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Fringe Democracy

Disinformation and the Manipulation of Public Opinion in the Digital Era

EDITED BY

Giovanni Boccia Artieri

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Sommario

Introduction
Public Spheres, Platforms, and Democratic Margins

To speak of democracy today means, increasingly, to speak of its margins. This is the case because democratic life is being reshaped in spaces that are no longer fully legible through the traditional coordinates of representation, mediation, and public reason. Parliaments, parties, governments, and legacy media still matter, and yet the conditions under which democracy is imagined, contested, and experienced are now being reorganised within a platformised public sphere, across hybrid media systems, and through lateral, vernacular, and frequently antagonistic forms of participation. In this environment, margins appear less as residual zones and more as strategic sites where public visibility, legitimacy, political conflict, and symbolic belonging are being renegotiated with particular intensity.[1]

1 van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018), *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*, Oxford University Press; Schlesinger, P. (2020), *After the post-public sphere*, in "Media, Culture & Society", *42*(7-8), pp. 1545-1563; Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025a), *Fringe democracy and the platformization of the public sphere*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *26*(1), pp. 3-21.

The central intuition of this volume is that the margins have become constitutive spaces of contemporary democracy. They condense tensions that traverse the public sphere more broadly: pluralism and fragmentation, participation and delegitimation, visibility and exclusion, innovation and radicalisation. In this sense, the fringe is not simply located outside democracy. It is one of the terrains on which democracy is currently being redefined. This perspective resonates with a longer line of reflection that associates democratic margins with forms of dissent, civil society activation, and bottom-up democratisation, while also inviting a more contemporary understanding of margins as mobile zones generated within a platformised ecology of communication.[2]

This shift of perspective becomes especially important in a conjuncture marked by disinformation, conspiracy cultures, political incivility, algorithmic governance, fringe platforms, influencer politics, and affective polarisation. These are not isolated anomalies. They are structural expressions of a communicative environment in which platforms increasingly organise the circulation of discourse, the hierarchies of visibility, and the conditions of public participation.[3] Public communication is shaped, in this setting, by systems that convert attention into value, interaction into data, and visibility into political capital. The public sphere thus emerges less as a stable arena of deliberation and more as a stratified and conflictual environment where mainstream and fringe, institutional actors and networked publics, truth claims and identity performances enter into unstable and often antagonistic relations.

2 Tordjman, S. (2011), *Margins of democracy: From dissidents to civil society activists*, in I. Filibi, N. Cornago, & J.O. Frosini (Eds.), *Democracy with(out) nations? Old and new foundations for political communities in a changing world*, Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, pp. 159-179.

3 Gillespie, T. (2018), *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, Yale University Press; Zuboff, S. (2019), *The age of surveillance capitalism*, Profile Books; Fischer, C., & Jarren, O. (2024), *The platformization of the public sphere and its challenge to democracy*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(4), pp. 425-448.

The concept of fringe democracy offers a useful framework for reading this condition. The term does not identify a closed ideological camp, and it does not refer only to extremist actors inhabiting marginal digital spaces. It names a broader condition in which peripheral actors, heterodox discourses, alternative infrastructures, and affective publics enter into dynamic tension with the mainstream, reshaping the boundaries of democratic discourse and political legitimacy.[4] Fringe democracy therefore designates an ambivalent field. It includes processes through which marginal spaces become laboratories of symbolic innovation, and it includes processes through which the same spaces become incubators of hostility, conspiratorial belief, or radicalisation. This ambivalence is one of the key threads running through the volume.

The first part, *Rethinking Democracy from the Margins*, establishes the conceptual architecture of the book. My chapter on the rise of fringe democracy argues that contemporary democracy must increasingly be read from its margins, where the interplay between opening and closure, inclusion and exclusion, democratisation and erosion becomes particularly visible. Axel Bruns' chapter on simple explanations and destructive polarisation deepens this argument by examining how hyperconnectivity, simplification, and conspiratorial interpretation interact within contemporary media environments, while Augusto Valeriani and Laura Iannelli complicate reductive accounts of political polarisation by locating it within hybrid media systems, differentiated media diets, and context-specific forms of political conflict. Taken together, these essays show that democratic margins are shaped at once by media infrastructures, epistemic tensions, and cultural repertoires of simplification and antagonism.

The second part, *Platforms, Infrastructures, and Digital Influence*, turns to the technological and infrastructural dimensions of these transformations. Fabio Giglietto, Nicola Righetti, and Timothy Gra-

4 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025a), *Fringe democracy and the platformization of the public sphere*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *26*(1), pp. 3-21.

ham analyse media manipulation and digital influence as practices embedded in platform affordances and in emerging configurations of coordinated disinformation. Tim de Winkel's chapter on fringe platforms shows that alternative platforms are best understood as ideological and infrastructural formations that contest dominant models of governance, publicity, and legitimacy, while remaining deeply entangled with the mainstream platform ecology. Emiliano Treré's cartography of algorithmic politics further expands the picture by showing that platforms and protocols are normative infrastructures that organise publics and distribute power. Stefano Brilli and Elisabetta Zurovac ground these issues in the empirical field of the Italian Telegramsphere, where the distinction between "alternative" and "fringe" becomes itself an object of analysis. This section makes clear that margins are not only symbolic or discursive. They are produced and mediated infrastructurally, through affordances, governance regimes, and architectures of visibility.

The third part, *Conflict, Populism, and Cultural Politics*, shifts attention toward the affective and symbolic forms through which fringe dynamics become politically consequential. Donatella Campus and Marco Mazzoni analyse political leadership through the lens of fandom, showing how contemporary politics is increasingly embedded in circuits of emotional investment, devotion, and anti-fandom. Sara Bentivegna and Rossella Rega address political incivility as a strategic and performative resource that reshapes democratic language and the conditions of public confrontation. Pari Esfandiari's contribution on conspiracy theories situates them within a wider crisis of truth, authority, and belief, linking them to the epistemic instability that marks post-truth public life. Raquel Recuero's analysis of the Brazilian 2022 election shows with particular force how far-right populism, illiberalism, and disinformation converge when fringe narratives move toward the centre of political conflict. Laura Gemini's essay on the fringe turn of art widens the scope of the volume by showing that the fringe also functions as a space of cultural experimentation, artivism, and alternative community formation. This final move is essential because it

keeps the volume attentive to the double life of the fringe: as a site of democratic erosion and as a site where new forms of expression, solidarity, and political imagination may also emerge.

What unifies these contributions is therefore more than a shared interest in digital politics, disinformation, or manipulation. The volume advances a broader proposition: contemporary democracy is increasingly organised through unstable relations between infrastructures and discourses, visibility and power, participation and antagonism, mainstream legitimacy and fringe experimentation. Read from this angle, the margins become diagnostic sites. They reveal how democratic life is being transformed under conditions of platformisation, algorithmic ordering, affective polarisation, and proliferating claims to truth. They reveal, at the same time, how alternative publics, cultural practices, and emergent forms of collective action continue to inhabit the same environment. The fringe thus appears as one of the places where democracy is exposed, strained, and reconfigured.

To read democracy from the margins is therefore not to romanticise exclusion, and it is not to treat every counter-public formation as emancipatory. It is to recognise where some of the most consequential transformations of public life are taking place. In a platformised and increasingly polarised public sphere, the margins have become key sites in which legitimacy, truth, and political belonging are being renegotiated. This volume is offered in that spirit. It proposes a conceptual and empirical map of a public sphere in transformation, and it invites readers to follow democracy where it is most unstable, most conflictual, and most revealing.

Editorial Note

This volume originates in a revised and rearticulated selection from *Democrazia ai margini. Disinformazione e manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica nell'era digitale*, the 2025 volume of the *Annali* of Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, edited by Giovanni Boccia Artieri and published in Milan in November 2025. In its original Italian form, that collective work brought together a broad interdisciplinary reflection on the transformation of the public sphere under conditions of platformisation, disinformation, manipulation, and democratic strain. The present book grows out of that project and reworks part of its conceptual architecture and a selected group of essays for an English-language volume addressed to a wider international readership. The path leading to this publication has therefore been one of selection, revision, and repositioning. The original Italian *Annale* offered a wider map of the crisis of public communication and of the mutations affecting democratic life in the digital environment. This volume retains that broader horizon while developing a more specific focus on fringe democracy, platformed publics, political conflict, and the ambivalent role of mar-

gins in contemporary democratic life. Several contributions have been revisited, translated, and reframed in order to speak coherently within this new editorial structure and to engage ongoing international debates on platforms, public spheres, polarisation, disinformation, and democratic transformation.

Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli has long promoted critical and interdisciplinary research on social, political, and cultural change through its research activities, its annual *Annali*, and its documentary and library heritage. The 2025 *Annale* itself was produced within the Foundation's research programme, and its development also drew on the broader intellectual and archival resources that the Foundation makes available for the study of media, democracy, and public life. In this sense, the present volume should be read both as an autonomous book and as part of a longer research trajectory fostered by the Foundation.

This English-language edition continues that trajectory in a new form. It does not reproduce the Italian *Annale* in its entirety. Rather, it offers a revised and curated extraction from it, organised around a more tightly focused argument: that democracy today must increasingly be understood through the unstable relations between centre and margin, mainstream and fringe, infrastructure and discourse, visibility and exclusion. In bringing these essays together in a new configuration, the volume seeks to extend the original project while opening it to a broader scholarly conversation.

The Margins of Democracy: The Rise of Fringe Democracy in the Age of the Platformised Public Sphere

Giovanni Boccia Artieri

1. The Margins as Democracy's New Centre

Contemporary democracy is no longer shaped only in the canonical arenas of political representation or through the major media institutions that historically sustained the public sphere. Nor can it be understood solely through mainstream digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, even though their communicative centrality has profoundly restructured public debate. Increasingly, democracy must be read from its margins: from those lateral spaces, practices, and subjectivities that stand at a distance from institutional centres and yet exert growing influence on the definition of what can be said, seen, and legitimised in public life. Margins are not simply an external "outside" waiting to be incorporated into the democratic order. Rather, they are mobile and interstitial zones in which the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility, legitimacy and delegiti-

mation are continuously renegotiated.[1] They include not only extremist formations and alternative or fringe platforms such as Telegram, Gab, or BitChute, but also niches, subcultures, and counter-publics operating within mainstream platform environments themselves, where actors who were once peripheral to public discourse can strategically appropriate infrastructures of visibility to gain traction and public relevance.

This growing centrality of the margins is inseparable from the platformisation of the public sphere. By platformisation, I refer to the process through which digital platforms have become the new infrastructures of public and political communication, reshaping the conditions under which content circulates, visibility is distributed, and participation becomes possible.[2] Platforms do not merely host social interaction; they actively organise it, embedding specific values, priorities, and regimes of visibility into their technical and economic architectures. The result is a public sphere increasingly marked by fragmentation, polarisation, and the privatisation of collective communication, a condition that has been described as a "platformised" or even "post-public" sphere.[3]

It is within this scenario that the concept of fringe democracy becomes analytically useful. The term does not refer only to radical actors operating on fringe platforms, but to a broader and more ambivalent process through which marginal spaces, heterodox narratives, and peripheral subjectivities do not remain confined to the edges of public life. Instead, they actively reshape the rules of political participation, sometimes expanding democratic pluralism and sometimes

1 Tordjman, S. (2011), *Margins of democracy: From dissidents to civil society activists*, in I. Filibi, N. Cornago and J.O. Frosini (eds.), *Democracy with(out) nations? Old and new foundations for political communities in a changing world*, Leioa, pp. 159-179.

2 van Dijck, J., Poell T., de Waal, M. (2018), *The Platform Society. Public values in a connective world*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

3 Sorice, M. (2020), *La "piattaformizzazione" della sfera pubblica*, in "Comunicazione politica", 3/2020, pp. 371-388, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.3270%2F98799&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8; Schlesinger, P. (2020), *After the post-public sphere*, in "Media, Culture & Society", *42*(7-8), pp. 1545-1563.

undermining its very foundations.[4] Margins, in this sense, are not residual spaces. They are sites where contemporary democracy is being reconfigured with particular intensity.

This chapter is organised as a progressive argument. It starts from platformisation as the structural condition of the contemporary public sphere, that is, from the infrastructural transformation that reshapes access, visibility, and the terms of public participation. It then moves to the level of cultural expression, examining digital folklore as the vernacular and affective grammar that takes shape within this platformised environment and increasingly informs contemporary political participation. From here, the analysis turns to post-truth, disinformation, and affective polarisation, understood as consequences of a communicative ecology in which emotional resonance, identity, and visibility tend to prevail over verification and argumentative mediation. This leads to the notion of fringification, which names the process through which marginal actors, discourses, and spaces are not simply excluded from the mainstream but enter into tension with it, contaminating and reconfiguring its boundaries. Finally, the chapter turns to artificial intelligence as a new threshold in this transformation, showing how it intensifies, automates, and restructures these dynamics, before concluding with a broader reflection on how democracy is being reconfigured from its margins.

