised feeds with one common or reverse-chronological hierarchy. Yet this activates the other side of the paradox. Any common feed must still decide which fraction of the available information deserves collective visibility. A reverse-chronological feed merely substitutes recency for personalised relevance; repeated or coordinated publication can therefore occupy a disproportionate share of the available attention.¹⁴ A curated public-interest feed, meanwhile, requires someone to define the public interest. Whether that role is performed by editors, platform employees, regulators or automated rules, a non-individualised system reconstructs a few-to-many relation at the level of attention: many may speak, but a limited authority determines which speech becomes commonly visible. The architecture of production remains many-to-many while the architecture of effective visibility returns towards the legacy model.

As Fraser argues within stratified societies, the designation of some issues as matters of “common concern” is itself shaped by unequal power. A unified agenda may integrate citizens while treating dominant groups’ experiences as universally significant and subordinated groups’ experiences as private, exceptional or irrational.¹⁵ Fraser therefore defends “subaltern counterpublics”: parallel discursive arenas in which subordinated groups formulate needs, invent counterdiscourses and reinterpret their experiences before intervening in wider publics. Such spaces enable both “withdrawal and regroupment” and broader contestation.¹⁶ Fragmentation within social media is

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 359–73.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, “Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): 145–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221112341>.

¹⁴ This is an analytical implication of reverse-chronological ordering, not a claim that empirical research has shown chronological feeds always privilege the same actors. Chronology removes profile-based ranking, but it still allocates visibility through recency and volume.

¹⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, nos. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, especially 61–67.

¹⁶ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67–68.

therefore not inherently anti-democratic: it can correct exclusions embedded within an apparently universal agenda.

Black Lives Matter illustrates this counterpublic potential. Activists used social media to connect individual incidents of police violence to a structural account of racial injustice. Freelon, McIlwain and Clark analysed 40.8 million tweets, more than 100,000 web links and forty interviews, finding that activist communication helped nationalise the story of Michael Brown and circulate interpretations that did not depend entirely on mainstream news organisations.¹⁷ Carney likewise shows how young people of colour used Twitter to challenge dominant narratives, while Mundt, Ross and Burnett identify social media's role in mobilisation, connection-building and coalition formation.¹⁸ A counterpublic thus reorganised dispersed experiences into a political claim and helped place an insufficiently recognised issue on the national agenda.

However, this architecture is not normatively selective. Not every marginal or oppositional community constitutes a Fraserian subaltern counterpublic: Fraser acknowledges that counterpublics may reproduce exclusion and marginalisation.¹⁹ The same affordances that enable subordinated groups to organise can facilitate exclusionary movements. Berger and Morgan estimated that between September and December 2014, at least 46,000 and possibly around 70,000 Twitter accounts were used by ISIS supporters, although they were not all active simultaneously.²⁰ Youngblood's study of 416 American far-right extremists found that social-media use and organised group membership enhanced ideological diffusion.²¹ Ribeiro et al., analysing 28.8 million posts across six forums and fifty-one subreddits, traced migration towards more toxic and misogynistic incel and Men Going Their Own Way communities.²² Such formations may constitute counterpublics descriptively, but not in Fraser's emancipatory sense: movements that reject equal participation may use democratic visibility to erode democracy's own conditions.

¹⁷ Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith D. Clark, *Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice* (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, 2016), 5.

¹⁸ Nikita Carney, "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media," *Humanity & Society* 40, no. 2 (2016): 180–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597616643868>; Marcia Mundt, Karen Ross, and Charla M. Burnett, "Scaling Social Movements Through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter," *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 4 (2018): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118807911>.

¹⁹ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, nos. 25/26 (1990): 67.

²⁰ J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper no. 20 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015), 7.

²¹ Mason Youngblood, "Extremist Ideology as a Complex Contagion: The Spread of Far-Right Radicalization in the United States between 2005 and 2017," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 49 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00546-3>.

²² Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., "The Evolution of the Manosphere across the Web," *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 15, no. 1 (2021): 196–207, <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18053>.

The central question therefore becomes which counterpublics escape their original networks and acquire wider visibility. Commercial ranking systems often answer this through predicted engagement. Rathje, Van Bavel and van der Linden found that references to political out-groups, were the strongest predictor of sharing in posts by American politicians and news organisations, with each additional out-group term increasing the odds of a share by approximately 67 per cent.²³ Brady et al.'s analysis of 563,312 political messages similarly found that each additional moral-emotional word increased diffusion by about 20 per cent.²⁴ Visibility is therefore partly allocated according to a claim's capacity to provoke moral emotion and out-group hostility. Personalised ranking may intensify this advantage by predicting which antagonisms will elicit engagement from a particular user. This gives movements organised around hostile identities a potentially valuable informational advantage.

