



## **Report 2: Democracy and Social Media**

In this series of reports from our project workshops, we explore how philosophy can help us think clearly about social media. In this report we discuss the themes that emerged at a workshop which invited academics working on political philosophy, media studies, and law, to apply their work to issues in social media.

### **Background**

Until the turn of the century, political debate in the UK and similar countries primarily took place in an open, public forum via newspapers, broadcasters and book publishing, alongside public protest, speech and demonstrations, plus everyday political discussion among friends and neighbours. The owners of mass media companies, along with editors, the police and politicians, had a lot of power to control who had access to this shared conversation.

The rise of social media has created a new layer of political discussion, running alongside and influencing the old formats. Social media enables politicians to speak 'directly' to the public, in a voice whose standing as 'official' or 'personal' is often obscured. Social media also enables the public to build political platforms and campaign without the costs and traditional gatekeepers of the old forums for debate.

Our project examines the philosophical implications of the impact of these changes on our democracies' relation to truth, to participation and to privacy. Our first workshop focused on truth and epistemic virtues. The second one - the focus of this report - examined the ideals of democratic participation in the new public sphere.

### **The Workshop**

In December 2019 we invited a number of academics to a workshop called "Democratic Self-Government in the new Public Sphere". In this report, we highlight two themes we think are especially of interest to media professionals, government officials, and others thinking about internet regulation.

#### ***Digital participation and democratic deliberation***

The first theme concerned the virtues and values that we might expect, or hope, to see in a public sphere which has lower barriers for entry and correspondingly increased democratic participation.



Political scientist Simone Chambers drew on Jürgen Habermas's claim that rational, democratic deliberation can lead to truth, and Bernard Williams's discussion of the "virtues of accuracy," to suggest that we should be optimistic about fake news' eventual legacy. She argued that a public sphere with the right structural and regulatory features - including education, inculcation of caution, fact-checking - can foster the kinds of virtues citizens need to counteract fake news, and that we are already witnessing a push back, with ordinary citizens becoming more epistemically responsible consumers of digital information.

Law professor Gavin Phillipson's discussions of current and proposed legislation painted a different picture. He described increasingly strict content regulations in Europe, with huge fines for non-compliance, which he worries will discourage slow, considered regulatory decision-making. Instead, he thinks this approach will incentivise fast takedowns which err on the side of caution but restrict public discourse unnecessarily. But Phillipson was also critical of the less interventionist US model, blaming the spread of false and destructive beliefs on the combination of First Amendment and CDA 230 protections underpinned by a "marketplace of ideas" ethos. Rather than opening up public discourse, he argued that this approach to legislation allows public discourse to be controlled by corporate power for its own ends.

Where Chambers and Phillipson focused on *citizens'* virtues which the new public sphere can support, philosopher Tom Simpson focused on one of the values we might like to see in our *governments*, but currently don't: trustworthiness. He argued that the reason for current widespread mistrust of power is a mismatch between the "Overton window" (the range of policy options deemed 'mainstream' and hence achievable by those in power) and public opinion. He considered the ways that media based in London fail to identify or speak for public opinion in other parts of the UK, and he outlined alternatives, including a willingness for power to do more to reflect public opinion

A central concern of all three talks was the extent to which the force of law or regulation, and in contrast the power of moral beliefs and values, can (and cannot) work together to incentivise respectful, inclusive and truth-oriented democratic deliberation.

### ***Journalism's role***

The second theme we'd like to highlight is the idea that journalism is best understood as a practice and a set of roles with their own distinctive ethical purpose, aiming ultimately to serve the public good - rather than as a collection of recognised publications, institutions, and the people who work for them.

Philosopher (and project member) Rowan Cruft showed how this approach justifies principled limitations on the special protections that journalism deserves. He argued that the special rights and protections we associate with journalism are granted by its ability to meet fundamental public needs - needs for education, for legitimate non-corrupt authorities, and for



the public voicing of opinions that individuals lack the power to voice alone. Journalism's special protections should only work in ways which serve these needs. Communications that mislead rather than educate, or that reinforce powerful voices without holding them to account, do not merit the relevant special protections.

This conception of journalism as serving the public good was also key to Media and Communications scholar Natalie Fenton's contribution. She and her co-authors claim the crises that traditional journalism face are due to the economic system of capitalism, which treats media as a means to make money. They outlined three principles for alternative media ownership (egalitarianism, democracy, and sustainability), designed to correct this fundamental error.

A central concern of both papers was to highlight the distinctive public role of journalistic speech, and to tie this to special protections and limitations not shared by speech in general. A related concern was to argue that journalism in this sense is not limited to traditional newspaper and broadcast work: rather, much online activity in the new public sphere is journalistic in the relevant sense, serving the goals of education, of holding power to account, and of giving voice to the disempowered.

## **Summary**

This report focused on some ways that philosophy and other disciplines can help us to think about democracy and social media. We talked about the intrinsic democratic importance of citizen participation, alongside its epistemic, truth-serving importance; we discussed the ways that the internet has served and impeded such participation. And we talked about the special role in democratic debate of journalistic activity: how its distinctive aims to serve the public bring with them special limits and responsibilities. Underlying these debates were concerns about how democratic and epistemic ends are served by regulation, law, and social/moral commitment.

You can read a report of an earlier workshop on facts, fake news and social media [here](#). Our next event on privacy and social media will take place soon. To find out more about Norms for the New Public Sphere please visit our [website](#) or subscribe to our [mailing list](#).