2. Platformisation as a Structural Condition

As already suggested, the rise of fringe democracy takes shape within the broader process of the platformisation of the public sphere. This is not simply a matter of social media platforms or search engines becoming central sites of information and interaction. Rather, it signals a deeper transformation in which platforms have assumed the role of new institutional infrastructures of public discourse. They

4 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025a), *Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere*, in "Comunicazione politica", *26*(1), pp. 3-21.

are regulatory actors that impose protocols, standards of visibility, and conditions of access, embedding specific values and priorities into their technical architectures.[5] This dynamic unfolds through a double logic[6]: on the one hand, it decentralises the production of data, while on the other it recentralises those same data by making them "platform-ready" for capture, classification, and monetisation. Platformisation, then, should not be understood merely as a technological transition, but as a structural process that reorganises the very conditions under which information becomes visible, selected, and circulated.

In this context, platforms operate as the "new custodians of the Internet",[7] exercising significant control over the discursive order by shaping which contents circulate, how they are classified, and according to what hierarchies of relevance. This control is exercised above all through algorithmic mediation, which tends to privilege whatever generates interaction and attention, thereby intensifying the spectacularisation and emotionalisation of political communication. Emotions, interactions, and social relations are thus translated into metrics and commodified, placing platforms at the centre of a new political economy of the digital environment.[8] Within this framework, platforms function as new institutional intermediaries,[9] capable of redefining the balance of power between media, politics, and citizens, while simultaneously eroding the role of newspapers and journalism as traditional mediators of public life.

The consequences of this transformation are deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, lower barriers to access allow marginal voices to enter public debate more easily; on the other, the logic of engagement fos-

5 van Dijck, J., Poell T., de Waal, M. (2018), *The Platform Society. Public values in a connective world*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

6 Helmond, A. (2015), *The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready*, in "Social Media + Society", *1*(2), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305115603080.

7 Gillespie, T. (2018), *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, Yale University Press.

8 Srnicek, N. (2017), *Platform capitalism*, Polity.

9 Fischer, R., & Jarren, O. (2024), *The platformization of the public sphere and its challenge to democracy*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(1), pp. 200-215.

ters discursive incivility, affective radicalisation, and disinformation.[10] Platformisation thus pushes the public sphere towards a condition of fragmentation that may erode the very bases of democratic deliberation. Yet fragmentation does not necessarily imply dissolution. It remains possible to speak of a public agenda, provided that we understand it as an interrelated public agenda[11]: an agenda shaped through the unstable entanglement of convergences and divergences among legacy media, digital platforms, and everyday communicative practices. This notion of an interrelated agenda moves beyond both nostalgia for a lost unity and alarmist accounts of a purely atomised public sphere. Instead, it highlights a continuum in which different forces – horizontal and vertical, personal and aggregative, static and dynamic – coexist in a fragile and constantly renegotiated equilibrium.

It is precisely within this new architecture of continuous recomposition that the margins acquire renewed centrality. Platformisation multiplies voices and amplifies visibility, creating spaces in which lateral actors, communities, and narratives gain new possibilities for emergence. Margins are no longer an "outside" to an otherwise unified public sphere. They are one of its structural consequences: mobile zones generated by the very logic of platforms, capable both of enriching democratic pluralism and of destabilising the conditions of deliberation, while accelerating the renegotiation of the boundaries of democratic discourse itself.

3. Digital Folklore and the Transformation of Politics: From Participation to Influactivism

If platformisation constitutes the structural condition of the contemporary public sphere, digital folklore represents one of its most visible cultural expressions. Online public life is increasingly shaped by the circulation of vernacular forms such as memes, ironic com-

10 Zuboff, S. (2019), *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile Books.

11 Bentivegna, S., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2020), *Rethinking public agenda in a time of high-choice media environment*, in "Media and Communication", *8*(4), pp. 6-15.

ments, emojis, remixed images, borderline jokes, and ephemeral communicative gestures. These formats are no longer peripheral to public discourse; they have become part of its everyday grammar. In this sense, digital folklore can be understood as the shared, creative, collective, and often anonymous repertoire that sustains participatory culture and gives symbolic texture to contemporary online life.[12] It functions as a connective tissue of digital culture: a diffuse mode of cultural production that can mobilise as well as divide, legitimise as well as disrupt.

This vernacular dimension, however, is profoundly ambivalent. The same cultural forms that enable symbolic empowerment and collective participation can also become vehicles for discursive incivility, exclusion, and dehumanisation. Practices of collective sharing generate affective solidarities and forms of cultural belonging, but they may also foster coordinated attacks, public humiliation, and antagonistic forms of identification. Participatory culture is therefore far from being a neutral space. It increasingly operates as an arena of conflict in which irony blends with symbolic violence, and creativity with resentment.[13] Trolling offers a paradigmatic example of this ambivalence: it can function as a disruptive critique of power, but also as a destructive practice aimed at delegitimising opponents and circulating hostility. This dynamic is intensified by the erosion of what Chouliaraki[14] calls public compassion, that is, the capacity to recognise and respond to the vulnerability of others. In accelerated and hyper-visible digital environments, the other is often encountered less as an interlocutor than as a target, an enemy, or an intruder. The threshold of indignation rises, while that of empathy declines.

12 de Seta, G. (2020), *Digital folklore*, in J. Hunsinger, M. Allen, & L. Klastrup (Eds.), *Second international handbook of internet research*, Springer, pp. 167-183.

13 Phillips W. and Milner R. M. (2017), *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, Polity.

14 Chouliaraki, L. (2006), *The spectatorship of suffering*, SAGE Publications.

These transformations are closely connected to the broader popularisation of politics,[15] which now intersects ever more deeply with digital folklore and with the logics of celebrity culture. Political leaders increasingly adopt the traits of internet celebrities and online influencers, operating through continuous visibility, emotional engagement, and the cultivation of fan bases.[16] Politics is thus reconfigured as a form of politainment, produced through an increasingly compressed circuit between legacy media and social media, where entertainment, branding, and affective communication converge. Within this environment, leaders become objects of fandom and anti-fandom, surrounded by dynamics of devotion and hostility, mobilisation and symbolic identification.[17]

It is in this context that a new configuration emerges, that of influactivism,[18] in which the distinction between political actor, activist, and influencer becomes increasingly porous. Activist practices are hybridised with communicative strategies typical of the attention economy: personal storytelling, vernacular aesthetics, value branding, and identity performance. Political communication becomes inseparable from self-presentation, and public intervention is increasingly articulated through aesthetic codes shaped by ugly internet culture, ironic kitsch, remix practices, and post-ironic sensibilities. What matters in this environment is often less the programmatic coherence of a political position than its symbolic intensity, recognisability, and affective resonance.

At the same time, influencers themselves have become increasingly relevant political actors. Digital creators do not simply promote products or lifestyles; they also intervene in public debate, shape political

15 Mazzoleni, G., & Sfardini, A. (2009), *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'isola dei famosi"*, Il Mulino.

16 Barnes, R. (2022), *Fandom and polarization in online political discussion: From pop culture to politics*, Palgrave Macmillan.

17 Dean, J. (2017), *Politicising fandom*, in "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations", *19*(2), pp. 408-424.

18 Murru, M. F., Pedroni, M., & Tosoni, S. (2024), *Influ-activism: Outlining a new area of investigation between media studies and activism research*, in "Mediascapes Journal", *24*, 2024, pp. 1-20.

perceptions, and sometimes influence institutional actors directly. In the United States, for instance, Donald Trump has explicitly drawn on narratives and pressures coming from far-right influencers such as Laura Loomer, to the point of reportedly adjusting political decisions and staff arrangements in response to their positions.[19] In other cases, creators move directly into institutional politics, as illustrated by the election to the European Parliament of the Cypriot YouTuber Fidias Panayiotou, who entered the political arena with no prior experience and with strong support from younger voters. Elsewhere, influencers are mobilised by geopolitical actors as vehicles of soft power and international propaganda. Israel's attempts to legitimise its military intervention in Gaza through influencer visibility campaigns,[20] China's sponsored trips for Western influencers as part of its contemporary soft-power strategy,[21] and Russian disinformation operations in Europe that instrumentalise the economy of visibility[22] all show how platformed popularity can be politically activated. These examples reveal an ecosystem in which aesthetic, political, and algorithmic influences converge, restructuring both the forms of participation and the conditions of public deliberation.

Within this context, digital folklore should not be understood simply as popular expression or diffuse online humour. It is a discursive grammar that renders complexity emotionally manageable. The contents that circulate most intensely – memes, sarcastic commentary, remixed images, short-form affective statements – are often those that

19 Risen, J. (2025), *Maga influencer and de facto national security adviser Laura Loomer holds outsized sway on Trump*, in "The Guardian", 6 July 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jul/06/laura-loomer-donald-trump-maga-influencer.

20 Bronner, L. (2025), *At Gaza's border, influencers broadcast Israeli propaganda*, in "Le Monde", August 29, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/08/29/at-gaza-s-border-influencers-broadcast-israeli-propaganda_6744833_4.html.

21 Masi, C. (2025), *Viaggio premio in Cina per influencer. Il nuovo volto del soft power di Pechino*, in "Formiche", 11 giugno 2025, https://formiche.net/2025/06/soft-power-cina-influencer-usa/.

22 Lunday, C. (2025), *Putin's bot army tries to swing German election*, in "Politico", February 6, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-election-flood-social-media-x-russia-bots-kremlin-operation-false-news/.

simplify complexity, sharpen oppositions, and reinforce forms of belonging. This capacity to condense meanings, values, and positions into communicative forms that are light in appearance but affectively powerful is precisely what makes digital folklore so central to the contemporary public sphere. It can activate solidarity, mobilise communities, and unsettle dominant narratives. At the same time, it can generate closure, intensify cognitive bias, and harden conflict. Public confrontation is increasingly transformed into identity performance, and deliberation into symbolic struggle. It is on this terrain – marked by the tension between expressive participation and the weakening of rational-discursive mediation – that the cultural conditions of post-truth take shape.

4. Post-truth Politics: Disinformation and Affective Polarisation

The contemporary communication environment is increasingly marked by a shift from reason to emotion, from argument to reaction, and from verification to indignation. Both top-down communication – from institutional actors and legacy media – and bottom-up communication emerging through participatory and vernacular flows are now deeply shaped by affective, corrosive, and often polarising languages. In this context, the status of truth itself is redefined. Facts do not disappear, but they lose centrality in relation to their capacity to activate emotions, reinforce belonging, and sustain identity. It is within this environment that the conditions of post-truth politics take shape, together with communicative practices such as fake news, disinformation, and affective propaganda.

At the cultural level, this transformation has been widely described as the rise of post-truth politics,[23] a condition in which factual reality is progressively weakened and emotional appeal becomes central to

23 Higgins, K. (2016), *Post-truth: a guide for the perplexed*, in "Nature", *540*(7631), p. 9; Gili G., Maddalena (2020), *The history and theory of post-truth communication*, Palgrave Macmillan.

public persuasion. Under this regime, credibility is no longer grounded primarily in evidence, but in value alignment and affective identification. What matters is less whether a claim can be demonstrated than whether it feels plausible, familiar, or morally resonant. Attempts at debunking, even when accurate and well documented, are often dismissed because they fail to challenge the deeper affective investments that sustain belief. In this sense, fake news should not be understood simply as false content. They are discursive forms capable of activating fear, outrage, resentment, or moral panic regardless of their factual status.

This shift became especially visible during the electoral cycle of 2016, from Brexit to the US presidential election, when the expression *fake news* reached global prominence.[24] As Craig Silverman[25] famously showed, false election stories circulating on Facebook in the final months of the US campaign generated more engagement than content produced by major news outlets. These dynamics intensified public concern about platform responsibility and accelerated attempts by major platforms to present themselves as more accountable actors, especially in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. That trajectory reached a symbolic peak with the deplatforming of Donald Trump after the events of January 2021 at Capitol Hill, a moment that marked an unprecedented regulatory intervention by platforms into the communicative power of a political leader. Yet this containment model quickly showed its limits. The ideological turn promoted by Elon Musk at Twitter/X, framed around a libertarian rhetoric of "free speech", together with Meta's progressive loosening of fact-checking and moderation policies, has contributed to a renewed environment

24 Peters, M. A. (2017), *The information wars, fake news and the end of globalisation*, in "Educational Philosophy and Theory", https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=The+information+wars%2C+fake+news+and+the+end+of+globalisation&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8; Rose, J. (2017), *Brexit, Trump, and Post-Truth Politics*, in "Public Integrity", *19*(6), pp. 555-558.