The individualisation of content may also contribute to polarisation, which must be distinguished in ideological and affective terms. Ideological polarisation concerns divergence between political positions, whereas affective polarisation concerns growing attachment to one's own political group and hostility towards its opponents.²⁵ Personalisation may reinforce these tendencies through two different mechanisms. First, Pariser's filter-bubble thesis argues that platforms infer users' preferences from previous behaviour and increasingly prioritise congenial content.²⁶ Bakshy, Messing and Adamic's analysis of 10.1 million Facebook users offers qualified support: friendship networks, algorithmic ranking and users' own choices each reduced exposure to cross-cutting news, but none eliminated it, and individual choices and network composition generally exerted larger effects than ranking itself.²⁷ The democratic problem is therefore not complete informational isolation, but a possible reduction in engagement with the range and reasoning of opposing positions. Repeated exposure to congenial interpretations may make existing beliefs more resistant to revision and unfamiliar opponents easier to treat as irrational or illegitimate.

Second, personalization under the commercial model does not merely conceal opposing views; it may expose users to the opposing arguments most likely to provoke them. Bail et al. complicate

²³ Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, "Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 26 (2021): e2024292118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024292118>.

²⁴ William J. Brady et al., "Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 28 (2017): 7313–18, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114>.

²⁵ Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>; Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

²⁶ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 1–20.

²⁷ Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic, "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook," *Science* 348, no. 6239 (2015): 1130–32, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1251160>. Network composition and users' choices generally reduced cross-cutting exposure more than algorithmic ranking did.

the assumption that cross-cutting exposure necessarily produces moderation: in their experiment, Republicans assigned to follow a bot retweeting liberal political elites became significantly more conservative, while the corresponding shift among Democrats was small and statistically insignificant.²⁸ Exposure is therefore not equivalent to deliberation. The out-group homogeneity effect: the tendency to perceive an out-group as less internally varied than one's own group, can further make an inflammatory speaker appear representative of an entire political camp.²⁹ Algorithmic selection may consequently convert disagreement with legitimate adversaries into confrontation with an apparently uniform and dangerous enemy.

Polarisation is not inherently undemocratic. Mouffe distinguishes democratic agonism, in which opponents recognise one another as legitimate adversaries, from antagonism, in which they are treated as enemies to be defeated or excluded.³⁰ Algorithmic personalisation threatens this distinction when it narrows engagement with opposing arguments while disproportionately displaying their most inflammatory representatives. It may thereby transform disagreement over policy into hostility towards opponents themselves, eroding the mutual toleration and acceptance of electoral defeat on which democratic competition depends.

The democratic problem cannot be resolved either through unrestricted personalisation or by restoring a single authoritative feed. Sunstein argues that democracy requires both “unplanned, unanticipated encounters” and common experiences through which citizens recognise shared problems.³¹ This essay therefore proposes a limited civic layer exposing all users to elections, major legislation, emergencies and issues of demonstrable public importance, while leaving substantial space for individual choice. Helberger's model of “democratic recommenders” supports the broader principle that recommendation systems can be designed around participation, diversity, deliberation and other public values rather than engagement alone.³²

Common visibility must nevertheless preserve counterpublic autonomy. Fraser argues that subaltern counterpublics “stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics,” allowing

²⁸ Christopher A. Bail et al., “Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 37 (2018): 9216–21, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>. The significant treatment effect was found among Republicans; the estimated change among Democrats was not statistically significant.

²⁹ George A. Quattrone and Edward E. Jones, “The Perception of Variability within In-Groups and Out-Groups: Implications for the Law of Small Numbers,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38, no. 1 (1980): 141–52, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.1.141>.

³⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 101–5.

³¹ Sunstein, *Republic.com*, 7–8. “Unplanned, unanticipated encounters” appears on p. 7; the argument about common experiences follows on pp. 7–8.

³² Helberger, “Democratic Role of News Recommenders,” 993–1012. Helberger develops a typology of democratic recommenders rather than claiming that any single set of values is uniquely correct.

subordinated groups to formulate needs and identities excluded from mainstream discourse.³³ Yet these publics must also be capable of influencing wider opinion and political decisions. A democratic architecture should therefore connect autonomous counterpublics to shared arenas through public-service journalism, petitions, citizens' assemblies and transparent procedures through which neglected claims can contest the common agenda. This would produce neither one homogeneous public nor isolated personalised publics, but a connected plurality.

Habermas's diagnosis of the simultaneous "expansion and fragmentation" of the public sphere suggests that the appropriate response is not algorithmic abolition but institutional democratisation.³⁴ Because behavioural advertising ties commercial incentives to attention, data extraction and prediction.³⁵ Realising these objectives may therefore require publicly funded or non-profit infrastructure protected by operational independence, civil-society governance and legal safeguards against state control. Social media's democratic potential therefore depends on making the unavoidable allocation of visibility plural, transparent and accountable, rather than leaving it to either commercial prediction or central political authority.

³³ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 70–71.

³⁴ Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses," 145–71.

³⁵ Helberger, "Democratic Role of News Recommenders," 993–1012; Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8–10, 93–100. The proposed public or non-profit infrastructure is the essay's normative conclusion, not a finding established by either source.

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