25 Silverman, C. (2016), *This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook*, in "Buzzfeed", 16 november 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook.

in which visibility is once again highly compatible with manipulation, polarisation, and low-verifiability content. In this setting, the platformed circulation of information appears less aligned with norms of public accountability than with the affective logics of post-truth communication.

Post-truth, however, cannot be reduced to strategic manipulation or algorithmic distortion alone. It also reflects a deeper cultural transformation in the relationship between knowledge, truth, and authority. The discursive forms that replace argument with indignation and factuality with affective performance find fertile ground in a culture that has absorbed and then distorted some key elements of postmodern critique. As McIntyre[26] and Kakutani[27] have argued, contemporary populist and right-wing rhetorics have selectively appropriated ideas once associated with progressive cultural criticism: the relativity of truth, the subjectivity of moral judgement, the critique of grand narratives, and the elevation of personal experience as epistemically sufficient. In this distorted form, the deconstructive gesture no longer serves to question regimes of truth in order to emancipate marginalised subjectivities; instead, it becomes a weapon against any shared standard of reality. The result is not pluralism, but epistemic fragmentation.

In this context, disinformation works not only by spreading falsehoods, but by saturating public discourse with instability, suspicion, and antagonism. The issue is not ignorance alone, but the consolidation of alternative epistemologies grounded in intuition, lived experience, distrust of expertise, and identity-based forms of certainty. This helps explain why conspiratorial narratives, anti-scientific claims, and systematic attacks on journalism can flourish even in highly connected information environments. As Gauchat[28] has shown, distrust in science in the United States has grown significantly among segments of

26 McIntyre, L. (2018), *Post-Truth*, Mit Press.

27 Kakutani, M. (2018), *The Death of Truth. Notes on falsehood in the age of Trump*, Tim Duggan Books, New York.

28 Gauchat G. (2012), *Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010*, in "American Sociological Review", *77*(2), pp. 167-187.

the conservative public, including among the more educated. Truth, in this environment, increasingly becomes a tribal and affective property: something that distinguishes "us" from "them", rather than something produced through shared procedures of verification and contestation.

A crucial role in this process is played by affective polarisation.[29] This refers not simply to disagreement between opposing positions, but to a mode of political conflict in which the other is perceived as a moral enemy: irredeemable, threatening, and fundamentally alien. Under these conditions, information sources are selected less for their reliability than for their alignment with one's group identity, and arguments are judged less by coherence than by loyalty to the symbolic boundary between "us" and "them". Online environments intensify these dynamics by combining algorithmic visibility, homophilic aggregation, and cognitive biases such as confirmation bias. Concepts such as echo chambers and filter bubbles attempt to capture this tendency toward informational closure,[30] even though the empirical literature has rightly complicated any overly deterministic interpretation.

Indeed, recent scholarship has shown that affective polarisation cannot be attributed solely to social media, nor reduced to the passive consumption of fake news. Echo chambers affect only a minority of users, and media diets are often more mixed and stratified than alarmist narratives suggest.[31] Most citizens move across multiple media environments, combining traditional and digital sources and encountering heterogeneous contents. Yet this does not weaken the di-

29 Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019), *The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States*, in "Annual review of political science", *22*(1), pp. 129-146.

30 Pariser, E. (2011), *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin UK; Sunstein, C. R. (2007), *Republic.com 2.0.*, Princeton University Press; Del Vicario, M. et al. (2016), *The spreading of misinformation online*, in "PNAS", *113*(3), pp. 554-559.

31 Guess, A., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018), *Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign*, Technical Report, Princeton University; Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018), *The echo chamber is overstated: the moderating effect of political interest and diverse media*, in "Information Communication and Society", *21*(5), pp. 729-745; Bruns, A. (2019), *Are filter bubbles real?*, John Wiley & Sons.

agnosis of post-truth politics. Rather, it refines it. Polarisation emerges less from total informational isolation than from an identity-driven reorganisation of media consumption, where selection is guided by belonging, resonance, and affective investment more than by norms of verification. In this sense, post-truth is not built simply against facts, but through an affective restructuring of facts themselves.

Post-truth, then, should not be understood as a temporary anomaly or a contingent deviation of public debate. It is a structural symptom of a broader crisis of epistemic trust, in which traditional authorities – scientific, journalistic, cultural – are delegitimised or reduced to mere opinions among others, while credibility is relocated into affective communities and preconstituted beliefs.[32] As Hannah Arendt warned, the ideal subject of totalitarianism is not the convinced believer, but the individual for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, has collapsed.[33] Disinformation must therefore be understood not merely as the circulation of false content, but as a set of discursive and relational practices that manipulate attention, reinforce prejudice, generate distrust, and intensify mutual delegitimation.[34] It is within this space of epistemic instability and cognitive disorientation that processes of fringification gain force. As the distinction between true and false becomes less socially binding, the conditions are created for marginal actors, antagonistic narratives, and heterodox publics to acquire new visibility and political relevance. Fringe democracy, in this sense, is not a side effect of post-truth politics; it is one of its emerging political configurations.

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32 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., & Cook, J. (2017), *Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era*, in "Journal of applied research in memory and cognition", *6*(4), pp. 353-369, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Beyond+misinformation%3A+Understanding+and+coping+with+the+%E2%80%9Cpost-truth%E2%80%9D+era&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

33 Arendt, H. (1973), *The origins of totalitarianism*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

34 Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017), *Media manipulation and disinformation online*, Data & Society Research Institute, pp. 7-19; Tandoc Jr, E. C., Lim, D., & Ling, R. (2020), *Diffusion of disinformation: How social media users respond to fake news and why*, in "Journalism", *21*(3), pp. 381-398.

5. Fringification: Tensions Between Margins and Centre

If post-truth politics signals a broader epistemic and relational crisis, "fringification" names one of its most significant consequences in the contemporary digital public sphere. It refers to the process through which marginal actors, contents, and discursive forms do not simply emerge in alternative spaces, but enter into dynamic tension with the mainstream, generating patterns of hybridisation, contamination, and recomposition. Fringification is not merely a movement towards the edges of visibility. It is at once centrifugal and centripetal: it pushes certain actors and narratives to the margins, while also allowing what was previously marginal to regain centrality and reshape the grammar of public discourse. In this sense, fringe democracy should not be understood as a stable or closed formation, but as a field of tension in which actors, values, and languages that are dissonant with dominant democratic culture meet, clash, and sometimes overlap.[35]

Within the platformised public sphere, this process is especially visible in relation to fringe platforms: digital environments that position themselves in explicit opposition to the governance models, visibility regimes, and normative expectations of dominant platforms. As Tim de Winkel[36] has shown, these platforms are not isolated spaces detached from the rest of the media ecosystem. They are defined in constant relation to the mainstream and are traversed by hybrid users, contents, and practices. They do not simply offer technical or communicative alternatives. They also operate as ideological infrastructures, advancing specific visions of what democracy should be, who should be allowed to speak in public, and what counts as legitimate discourse. In this sense, fringe platforms function as sites of active contestation

35 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025a), *Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere*, in "Comunicazione politica", *26*(1), pp. 3-21.

36 De Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Utrecht University.

within the wider platform ecology, articulating critiques of moderation, governance, and algorithmic visibility.

To understand fringification, then, it is useful to adopt a processual and multi-layered perspective. As we have argued elsewhere,[37] fringification can be approached through at least three interdependent dimensions. The first concerns fringe infrastructures and governance. Technological affordances such as end-to-end encryption, ephemerality, or minimal moderation can create digital enclaves that are difficult to regulate and attractive to users seeking to escape public visibility or institutional control.[38] The relative absence of moderation may foster ideological aggregation, disinformation, and polarisation, while also creating space for discourses that remain marginalised elsewhere.[39] The second dimension concerns fringe publics. Marginality is not produced by infrastructures alone, but is co-constructed by identities, practices, and affective attachments. Memes, coded language, digital rituals, and shared narratives reinforce tribal dynamics and strengthen solidarities organised around a marked distinction between "us" and "them".[40] The third dimension concerns fringe semantics. The opposition between fringe and mainstream is not generated only internally by communities themselves; it is also imposed from outside through labels, classifications, and public narratives. The category of the "fringe", often mobilised by journalists, policymakers, or watchdogs, works performatively: it can stigmatise marginal actors, but it can also reinforce internal cohesion and consolidate symbolic exclusion.

37 Boccia Artieri, G., Brilli, S., Donato, V., Righetti, N., & Zurovac, E. (2025b), *The fringification of funding: monetization strategies within the Italian anti-mainstream Telegramsphere*, in "New Media and Society", Forthcoming.

38 Urman, A., & Katz, S. (2022), *What they do in the shadows: examining the far-right networks on Telegram*, in "Information, communication & society", *25*(7), pp. 904-923.

39 Afsahi, Afsoun (2020), *Disabled lives in deliberative systems*, in "Political Theory", *48*(6), pp. 751-776.

40 Nikunen, K. (2018), *From irony to solidarity: Affective practice and social media activism*, in "Studies of Transition States and Societies", *10*(2), pp. 10-21.

These intertwined dynamics produce a field in which marginality is at once a condition imposed from outside and a strategy actively embraced from within. In many cases, fringe spaces operate as incubators for anti-system ideologies, conspiratorial narratives, and disinformation ecosystems that contribute to the normalisation of extremist and populist positions.[41] Such spaces often function as discursive laboratories, where radical languages and imaginaries are tested before entering more visible channels through hybridisation, mimicry, or virality. Yet spaces marked by fringification cannot be reduced to sites of radicalisation alone. They may also serve as arenas of resistance and reappropriation, where marginalised subjectivities or disadvantaged communities – including ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ groups, or radical climate movements – find possibilities for expression that are denied in more regulated environments. The fringe, in this sense, is not simply a stigmatising label. It can also designate a space of discursive possibility, where alternative grammars of belonging, solidarity, and activism emerge.

Fringification, moreover, does not operate only from below. It is also sustained by mainstream and institutional actors who selectively appropriate fringe codes, aesthetics, and rhetorical styles in order to intensify engagement, mobilise affect, or legitimise divisive narratives. This process of co-optation shows that the margin is not a fixed threshold, but a site through which centrality itself is renegotiated. More broadly, fringification is always defined in relation to the mainstream and is continuously re-entered by it through users, contents, and hybrid communicative logics. Far from constituting an autonomous sphere, it exists within a distributed network of flows, migrations, and overlaps. In this perspective, fringification is not a linear movement towards the periphery, but an ongoing tension between

41 Lewandowsky, S., Smilie, L., Garcia, D., Hertwig, R., Weatherall, J., Egidy, S., & Leiser, M. (2020), *Technology and democracy: Understanding the influence of online technologies on political behaviour and decision-making*, Joint Research Centre, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC122023.

marginalisation and reintegration, between invisibility and exposure, between exclusion and symbolic recovery.

Every fringe space or discourse therefore carries within it the possibility of being reabsorbed, recontextualised, or strategically appropriated by the mainstream. This continuous movement is what makes fringification so crucial for understanding the present transformation of the public sphere. It allows us to grasp not only processes of radicalisation, but also new forms of politicisation, alternative economies of visibility, and the cultural fractures that traverse contemporary digital and media ecosystems. The public sphere can no longer be conceived as a unitary and hierarchical space. It must instead be understood as a fluid, stratified, and conflictual ecosystem in which the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate, visible and invisible, central and peripheral are constantly renegotiated. Fringification is one of the key names for this transformation. It exposes democracy to risks of erosion, while also revealing spaces in which democratic energies may be reconfigured and, at times, renewed.

6. Artificial Intelligence and Fringe Democracy: A New Discursive Threshold

The emergence of artificial intelligence as a pervasive, performative, and generative dispositif is profoundly transforming the conditions of public discourse. Fringe democracy, already rooted in processes of disintermediation, affective polarisation, and the contestation of epistemic authority, now encounters a techno-discursive infrastructure capable not only of accelerating these dynamics, but of restructuring them in significant ways. Artificial intelligence should not be understood simply as a cognitive technology or a neutral tool for information processing. It operates as a discursive force that shapes access to information, hierarchies of visibility, thresholds of credibility, and the expressive possibilities available within the public sphere.[42] In this

42 Crawford, K. (2021), *The atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*, Yale University Press; Gillespie, T. (2024), *Generative AI and the politics*

sense, AI acts as a cultural agent in its own right, one that persistently and often opaquely influences the logics of representation, selection, and persuasion.[43] It is also an ideological infrastructure, since it reorganises not only what can be said, but who is able to speak, through which formats, and under what conditions of legibility and circulation. Far from being neutral, AI is embedded in forms of algorithmic governance that remain deeply asymmetrical, commercially driven, and extractive,[44] with significant consequences for discursive agency, particularly in fringe environments.

In relation to fringe democracy, the adoption of generative models – text-to-image systems, text-to-video tools, chatbots, synthetic audio, and deepfakes – raises at least three interrelated issues. First, AI expands the expressive capacities of marginal actors by providing increasingly accessible tools for content production, from automated meme generation and chatbot-based propaganda to synthetic videos and AI-generated websites. In this sense, the margins become more technically productive and symbolically pervasive. AI does not simply add new tools to existing communicative practices; it lowers thresholds of production, multiplies formats of intervention, and enhances the speed, scale, and aesthetic adaptability of fringe communication. What previously required organisational resources, technical expertise, or collective coordination can now be generated more rapidly, more cheaply, and with greater stylistic flexibility.

Second, AI contributes to a profound reconfiguration of the ecology of credibility. By making synthetic content easier to produce and harder to verify, it further weakens confidence in traditional criteria of evidence and authentication. This is not only a matter of deception in the narrow sense. More broadly, AI strengthens dynamics of *truth-*

of visibility, in "Big Data & Society", *11*(2).

43 Farrell, H., & Han, H. (2025), *AI and Democratic Publics. Bringing politics back into debates about AI and democracy*, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/ai-and-democratic-publics.

44 Ulnicane, I., & Aden, A. (2023), *Power and politics in framing bias in Artificial Intelligence policy*, in "Review of Policy Research", *40*(5), pp. 665-687.

iness,[45] in which what matters is not whether a statement is true, but whether it appears plausible, affectively convincing, or consistent with an already established worldview. In this sense, AI risks functioning not only as a tool of disinformation, but as a semantic multiplier of post-truth. It intensifies a communicative environment in which evidentiary standards are weakened and affective plausibility becomes increasingly central to public judgement. Under these conditions, the instability of truth becomes not an exception, but an ordinary feature of mediated communication.

Third, AI also reinforces logics of surveillance, profiling, and control, including within marginal or oppositional spaces. The platformisation of AI, driven by private actors and extractive business models, introduces new techniques for monitoring fringe discourses and classifying them through automated systems of detection, ranking, deranking, moderation, or shadow banning.[46] Even fringe democracy, precisely insofar as it appears oppositional or external to dominant communicative regimes, becomes increasingly mapped, measured, and rendered valuable as data. This means that AI does not simply empower marginal actors; it also redefines their vulnerability. The same infrastructures that expand expressive agency may simultaneously expose fringe communities to new forms of visibility, capture, and containment.

Artificial intelligence, then, does not merely intervene in the public sphere from the outside. It rewrites its conditions of possibility by intensifying the tension between fringe and mainstream, productivity and control, visibility and manipulation. It increases the discursive productivity of digital peripheries while also transforming the terms under which they can be monitored, legitimised, or suppressed. In this context, fringification acquires a new automated, accelerated,

45 Farrell, H., & Han, H. (2025), *AI and Democratic Publics. Bringing politics back into debates about AI and democracy*, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/ai-and-democratic-publics.

46 Gillespie, T. (2024), *Generative AI and the politics of visibility*, in "Big Data & Society", *11*(2).

and computationally mediated dimension. It is no longer only the result of ideological positioning, participatory practices, or discursive experimentation. It also becomes a systemic effect of the interaction between semiotic innovation and computational governance. To understand the role of AI in relation to fringe democracy, then, is to ask how democratic participation is being redefined in an environment where visibility is simultaneously a resource and a threat, and where discursive innovation moves along increasingly unstable boundaries of credibility, regulation, and legitimacy.

7. Rethinking Democracy from the Margins

The rise of fringe democracy shows that the crisis of the contemporary public sphere can no longer be understood solely in terms of informational dysfunctions or algorithmic distortions. What is at stake is a deeper transformation that affects technological infrastructures, discursive grammars, and forms of political subjectivity at the same time. In this context, disinformation and manipulation are not exceptional deviations from an otherwise stable democratic order. They are structural manifestations of a communicative ecosystem that has been profoundly reconfigured by platformisation, affective visibility, and the unstable boundaries between mainstream and fringe.

To grasp this transformation, a change of perspective is required. Rather than looking only at institutional centres, established media, or formal arenas of representation, we need to read democracy from its margins: from those spaces where conflict, experimentation, exclusion, and symbolic innovation become visible with particular intensity. Margins are not simply residual zones or external threats to democratic life. They are environments in which the tensions that traverse contemporary democracy appear in a concentrated form. It is there that processes of politicisation, delegitimation, participation, radicalisation, and reappropriation can be observed as part of the same unstable field. This is why fringe democracy should not be treated merely as a pathology of digital communication, nor reduced to the presence of

extremist actors or alternative platforms. It names a broader condition in which the public sphere is increasingly shaped by mobile and contested relations between visibility and invisibility, legitimacy and delegitimation, inclusion and exclusion. From this perspective, the fringe is not simply what stands outside democracy. It is one of the places where democracy is currently being redefined, both in ways that expand pluralism and in ways that erode the norms and institutions on which democratic coexistence depends.

What emerges, then, is not a unitary public sphere that has simply fragmented, but a more fluid and stratified communicative environment, traversed by asymmetries of power, affective attachments, algorithmic hierarchies, and competing truth claims. Mapping democracy at the margins means recognising this ambivalence. It means acknowledging that the same environments that incubate conspiracy, hostility, and anti-democratic rhetoric may also host practices of resistance, counter-public formation, and alternative political imagination. Any adequate cartography of the present must therefore attend to both sides of this process: the risks of democratic erosion and the possibility that new forms of participation and collective expression may also emerge from the margins.

Reading democracy from the margins, then, is not simply an analytical correction. It is a way of recognising where some of the most consequential transformations of public life are now taking place. In a platformised, polarised, and increasingly AI-mediated public sphere, the margins have become one of the key sites in which democratic legitimacy, public truth, and political belonging are being renegotiated. To understand democracy today means to follow these processes where they are most unstable, most conflictual, and most revealing.

Simple Explanations in a Complex World: From Hyperconnectivity to Destructive Polarisation

Axel Bruns

Introduction

Around the world there is growing concern about the backsliding of democratic systems towards illiberalism and authoritarianism.[1] Such processes can be observed in established western democracies as well as the more recently democratic nations of Eastern Europe and the Global South, and the dynamics of their decline are often linked to the increasing role that contemporary digital and social media have come to play in their media systems.[2] These media – no longer "new", but still distinct in function, format, and audience demographics from "legacy" media, such as print and broadcast, and even from earlier web-based news and information sources – are said to have embold-

1 Štětka, V., & Mihelj, S. (2024), *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, Springer.

2 Bennett, W. L., & Kneuer, M. (2023), *Communication and Democratic Erosion: The Rise of Illiberal Public Spheres*, in "European Journal of Communication", *39*(2), pp. 117-196, https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231231217378.

ened new populist and propagandistic actors,[3] enabled domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns,[4] and especially also facilitated a partisan sorting into homogeneous informational enclaves where highly biased content can circulate unchecked and thereby radicalise audiences towards fringe political perspectives.

Such enclaves are commonly described as "echo chambers"[5] or "filter bubbles",[6] with the two terms often used interchangeably and without clear definitions even in the scholarly literature, and their existence is assumed to have been proven beyond all doubt: politicians and journalists lamenting the decline of liberal political systems and the rise of authoritarian populists often single out these concepts for particular attention. (Conveniently, this also neatly deflects blame from the politicians themselves for any genuine disillusionment with conventional political processes that citizens may feel.) And yet, evidence for the existence of "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" in the real world is scant, as this article will demonstrate,[7] and the success of disinformation campaigns and populist politicians in connecting with sufficiently large audiences in fact depends on the very absence of such information enclaves: their aim has always been to reach the largest possible audience, not to speak only to their already committed, fervent supporters.

Far from the disconnections that would result from a fragmentation of (online and offline) audiences, then, the real challenge for citizens

3 Judge, B. (2024), *The Birth of Identity Biopolitics: How Social Media Serves Antiliberal Populism*, in "New Media & Society", *26*(6), pp. 3273-3289, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099587.

4 Starbird, K., DiResta, R., & DeButts, M. (2023), *Influence and Improvisation: Participatory Disinformation during the 2020 US Election*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943.

5 Sunstein, C.R. (2001a), *Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond*, Princeton University Press; Sunstein, C. R. (2017), *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton University Press.

6 Pariser, E. (2011), *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin; Pariser, E. (2015), *Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis?*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/.

7 Bruns, A. (2019), *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Polity; Bruns, A. (2024), *È Vero Che Internet Ci Chiude in una Bolla?*, FrancoAngeli.

in the contemporary media environment is hyperconnectivity, and the information abundance – and information overload – that this hyperconnectivity can and does result in. Coupled with insufficient and unevenly distributed media literacy, and indeed the weaponisation of media literacy concepts for malignant purposes, these challenges can result in citizens seeking and finding what they believe to be trustworthy information in all the wrong places, and even in them becoming willing participants in the further dissemination and amplification of problematic content, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.[8] As we will see, such tendencies are especially intense during times of genuine uncertainty – and our world has been living through such times at least since the mid-2010s, with Brexit, the first Trump presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the worsening climate crisis, and many other events combining into a continuing polycrisis that shows no signs of abating.

Such uncertain times lead many citizens to seek out simple and comforting explanations for an unbearably complex world, then, and to place their trust in and give their votes to the political and other leaders who promise quick and painless solutions to these problems – solutions that often promise peace of mind for the price of just a little less liberalism, a little more autocracy, and draw sharp distinctions between in- and out-groups like "the ordinary people" and "the political elites". This is a typically populist strategy, of course, and – due to populism's character as a "thin ideology"[9] – available to illiberal political actors across the entire political spectrum from the leftmost to the rightmost fringes. Such populist propaganda inevitably also increases societal polarisation, and its communicative strategies will usually

8 Starbird, K., DiResta, R., & DeButts, M. (2023), *Influence and Improvisation: Participatory Disinformation during the 2020 US Election*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943.

9 Mudde, C. (2004), *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in "Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics", *39*(4), pp. 541-563, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-zeitgeist/2CD34F8B25C4FFF4F322316833DB94B7.

show many of the symptoms of what Esau et al.[10] have described as "destructive polarisation".

In turn, while in principle it should be a core role of mainstream media and political institutions to push back firmly against such tendencies, in practice many such institutions have been hollowed out by decades of neoliberal policy-making, and are themselves subject to state capture once illiberal political groups gain a foothold in government[11]; even where they do seek to resist the rise of fringe political actors, however, this often simply intensifies the processes of destructive polarisation as it clarifies and deepens the societal faultlines between liberal and illiberal political forces and institutions.

There are no easy solutions for this confluence of factors threatening liberal democracies – and a lazy attribution of the causes for decades of democratic stagnation and backsliding solely to the rise of contemporary digital and social media since the early 2000s only serves to distract us from diagnosing a much more complex set of problems. We can and must start, however, at least by debunking the "echo chamber" and "filter bubble" fallacies, and by replacing them with a more accurate reading of the communicative environment that we and our fellow citizens now find ourselves in; we can then use this to develop a better understanding of the severe challenges that we and our democracies face at the present moment.

1. Against "Echo Chambers" and "Filter Bubbles"

As early as 2004, first-wave internet theorist and activist David Weinberger described the "echo chamber" concept as "a myth just waiting to concretize into common wisdom".[12] Introduced by legal

10 Esau, K., Choucair, T., Vilkins, S., Svegaard, S. F. K., Bruns, A., O'Connor-Farfan, K. S., & Lubicz-Zaorski, C. (2024), *Destructive Polarization in Digital Communication Contexts: A Critical Review and Conceptual Framework. Information*, in "Communication & Society", https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127.

11 Štětka, V., & Mihelj, S. (2024), *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54489-7.

12 Weinberger, D. (2004), *Is There an Echo in Here?*, in "Salon", https://www.salon.com/2004/02/21/echo_chamber/.

scholar Cass Sunstein,[13] the term had already been adopted widely in both scholarly literature and general public debate; this was aided considerably by the lack of any concrete definition – Sunstein had described it only in vague terms, and "echo chamber" therefore became a floating signifier that could be used to describe various communicative settings and processes. Broadly, however, a more explicit definition of an "echo chamber" might emphasise the complete and hermetic enclosure of politically homogenous groups in information enclaves where no ideas challenging their beliefs could ever intrude[14]; this was seen as a problem as such groups would therefore not benefit from a balanced information diet and might thus be misled in their opinion formation processes towards fringe and extreme ideological perspectives that could contradict their own interests as well as denigrate other, apparently antagonistic groups in society. In other words, "echo chambers" were thought to cause the informational isolation of specific partisan groups, and thereby also the communicative fragmentation of society itself.

Proponents of the concept saw the potential for "echo chambers" to exist especially in social media, where clearly it was possible for users to form communities of interest around various cultural, social, political, and other aspects of their personal identities. Indeed, through their follower and friendship networks, public and private group functionality, thematic hashtags, private messaging, and other affordances, many social media platforms did and do provide a range of ready-made affordances for forming such communities, and for developing and maintaining a shared set of ideas, beliefs, values, and aims. Such preferential attachment to like-minded others could then also result in selective exposure to news, information, and other content that would reinforce these worldviews, and thereby perhaps also drive selective avoidance of any information and individuals challenging such collec-

13 Sunstein, C. R. (2001a), *Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond*, Princeton University Press; Sunstein, C. R. (2001b), *Republic.com*, Princeton University Press.

14 Bruns, A. (2019), *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Polity.

tive beliefs.[15] Over time, this could in theory entrench an information enclave that might be considered to represent an "echo chamber" in a stricter definition of the term, leading the individuals caught up in it to form highly partisan and unbalanced worldviews.

For these effects to manifest, however, such isolation of partisan groups in "echo chambers" would have to be considerable if not complete, and it is here that conceptual assumptions and empirical reality begin to diverge.[16] A famous early study of networks amongst partisan Democrat and Republican blogs in the lead-up to the 2004 US presidential election, for instance, found substantial in-group clustering of interconnections within each party group, but also significant linkages across the political divide. Such inter-party connections might be largely antagonistic in nature, but nonetheless represent a form of selective exposure to opposing political perspectives that should not exist in an "echo chamber" context, and the scholars therefore described their study as having identified only "mild echo chambers".[17] A decade later, a major study of several climate change-related hashtag communities on Twitter identified both preferential in-group attachment and selective out-group exposure amongst the two antagonistic groups accepting or denying the scientific consensus on climate change: each side predominantly followed and retweeted its own members, but both engaged considerably across the divide between science and denial through their @mentions. This led the scholars involved to conclude that they had observed *both* "echo chambers" and "open forums" at the same time.[18]

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15 Garrett, R. K., Carnahan, D., & Lynch, E. K. (2013), *A Turn toward Avoidance? Selective Exposure to Online Political Information, 2004-2008*, in "Political Behavior", *35*(1), pp. 113-134, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-011-9185-6.

16 O'Hara, K. (2014), *In Worship of an Echo*, in "IEEE Internet Computing", *18*(4), pp. 79-83, https://kieronohara.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/In_Worship_of_an_Echo.pdf.

17 Adamic, L. A., & Glance, N. (2005), *The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election: Divided They Blog*, in J. Adibi, M. Grobelnik, D. Mladenic, & P. Pantel (Eds.), *LinkKDD '05: Proceedings of the 3rd International Workshop on Link Discovery*, pp. 36-43, p. 41, ACM, https://doi.org/10.1145/1134271.1134277.

18 Williams, H. T. P., McMurray, J. R., Kurz, T., & Lambert, F. H. (2015), *Network Analysis Reveals Open Forums and Echo Chambers in Social Media Discussions of Climate*

Studies such as these are especially valuable as an antidote to the myriad of other research projects that purport to have found "echo chambers" (and/or "filter bubbles"), but on closer inspection turn out to have examined only isolated communicative phenomena – for instance, a single hashtag community on Twitter – without considering the broader communicative contexts within which such communities and their members exist. As the study by Williams et al.,[19] in particular, demonstrates, even in the context of a single issue and on a single platform it is highly likely that individuals and groups will at the same time use the various communicative affordances available to them both to connect selectively and supportively with their fellow partisans (here for example through following them and retweeting their messages), *and* to challenge, critique, and antagonise their opponents (through @mentions that may range from genuine attempts to debate to all-out trolling and abuse).

But as and when such counter-ideological engagement takes place, these individuals and groups explicitly place themselves outside any (even mild) "echo chambers" that might be in danger of enclosing them: it is impossible to take on the enemy without an understanding, however distorted, of who the enemy is and what worldview that enemy represents. Indeed, other research has long documented that those individuals and groups who represent the most extreme partisan positions are also those who pay the greatest attention to the societal and political mainstream: it is critical to their own ideological standing and propagandistic efforts that they closely monitor the established political forces they seek to attack and undermine. Hyperpartisan visitors to the fascist Stormfront site were found to also be highly active (and highly critical) consumers of the *New York Times*, for instance,[20] while

Change, in "Global Environmental Change", *32*, pp. 126-138, p. 137, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.03.006.

19 Williams, H. T. P., McMurray, J. R., Kurz, T., & Lambert, F. H. (2015), *Network Analysis Reveals Open Forums and Echo Chambers in Social Media Discussions of Climate Change*, in "Global Environmental Change", *32*, pp. 126-138, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.03.006.

20 Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2011), *Ideological Segregation Online and Offline*, in "The Quarterly Journal of Economics", *126*, pp. 1799-1839, https://www.google.

politicians and supporters of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party have actively "instrumentalized German news media by making deliberate provocations that journalists not only covered but also scandalized", thereby gaining media exposure and attracting new followers.[21] They are thus paying close attention to the leading mainstream media outlets in Germany in order both to identify mainstream outlets that can be exploited to serve their own agenda, and to critique what they perceive as biased reporting by mainstream journalism.

Importantly, too, these examples – from political bloggers in the early 2000s through climate denialists on Twitter in the 2010s to fascist resurgents seeking media exposure in the 2020s – describe the practices only of a small subset of highly active, highly partisan actors. Their substantial political engagement and ideological commitment provides the motivation both to pursue considerable selective attachment with like-minded others, and to prevent selective avoidance by seeking out (and engaging with) the views of political antagonists, demonstrating in the process that selective attachment and selective avoidance are not inherently and inextricably linked to each other: there is no automatism which determines that selective attachment to an in-group also results in a corresponding level of selective avoidance of out-groups.[22] Rather, in fact, for extreme hyperpartisans strong selective (and supportive) attachment to the in-group might in turn also result in strong selective (but antagonistic) attachment to opposing out-groups; indeed, for such hyperpartisans it would be counterproductive to selectively avoid their opponents, as to do so would reduce the observability of such opponents' actions.

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com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Ideological+Segregation+Online+and+Offline&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

21 Maurer, M., Jost, P., Schaaf, M., Sülflow, M., & Kruschinski, S. (2022), *How Right-Wing Populists Instrumentalize News Media: Deliberate Provocations, Scandalizing Media Coverage, and Public Awareness for the Alternative for Germany (AfD)*, in "The International Journal of Press/Politics", *28*(4), pp. 747-769, p. 761, https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072692.

22 Garrett, R. K. (2009), *Politically Motivated Reinforcement Seeking: Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate*, in "Journal of Communication", *59*(4), pp. 676-699, https://rkellygarrett.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Garrett-Politically-motivated-reinforcement-seeking.pdf.

By contrast, however, in the first place most individuals with only mildly partisan worldviews are unlikely to go to any such lengths to specifically seek out distinct political perspectives and the communities that embody them. For better or worse, the vast majority of citizens tend not to be particularly politically aware and active: embracing a "news will find me" attitude[23] in relation to political and other news, they rely on their social media connections to eventually surface any information that may turn out to be important to them. This attitude may be deeply problematic from a normative democratic perspective, as ideally citizens should be deeply engaged with current affairs in order to be able to form their political opinions and make their electoral decisions on the basis of a high-quality information diet – but for the purposes of our present discussion it is also highly unlikely to lead citizens to become enclosed in information enclaves that might be described as "echo chambers". Rather, most ordinary users' social media networks represent a heterogeneous jumble of personal, professional, family, social, interest, and other connections – they suffer as well as benefit in equal measure from the phenomenon known as "context collapse", which connects layers of their lived experience that may be largely separate as they navigate their daily offline experiences but intersect through the nexus of general-purpose social media platforms.[24]

Through the diverse social connections that are combined into a single platform newsfeed by such context collapse, users therefore encounter a broad variety of perspectives, in the form of personal updates as well as shared information. As a result, active social media users are incidentally exposed to a broader information diet than non-users,[25] in

23 Gil de Zúñiga, H., Weeks, B., & Ardèvol-Abreu, A. (2017), *Effects of the News-Finds-Me Perception in Communication: Social Media Use Implications for News Seeking and Learning about Politics*, in "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", *22*(3), pp. 105-123, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316056973_Effects_of_the_News-Finds-Me_Perception_in_Communication_Social_Media_Use_Implications_for_News_Seeking_and_Learning_About_Politics.

24 Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011), *I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience*, in "New Media & Society", *13*(1), pp. 114-133, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313.

25 Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018), *Are People Incidentally Exposed to News on Social Media? A Comparative Analysis*, in "New Media & Society", *20*(7), pp. 2450-2468,

some circumstances even against their own will and to the detriment of their personal peace of mind: during the 2016 US election, for instance, many respondents to a Pew Center study,[26] at the time of the 2016 US presidential election reported that they had actively sought to eradicate pro-Trump or pro-Clinton posts from their Facebook newsfeeds because they did not align with their own political preferences, but found themselves unable to do so because such content came from otherwise important social connections and/or because the platform did not provide sufficient filtering affordances. Put differently, context collapse and platform algorithms combined to *prevent* social media users from seeking refuge in more politically homogenous information enclaves.

In this context we also encounter the second key concept that is often purported to drive the establishment of such enclaves: the "filter bubble", especially in its updated formulation.[27] A first iteration of the concept, introduced in 2011 by tech entrepreneur and activist Eli Pariser,[28] focused predominantly on the role of search engines, and claimed that the heavy personalisation of search results to the user's personal interests would place each user in an individual "filter bubble"; this claim has been roundly debunked by a series of studies which demonstrated widespread homogeneity in the search results presented to diverse users[29] – to the point where this very uniformity

https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817724170.

26 Duggan, M., & Smith, A. (2016), *The Political Environment on Social Media*, Pew Research Center, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/10/24160747/PI_2016.10.25_Politics-and-Social-Media_FINAL.pdf.

27 Pariser, E. (2015), *Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis?*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/.

28 Pariser, E. (2011), *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin.

29 Bruns, A. (2022), *Australian Search Experience Project: Background Paper*, Working Paper No. 1, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, https://www.admscentre.org.au/working-papers/; Haim, M., Graefe, A., & Brosius, H.-B. (2018), *Burst of the Filter Bubble? Effects of Personalization on the Diversity of Google News*, in "Digital Journalism", *6*(3), pp. 330-343, https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1338145; Krafft, T. D., Gamer, M., & Zweig, K. A. (2019), *What Did You See? A Study to Measure Personalization in Google's Search Engine*, in "EPJ Data Science", *8*(1), Article 1, https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-019-0217-5; Nechushtai, E., & Lewis, S. C. (2019), *What Kind of News Gatekeepers Do We Want Machi-*

of recommendations, promoting a limited set of key sources over all others, rather than any diversity and variation of search results was identified as a more serious limitation in maintaining a balanced information diet.[30]

Also reflecting the growing importance of social media rather than search engines as sources of information, Pariser then revised his original claim to focus more strongly on the role of social media newsfeed algorithms in shaping the information diets of the users of such platforms.[31] Although the power of such algorithms in surfacing or downranking specific forms of information is certainly considerable, however, the specific claim that these algorithms – alone or in a feedback loop with users' personal choices of whom to follow and what to engage with – create partisan information enclaves has so far largely lacked proof. As noted, research shows that active social media users encounter a greater diversity of news sources than non-users[32]; context collapse means that these sources, shared by others in the users' networks, are also likely to represent a variety of political perspectives, since most ordinary users do not solely connect with others because they are "political compadres", as Pariser assumes,[33] but for a wide variety of largely non-political reasons.

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nes to Be? Filter Bubbles, Fragmentation, and the Normative Dimensions of Algorithmic Recommendations, in "Computers in Human Behavior", *90*, pp. 298-307, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.07.043; Nechushtai, E., Zamith, R., & Lewis, S. C. (2023), *More of the Same? Homogenization in News Recommendations When Users Search on Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter*, in "Mass Communication and Society", *27*(6), pp. 1309-1335, https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2023.2173609.

30 Nechushtai, E., & Lewis, S. C. (2019), *What Kind of News Gatekeepers Do We Want Machines to Be? Filter Bubbles, Fragmentation, and the Normative Dimensions of Algorithmic Recommendations*, in "Computers in Human Behavior", *90*, pp. 298-307, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.07.043.

31 Pariser, E. (2015), *Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis?*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/.

32 Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018), *Are People Incidentally Exposed to News on Social Media? A Comparative Analysis*, in "New Media & Society", *20*(7), pp. 2450-2468, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817724170.

33 Pariser, E. (2015), *Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis?*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/.

Indeed, the greatest threat to users' information diets from platform algorithms has tended to be the explicit downranking of any news and political information, in a misguided attempt to keep the peace and prevent the circulation of disinformation on social media platforms: as parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, for instance, Meta has moved ever more strongly towards suppressing such content altogether,[34] both because user discussions about news and politics negatively affect user sentiment on its platforms[35] and have become increasingly antagonistic and abusive in recent times, and because the suppression of *any* news-like content excuses the company from having to make politically sensitive decisions about what sources provide genuine news and what sources publish disinformation.

A notable exception in this context, however, is X (formerly Twitter) under the leadership of Elon Musk, whose deliberate shadow banning of accounts and sources critical of Musk and his associates, and amplification of accounts and sources supporting him, has been widely and conclusively documented[36] – here, platform algorithms have now been deliberately weaponised in an attempt to create a pro-fascist "filter bubble", and it is for this reason that a substantial component of the platform's former userbase has decreased its use, deactivated its accounts, and/or sought out more welcoming alternative spaces.

Outside of such extreme and recent examples of heavy-handed intervention by a platform operator, however, there is no evidence that the rise of digital and social media as tools for public communication has promoted the widespread establishment of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles", and that any entrapment of large subsets of the population in such information enclaves has been the chief driver of the

34 Australian Financial Review (2024), *Concerns Grow as Facebook's News Exit Nears*, https://www.afr.com/technology/meta-to-take-news-feed-out-of-facebook-next-week-20240330-p5fg9a.

35 De León, E., & Trilling, D. (2021), *A Sadness Bias in Political News Sharing? The Role of Discrete Emotions in the Engagement and Dissemination of Political News on Facebook*, in "Social Media + Society", *7*(4), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211059710.

36 Graham, T., & Andrejevic, M. (2024), *A Computational Analysis of Potential Algorithmic Bias on Platform X during the 2024 US Election*, Working paper, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/253211/.

democratic backsliding towards illiberalism and autocracy that can be observed in many countries. Rather, indeed, attempts such as Musk's to reshape his social media platform into a pro-fascist "filter bubble" have notably *followed* rather than *preceded* the illiberal and autocratic makeover of the Republican Party under Donald Trump, and arguably represent Musk's defence against the vocal opposition from liberal democratic (and Democratic) Twitter users that these political developments have begun to generate.

Any emphasis on "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" as explanations for the contemporary political moment is misplaced, therefore[37]: the emergence of populist, illiberal, and autocratic leaders and movements to considerable prominence in recent years has taken place in the absence of such information enclaves, and – as we will see shortly – has even *benefitted* considerably from exploiting that absence. In line with the stages of the establishment of an illiberal public sphere outlined by Štětka & Mihelj,[38] it was usually only once they assumed some degree of power that authoritarian leaders have attempted to create platform- and even nationwide "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles", both by pressuring digital and social media platforms into downranking or removing critical and oppositional content, and by removing regime-critical content and voices from mainstream media platforms (including especially public service media where they play a significant role). This has been the case in Erdoğan's Turkey, Modi's India, Orbán's Hungary, and – with incessant attacks against critical journalism, cuts to PBS and Voice of America, billionaire capture of leading media outlets, and Musk's pro-fascist makeover of Twitter into X – now also in Trump's United States.

37 Bruns, A. (2019), *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Polity; Bruns, A. (2024), *È Vero Che Internet Ci Chiude in una Bolla?*, FrancoAngeli.

38 Štětka, V., & Mihelj, S. (2024), *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54489-7.

2. Hyperconnectivity, Not Isolation

Ultimately, in fact, one of the most consequential drivers of such democratic backsliding is the very opposite of informational isolation and communicative fragmentation: extreme connectivity, and the information overload it can produce. Progressive waves of communication technology – from broadcast radio and television through satellite and cable news to the early internet and web and contemporary social media – have made it ever more possible to connect with a global information environment and seek out news and opinion from a bewildering array of sources. This hyperconnectivity is not in itself inherently and unavoidably problematic: connecting with like-minded others at a potentially global scale can produce immense social, cultural, economic, scholarly, and political benefits. At the individual and collective level, however, it also requires media and communicative literacies and strategies that are highly unevenly distributed, and must evolve constantly as the global landscape of communication media itself continues to evolve; failure to keep up with such developments affects individuals, communities, and whole societies, both as they are unable to realise the opportunities inherent in modern information and communication networks and as they are become vulnerable to exploitation by others who are able to use these tools more effectively to achieve their own aims.

The effects of such an uneven distribution of communicative literacy and power are heightened even further in times of crisis, however. Especially in their initial stages, crises have always presented an information vacuum: the true facts of the current situation are genuinely unknown, but an apparently innate human need for explanation and reassurance nonetheless drives us to seek out what little information is available, and to formulate hypotheses to explain what is happening.[39] In doing so, poor media and information literacy can lead us to place our trust in unverified, misleading, and false information, and

39 Allport, G., & Postman, L. (1946), *An Analysis of Rumor*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", *10*(4), pp. 501-517.

in turn also to pass on that information to others; rumours, hearsay, and misinformation can then spread quickly to fill the information vacuum, and make it difficult for genuine, verified information to cut through. Indeed, once we have convinced ourselves of the validity of a specific explanation, we will be reluctant to let go of it, as to do so would mean acknowledging that we were wrong, and that our lack of information and media literacy allowed us to be misled.

Such dynamics are further exacerbated by the fact that we are also likely to prefer simple over complex explanations, and explanations that afford us some agency over those which position us as subject to forces beyond out control. This was evident from the rise and interweaving of conspiracy theories in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance: it is more comforting to believe that the virus escaped a biological laboratory, was activated by 5G mobile telephony technology, and/or was deliberately launched in order to justify a mass campaign to inject the world population with microchips than it is to accept the fact that pandemics occur unforeseeably as the result of random genetic mutations in viruses that enable them to spread more efficiently from carrier to carrier, and across species boundaries. Any of those unfounded conspiracy theories instead suggest that something can be done to stop the pandemic dead in its tracks, and indeed that someone can be held responsible for it, when in reality only a global campaign of lockdowns, mass vaccinations, and other intrusive and sustained health measures can hope to contain and eventually eradicate a virus that is now endemic in the global population.

Many of the conspiracy theories associated with the COVID-19 pandemic evolved organically, sometimes also repurposing preexisting conspiracist claims about vaccines, 5G, or secret government programmes to control the world population that had been circulating already; they emerged from small communities promoting these claims, and through offline and online word of mouth gradually reached larger

audiences. As Bruns et al.[40] have shown for the COVID/5G conspiracy theory, such small-scale reach was eventually boosted substantially only when individuals and groups with much higher levels of celebrity and influence finally decided to embrace and amplify them, and when tabloid and even mainstream media in turn covered such celebrity amplification without considering the consequences of doing so. Such dissemination and amplification processes serve as a useful illustration of the effects of a combination of hyperconnectivity with limited media and information literacy (amongst ordinary users as well as celebrities and journalists): in a reversal of the positive effects of the crowdsourcing of important grassroots protest voices to greater visibility that Meraz and Papacharissi[41] observed in the context of the Arab Spring protests of the early 2010s, here alternative voices representing an unfounded and unscientific resistance to government measures designed to control the pandemic were crowdsourced to greater visibility as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded.

Any such conspiracy theories – and broader mis- and disinformation related to the pandemic and other crises – that gain a broader audience through this collective crowdsourcing, amplification, and dissemination serve to demonstrate the absence of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles": had the initial groups of vaccine sceptics and 5G critics existed in "echo chambers" where they were hermetically sealed off from broader communication networks, for instance, their messages could never have reached the ordinary users and celebrities who contributed to their increasing reach; had there been algorithmic attempts to shape search results and social media newsfeeds into "filter bubbles", these conspiracist views similarly should never have reached users whose profiles were not already marked as receptive to such perspectives. (Instead, content flagging, moderation, downrank-

40 Bruns, A., Harrington, S., & Hurcombe, E. (2020), *"Corona? 5G? Or Both?": The Dynamics of COVID-19/5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook*, in "Media International Australia", *177*, pp. 12-29, https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20946113.

41 Meraz, S., & Papacharissi, Z. (2013), *Networked Gatekeeping and Networked Framing on #Egypt*, in "The International Journal of Press/Politics", *18*(2), pp. 138-166, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212474472.

ing, and removal of the most problematic conspiracist posts usually took place – if at all – only later, in reaction to the wide reach of such content, and thus at a time when the damage was already done.)

Therefore, the relative ease with which a conspiracy theory claiming secret links between COVID-19 and 5G technology, for instance, could go from an obscure French-language blog towards endorsement by Hollywood celebrities (and the entertainment media coverage that this generated) instead demonstrates the hyperconnectivity that is a core feature of contemporary communication networks.[42] It also points to the fact that for such conspiracist communities, and for mis- and disinformation actors more generally, it is indeed a central aim to make their views "go viral"[43]: to seal themselves away in an information enclave that might protect them from unwanted intrusions from the real world, but also hinders their ability to push information outwards to recruit more supporters, would be counterproductive. Further, as noted, to ensure the effectiveness of their messaging such groups are also strongly incentivised to maintain a close awareness of how their enemies, but also how possible targets for their messaging think – again, to disconnect themselves from broader information flows would therefore undermine their efforts.

Beyond the largely hobbyist, interest-driven efforts of conspiracist groups, such tendencies are even more pronounced for organised, professional, political or commercial, domestic or foreign influence and disinformation campaigns.[44] Such campaigns cannot afford to speak only to the already converted; their very purpose is to frustrate the opposition, confuse the unconvinced, and recruit the gullible. Their

42 Bruns, A., Harrington, S., & Hurcombe, E. (2020), *"Corona? 5G? Or Both?": The Dynamics of COVID-19/5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook*, in "Media International Australia", *177*, pp. 12-29, https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20946113.

43 Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., & Amazeen, M. A. (2017), *The Agenda-Setting Power of Fake News: A Big Data Analysis of the Online Media Landscape from 2014 to 2016*, in "New Media & Society", *20*(5), pp. 2028-2049, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817712086.

44 Harrington, S., Bruns, A., Matich, P., Angus, D., Hurcombe, E., & Jude, N. A. (2024), *"Big Lies": Understanding the Role of Political Actors and Mainstream Journalists in the Spread of Disinformation*, in "Media International Australia", https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X241291317.

work exploits hyperconnectivity and poor media and information literacy, and indeed seeks to weaponise media literacy to turn it against the very authoritative information sources it is designed to promote: where conventional media literacy says "consider the source" to warn against trusting fringe and unknown outlets, weaponised media literacy says "consider the source" to paint mainstream and public service media as representing "the elites" rather than "the people"; where conventional media literacy says "trust the experts" and means well-credentialled researchers with an extensive track record of relevant scholarship, weaponised media literacy says "trust the experts" and means podcasters and vodcasters with a strong alignment to its own partisan stance; where conventional media literacy says "do your own research" to encourage seeking out independent verification of a claim from multiple quality sources, weaponised media literacy says "do your own research" to find more sources that agree with your own worldview. Both offer the same advice to information seekers, but promote diametrically opposed compass headings for navigating the information landscape.

In this and other ways, professionally organised influence and disinformation campaigns also seek to harness the power of the crowd, of course: purely top-down and artificial campaigns are a great deal less effective than campaigns that enrol supporters, once they are convinced of the cause, in further dissemination and amplification. This is what Starbird et al.[45] describe as "participatory disinformation": campaigns may set the overall direction and tone of the messaging, but rely on their ordinary supporters to push this messaging out informally through their personal networks, where it may be received more willingly than an official campaign post or advertisement; and they will even empower ordinary supporters to construct their own messaging, creating a more organic and authentic impression than any top-down campaign would be able to.

45 Starbird, K., DiResta, R., & DeButts, M. (2023), *Influence and Improvisation: Participatory Disinformation during the 2020 US Election*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943.

The aim of such disinformation campaigns is not necessarily always to convince the entire populace of a particular point of view, however; often, and especially in political and electoral contests where voter engagement and turnout can play a decisive role, it is also to discourage and divide political antagonists and thereby weaken the opposition to one's own side. Indeed, committed hyperpartisan supporters enrolled in participatory disinformation will therefore often engage in such amplification efforts even if they are fully aware that the message they are asked to promote is misleading or false, since to do so will still annoy, distract, or confuse their opponents. Such influence and disinformation campaigns therefore promote destructive polarisation,[46] in order to divide and conquer.

3. Destructive Polarisation and Its Symptoms

Political and societal polarisation can take any number of forms[47]: as issue polarisation, it can focus on specific policy issues[48]; as ideological polarisation, it can describe a contest between ideological viewpoints that incorporate unified stances on a wide variety of issues[49]; as affective polarisation, it can represent a distinction between strongly felt individual and collective identities[50]; and any such divisions can also manifest in how the individuals and groups associated with specific

46 Esau, K., Choucair, T., Vilkins, S., Svegaard, S. F. K., Bruns, A., O'Connor-Farfan, K. S., & Lubicz-Zaorski, C. (2024), *Destructive Polarization in Digital Communication Contexts: A Critical Review and Conceptual Framework*, in "Information, Communication & Society", https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127.

47 Bruns, A., Choucair, T. D. S., Esau, K., Svegaard, S. F. K., & Vilkins, S. (2025), *Polarization in Online Spaces: Distinguishing Forms of Polarized Politics*, in D. Lilleker, D. Jackson, B. Kalsnes, C. Mellado, F. Trevisan, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning*, Routledge, pp. 45-57.

48 Lelkes, Y. (2016), *Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", *80*(S1), pp. 392-410, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298725413_Mass_Polarization_Manifestations_and_Measurements.

49 Yarchi, M., Baden, C., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2021), *Political Polarization on the Digital Sphere: A Cross-platform, Over-time Analysis of Interactional, Positional, and Affective Polarization on Social Media*, in "Political Communication", *38*(1–2), pp. 98-139, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1785067.

50 Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012), *Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", *76*(3), pp. 405-431, https://

poles in the contest of ideas interpret the information they encounter, interact with their antagonists, and perceive those who hold views different to their own.[51] These types of polarisation are not mutually exclusive, but can indeed combine and reinforce each other.

Importantly, not all such polarisation is problematic: rather, polarisation at least in its milder forms is an inherent and inevitable feature of public and political debate, as a complete absence of polarisation within such debate would imply a total uniformity of viewpoints (and therefore no need for debate in the first place). Benign levels of polarisation instead facilitate the crystallisation of particular positions on specific issues and policies, and the articulation of the overarching ideological programmes and identities that may govern the positioning of individuals and groups across multiple such issues. Importantly, the poles that result from such crystallisation are generally multiple, enabling the formation of temporary or more permanent discursive alliances between several such poles as they position themselves in antagonism to other such alliances[52]; the reduction of such more complex multipolar networks between groups to a simplistic bipolar antagonism between "the left" and "the right", government and opposition, the liberal establishment and the populist fringes, Republicans and Democrats is itself an indication that levels of polarisation in a given political context are no longer benign and productive. This transition from productive to destructive polarisation is gradual; there is no one threshold or tipping point at which the political system decisively enters a new and dysfunctional state. Rather, several key symptoms of destructive polarisation are likely to manifest with increasing intensity, driven perhaps also by the active intervention of political

www.researchgate.net/publication/255992384_Affect_Not_Ideology_A_Social_Identity_Perspective_on_Polarization.

51 Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Baden, C., & Yarchi, M. (2020), *Interpretative Polarization across Platforms: How Political Disagreement Develops over Time on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp*, in "Social Media + Society", *6*(3), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120944393.

52 Dehghan, E. (2020), *Networked Discursive Alliances: Antagonism, Agonism, and the Dynamics of Discursive Struggles in the Australian Twittersphere*, PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, https://doi.org/10.5204/thesis.eprints.174604.

forces and campaigns that believe they will benefit from increased levels of polarisation.

Esau et al.[53] outline five key symptoms of such destructive polarisation. The first of these is a growing breakdown of communication: the various sides in a polarised environment lose their willingness to constructively engage with one another to cooperate and develop workable compromises on current issues, and instead merely oppose each other's views. Importantly, this does not necessarily imply a complete absence of communication between the different sides, but can also result in a talking about, at, and past each other rather than constructive engagement with one another.

Second, as the different political groups do so, they may also increasingly discredit and dismiss any information seen to disagree with their own views and to favour another side. This also serves to undermine previously respected authorities, from quality media through the public service to domain experts, and thereby also further complicates any attempts to find policy consensus on the basis of generally accepted evidence.

Third, these tendencies are also likely to lead to the erasure of complexities, especially in relation to policy issues and decisions. If the political contest is reduced to an opposition between simplistic slogans, and if reliable evidence no longer plays a meaningful role in decision-making, then political actors are also likely to promote and implement simplistic solutions to the problems they have identified, regardless of how unworkable and ineffective these solutions may prove to be.

Fourth, these developments also provide exacerbated space and attention for extreme voices in political communication. As the sophistication, specificity, and complexity of political debate declines, this opens the door to populist actors who have no dedicated programme

53 Esau, K., Choucair, T., Vilkins, S., Svegaard, S. F. K., Bruns, A., O'Connor-Farfan, K. S., & Lubicz-Zaorski, C. (2024), *Destructive Polarization in Digital Communication Contexts: A Critical Review and Conceptual Framework*, in "Information, Communication & Society", https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127.

of policies beyond simple propaganda, and who can now espouse positions that would previously have been regarded as unacceptably fringe and extreme.

Finally, in line with the previous four symptoms it is also likely that political, populist, and propagandist arguments will increasingly employ affective rather than rational appeals to voters, and that such appeals will use emotion to target in-groups ("ordinary people") while excluding out-groups (such as "the elites", or specific ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities). This is designed to further deepen societal divisions.

This list of symptoms may not be exhaustive; others may be added over time as destructive polarisation is identified in a broader range of contexts. It is already easily evident in many of the democracies that are now backsliding into illiberalism and autocracy, however: US Republicans under Donald Trump, for instance, have ceased any meaningful policy engagement with their opponents; dismissed the expert advice and legal judgments they disagree with out of hand; simplified complex questions to slogans like "Make America Great Again"; embraced fascist gestures, slogans, and conspiracy theories; and inflamed emotional resentments against migrants, minorities, countries, and other perceived opponents. The same is true, if sometimes not yet to the same extent, in other democracies under threat from populist propaganda and illiberal agitators.

As such examples also show, this destructive polarisation becomes difficult to reign in because it already anticipates the reactions of established democratic institutions. Mainstream media, courts, activists, experts, and others opposing the democratic backsliding are all necessarily (and indeed accurately) positioned as opponents and enemies of the populist movements seeking to exploit such societal divisions, and through their legitimate actions unwillingly and unavoidably contribute to a further increase in destructive polarisation. While in realisation of this unenviable positioning some such actors may seek a truce to hostilities – positioning themselves as critical but constructive opponents to illiberal actors – such attempts at appeasement are ultimately unlikely to do much more than delay the inevitable, since

in the end such illiberal actors cannot and will not tolerate the continued existence of such critical voices.

Instead, the only principled – but personally, professionally, financially, and institutionally costly – response to illiberal and anti-democratic forces can only be a forceful and sustained opposition: as Kreiss and McGregor[54] point out, sometimes active polarisation by pro-democratic and pro-social forces against those who inherently threaten democratic and societal cohesion is not only justified but non-negotiable, and destructive levels of polarisation in the contest between democracy and its enemies are therefore not just inevitable but indeed required: we must make clear to those who seek to establish illiberal, autocratic regimes that their worldviews are fundamentally unacceptable, and that there can be no compromise between democracy and its negation.

However, this fundamental and forceful opposition to illiberalism must distinguish in targeting its opponents between those in society who are actively pursuing the destruction of the democratic order, and its replacement with autocracy, and who must therefore be resisted at every step, and those who have merely been enrolled in supporting such efforts by populist propaganda that exploited their limited media and political literacies. The former cannot be reintegrated into civil society other than through a slow deradicalisation process that may require a generation's worth of effort; the latter remain more open to being brought back from the brink through pro-democratic and pro-social arguments that, however, must also take seriously any genuine inequalities, injustices, and other legitimate grievances that have led to their disillusionment with liberal democracy.

In this context Kreiss and McGregor have forcefully reminded us that the "analysis of power and inequality – specifically differences in economic, social, and political status, and especially between different

54 Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2023), *A Review and Provocation: On Polarization and Platforms*, in "New Media & Society", *26*(1), pp. 556-579, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880.

racial and ethnic groups"[55] – is critical to any meaningful attempts to understand polarisation and its underlying systemic causes. Power imbalances and socioeconomic inequalities are endemic across many liberal democracies, and represent a root cause for many of the political dysfunctions outlined in this article. Those of us who seek to defend democracy against its many enemies must emphatically reject the political actors who seek to exploit such problems in their illiberal agitation – but we must act equally decisively to address the inequalities themselves that render disadvantaged societal groups exploitable in the first place, and by doing so work to deprive the forces of illiberalism of access to a population that is susceptible to recruitment.

Whether such a principled course of action can succeed, however, depends fundamentally on the balance between pro- and anti-democratic forces within a given political contest: where, as in many European nations, the fight is between a stable democratic core and its anti-democratic fringe, hope for the eventual survival and success of the democratic project remains; where, as in the United States, the faultline appears to run right through the centre of society, democracy is in much greater danger. These assessments should not cause European democrats to become overconfident, however, any more than it should lead Americans to adopt a defeatist attitude: the defence of European democratic achievements remains a constant struggle against internal and external antagonists, while Donald Trump was returned to the White House in 2024 on a slim plurality of the limited number of voters who bothered to do their democratic duty – which does not equate to a mandate for the wholesale transformation of the United States into an illiberal autocracy.

55 Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2023), *A Review and Provocation: On Polarization and Platforms*, in "New Media & Society", *26*(1), pp. 556-579, p. 558, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880.

Understanding Political Polarisation in Hybrid Media Systems

Laura Iannelli and Augusto Valeriani

1. Taking Polarisation Seriously

This chapter explores the complex phenomenon of political polarisation, shedding light on its possible manifestations and on how these can be studied within different media and political systems.

Over the past decade, political polarisation was initially regarded as an "American issue". More recently, however, we have witnessed the global diffusion of the language, logics, and modes of representation of this phenomenon that are specific to the United States context. These elements have sometimes been excessively emphasised – or even distorted – to adapt them to political cultures, institutional arrangements, and media ecosystems that differ significantly from those characterising the US.

Part of this global spread of discourse on polarisation derives from the influence of US political and media trends on the rest of the world. This influence does not concern only the analytical frameworks adopted by scholars. It also affects the strategic narratives used by political

actors to operate within the political field and by the media to represent it. In short, developments in the United States often function as a lens and as a model – directly or indirectly – through which polarisation is studied, enacted, and narrated elsewhere.

However, if we want this concept to genuinely help us interpret the transformations of contemporary political space, it is essential to take political polarisation seriously. This is especially true outside the framework of American exceptionalism. It is particularly relevant in countries such as Italy, where the political landscape has been shaped by a multiparty system and by different forms of ideological conflict.

In the United States, academic debates on polarisation have developed over recent years with an initial focus on political elites. Researchers have highlighted the decline of bipartisan cooperation and the growing ideological rigidity among elected representatives.[1] In other political contexts, however, collaboration between parliamentarians from opposing coalitions in the drafting and approval of legislation has never been a consistent feature of political life. For this reason, conceptualising polarisation as a deviation from bipartisanship would make little sense in contexts other than the United States.

Italy provides a clear example. Certain forms of polarisation have always been deeply rooted in the country's political culture. As early as 1966, Giovanni Sartori coined the term "polarised pluralism" to describe the political systems of countries such as Italy during the First Republic. These systems are characterised by a strong political centre and by a high degree of ideological differentiation. They also create strategic incentives for parties at the ideological extremes to distance themselves from the centre. This dynamic generates centrifugal forces within the political space. In countries with multiparty systems and deeply entrenched ideological identifications, elite-level polarisation has often taken the form of rhetorical radicalisation and uncivil tones

1 Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J. (2008), *Political polarization in the American public*, in "Annual Review of Political Science", *11*, pp. 563-588, https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836.

in public discourse.[2] This is a phenomenon that emerged only later in the US context.

We are therefore faced with two distinct but interconnected phenomena. On the one hand, we observe the decline of bipartisan cooperation in the United States – a feature that has never been prominent in many other countries. On the other hand, we see an intensification of conflict in political discourse – something that has always existed in other countries but has become increasingly marked in the US context in recent years.

To understand what political polarisation truly is today, and which of its dimensions may represent genuine threats to democratic systems, conceptual clarity is essential. The approach proposed in this chapter aims to achieve such clarity by analysing the interaction between polarisation and media systems.

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to clarify what we mean when we speak of "polarisation". Despite its frequent use in academic, journalistic, and political discourse, the term often remains vague and ambiguous. It functions as a concept with blurred boundaries that encompasses a wide range of political and social phenomena. Further complexity arises from the fact that both political and media elites, as well as ordinary citizens, may be involved in the process of polarisation.

One of the most relevant dimensions in terms of democratic dysfunction concerns citizens themselves. It is also the dimension for which greater clarity is perhaps most urgently needed. When analysing citizens' political attitudes, researchers generally identify three dimensions of polarisation. The first is ideological polarisation. This occurs when individuals' opinions shift towards the opposite extremes of the political spectrum, leading to a growing divide in political beliefs.[3] The

2 Mancini, P. (2013), *The Italian public sphere: a case of dramatized polarization*, in "Journal of Modern Italian Studies", *18*(3), pp. 335-347, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1080%2F1354571X.2013.780348&ie=UTF-8&oe-=UTF-8.

3 Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J. (2008), *Political polarization in the American public*, in "Annual Review of Political Science", *11*, pp. 563-588, https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836.

second is issue polarisation, characterised by increasing divergence on specific political issues – such as immigration, environmental policies, or civil rights – where citizens adopt increasingly uncompromising positions.[4] The third, and increasingly studied, is affective polarisation. This refers to the intensification of emotional hostility and social distance towards members of opposing political groups, often regardless of actual policy disagreements.[5]

Another key element concerns the need to consider political polarisation not as a static condition, but as a dynamic process that develops over time. Individuals or groups may progressively adopt more extreme positions. These shifts may occur at the ideological, emotional, or substantive level. They may also be asymmetric, affecting one group disproportionately, or symmetric. This leads to a further issue. Both in public discourse and, at times, in the measures used by researchers, there is a tendency to equate polarisation with a situation in which two opposing groups of equal size diverge simultaneously towards the extremes. However, some of the most problematic forms of polarisation can emerge when only one group moves towards radicalisation. This is the case even when that group represents a minority.

An exemplary case of such a situation was highlighted by a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.[6] This study challenged the media narrative dominant at the time. According to that narrative, Italian society was divided into two equally sized and opposing blocs of citizens. On the one hand were those who viewed lockdowns and mobility restrictions as necessary acts of collective responsibility. On the other were those who rejected such measures as undemocratic,

4 Garner, A., Palmer, H. (2011), *Polarization and issue consistency over time*, in "Political Behavior", *33*, pp. 225-246, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225720800_Polarization_and_Issue_Consistency_Over_Time.

5 Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., Westwood, S. J. (2019), *The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States*, in "Annual review of political science", *22*(1), pp. 129-146, https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034.

6 Iannelli, L., Marino, G., Serani, D., Valeriani, A. (2022), *Citizens, Polarization, and the Pandemic in the Italian Hybrid News Media System*, in D. Palau-Sampio, G. López García, L. Iannelli (Eds.), *Contemporary Politics, Communication, and the Impact on Democracy*, IGI Global Publishing, pp. 307-328.

unnecessary, and authoritarian. The researchers showed that the latter group was composed of a small minority. Despite its size, however, this minority distanced itself from the majority to a significant degree on ideological, attitudinal, and behavioural levels. This type of unidirectional, minority-driven polarisation poses unique challenges. The study found that these "extreme libertarians" exhibited media consumption patterns markedly different from those of "extreme communitarians", different attitudes towards disinformation, contrasting levels of trust in institutions, and adherence to radically different "truth regimes". Essentially, this was a minority of citizens characterised by a radical detachment from mainstream narratives and institutions: the divergences from the large majority of citizens holding "extreme communitarian" positions extended well beyond the specific issue of lockdowns and the balance between public health protection and individual freedoms. This radical detachment of extreme libertarians from the majority complicated any prospect of democratic dialogue, instead creating fertile ground for the emergence of subversive practices aimed at destabilising democratic norms.

Even more than ideological or issue polarisation, affective polarisation has attracted growing academic attention due to its potential to undermine democratic norms. It is often associated with reduced tolerance and an increased resistance to accepting legitimate democratic outcomes.[7] Affective polarisation is worrying because political differences shift into the emotional domain, drastically reducing the possibilities for rational discussion and constructive exchange. When emotions prevail over reason, the possibility of mediation, civil disagreement, and constructive debate – all practices essential to democratic functioning – becomes significantly more remote.

7 Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., Ryan, J. B. (2021), *How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", *85*(2), pp. 663-677, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354775349_How_Affective_Polarization_Undermines_Support_for_Democratic_Norms.

However, even from this perspective, it is necessary to approach the issue with greater analytical nuance. Recent studies have begun to challenge the idea that affective polarisation should always be considered intrinsically harmful. Harteveld and Wagner,[8] for example, provocatively suggest that affective polarisation may in fact act as a counterweight to political apathy – serving as "emotional oxygen" for democracy. According to this view, while excessive polarisation may indeed be explosive, a certain degree of emotional engagement – even when it generates conflict – may be vital to sustaining a vibrant democratic culture. Citizens who display emotional engagement with politics, even along partisan lines, are probably less likely to disengage entirely from participation.

In other words, the risk of treating affective polarisation as necessarily negative is that, as the saying goes, we may "throw the baby out with the bathwater". We could end up aspiring to an equally problematic condition: that of political apathy and widespread disengagement. To move beyond this deadlock, we must begin by clarifying which forms of polarisation – affective or otherwise – are truly destructive and dangerous for democracy. For instance, if we define affective polarisation simply as the emergence of strong positive feelings towards one's own political group (the "in-group") and cold or negative feelings towards the opposing group (the "out-group"), we risk considering indifference – a complete detachment from political life – as the positive opposite of polarisation. Yet indifference is also deeply dysfunctional from a democratic standpoint.

In this chapter, we therefore propose an alternative direction – one inspired by recent insights from studies that place contemporary communication and media ecosystems at the centre of analyses of political polarisation. We argue that, in order to truly understand the democratic risks associated with polarising dynamics in contemporary public and political discourse, it is both useful and necessary to change

8 Harteveld, E., Wagner, M. (2023), *Does affective polarisation increase turnout? Evidence from Germany, The Netherlands and Spain*, in "West European Politics", *46*(4), pp. 732-759, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402382.2022.2087395.

perspective. Rather than relying exclusively on the conceptual tools of traditional political science, we suggest adopting a more contemporary approach that views the media (both old and new) not merely as spaces that reflect political polarisation, but as actors in political communication that actively shape and amplify polarisation, influencing not only political behaviour, but also the broader structure and functioning of the public sphere.

2. Why and How the Media Matter

When examining the relationship between media and polarisation, it is essential to begin by recognising the fundamental role that media experiences play in shaping perceptions of reality.[9] Media representations of the political landscape at a given moment can significantly influence how social actors perceive not only political reality itself, but also the level of conflict that characterises it. In the context of polarisation, this phenomenon is defined as "perceived polarisation".[10]

When media narratives strongly emphasise polarisation and growing social divides – as has frequently occurred in recent years across many countries and very different political contexts – citizens may come to perceive the political environment as inevitably and irreversibly fractured. Even in situations where objective ideological or issue-based divisions are not particularly pronounced, narratives of conflict can themselves become self-fulfilling prophecies. As highlighted at the outset of this chapter, the transnational circulation of polarisation-related frames can lead to exaggerated perceptions of

9 Romer, D., Jamieson, P., Bleakley, A., Jamieson, K. H. (2014), *Cultivation theory: Its history, current status, and future directions*, in R.S. Fortner, P.M. Fackler (Eds.), *International Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory*, vol. 11, Wiley Blackwell, pp. 115-136.

10 Yang, J., Rojas, H., Wojcieszak, M., Aalberg, T., Coen, S., Curran, J., Hayashi, K., Iyengar, S., Jones, P.K., Mazzoleni, G., Papathanassopoulos, S., Rhee, J.W., Rowe, D., Soroka, S., Tiffen, R. (2016), *Why are "others" so polarized? Perceived political polarization and media use in 10 countries*, in "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", *21*(5), pp. 349-367.

conflict, regardless of the actual structure or functioning of a given political system.

Consequently, individuals may begin to ask themselves, "Why is everyone else so polarized?".[11] This perception can significantly erode interpersonal trust and increase reluctance to engage in political dialogue or to build relationships across ideological lines.[12] In this way, perceived polarisation – mediated and amplified by the media – can itself become a driver of social fragmentation, even in contexts where actual polarisation is in fact limited or asymmetric.

The popularisation of polarisation as a dominant narrative is undoubtedly shaped and sustained by media dynamics. Media systems do not merely transmit information; their structural logics often privilege dramatisation, emotional appeal, and conflict-oriented storytelling.[13] Political conflict, especially when framed in terms of irreconcilable opposition, is highly "newsworthy". This logic operates across media systems, albeit with varying degrees of intensity depending on the nature of the media market, journalistic norms, and the level of political parallelism within each system.

Therefore, the structure of the media system plays a crucial role – not only in reflecting political polarisation, but in constructing and amplifying it. The ways in which the political world is staged through media narratives can contribute to shaping precisely those conditions that make polarisation appear inevitable and irreversible. Countries characterised by a high degree of alignment between media and polit-

11 Yang, J., Rojas, H., Wojcieszak, M., Aalberg, T., Coen, S., Curran, J., Hayashi, K., Iyengar, S., Jones, P.K., Mazzoleni, G., Papathanassopoulos, S., Rhee, J.W., Rowe, D., Soroka, S., Tiffen, R. (2016), *Why are "others" so polarized? Perceived political polarization and media use in 10 countries*, in "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", *21*(5), pp. 349-367.

12 Lee, A. H. Y. (2022), *Social trust in polarized times: How perceptions of political polarization affect Americans' trust in each other*, in "Political behavior", *44*(3), pp. 1533-1554, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-022-09787-1.

13 Strömbäck, J. (2008), *Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics*, in "The international journal of press/politics", *13*(3), pp. 228-246, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1177%2F1940161208319097&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

ical actors – what Hallin and Mancini[14] define as "polarized pluralism" – tend to display more visible forms of media-induced polarisation. However, even in less overtly partisan systems, digital transformations have enabled new mechanisms of polarisation by increasing both the supply of and the demand for ideologically filtered content.[15] According to some scholars, the rise of digital platforms has accelerated these trends by fostering so-called "echo chambers" and facilitating selective exposure.[16] Others suggest, however, that digital media may also encourage incidental encounters with divergent viewpoints, potentially mitigating ideological segregation.[17]

These representations can contribute to the public perception of a deeply divided political landscape, shaping how citizens interpret political events and actors.[18] From this perspective, the media function as active agents in processes of polarisation, affecting both political elites and citizens. Politicians may adopt more extreme positions to gain visibility within a media system that rewards confrontation. At the same time, citizens may develop distorted perceptions of political distance and intergroup hostility as a result of media framing choices.

In Italy, for example, an empirical study conducted prior to the 2022 general election found that voters on both sides of the political spectrum held mixed views on several issues – that is, their positions were in some cases closer to those of left-wing parties and in others closer to those of right-wing parties – suggesting that ideological polarisation between voters from opposing camps was less pronounced than

14 Hallin, D. C., Mancini, P. (2004), *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*, Cambridge University Press.

15 Iyengar, S., Hahn, K. S. (2009), *Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use*, in "Journal of communication", *59*(1), pp. 19-39, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x.

16 Sunstein, C. R. (2018), *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*, Princeton University Press.

17 Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., Bonneau, R. (2015), *Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber?*, in "Psychological science", *26*(10), pp. 1531-1542.

18 Romer, D., & Jamieson, P. (2014), *Violence in popular US prime time TV dramas and the cultivation of fear: A time series analysis*, in "Media and Communication", *2*(2), pp. 31-41, https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/8.

it might appear. The authors therefore concluded that polarisation in Italy, rather than being primarily a citizen-driven phenomenon, is at least partly "induced" by the strategies and rhetoric of political leaders and by their amplification through the media.[19] Mancini[20] conceptualised this phenomenon as "dramatized polarization", referring to a situation in which political differences are exaggerated for strategic purposes, with the media playing a key role in fuelling the spectacle.

3. The Other Divide: Polarised Minorities in the Hybrid Media System

A recent study that can help clarify which forms of citizen polarisation are truly harmful to democracy, and the role that the media play in these dynamics, is provided by Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan.[21]

Working within the framework of political science, Krupnikov and Ryan move beyond the traditional definitions of polarisation offered by their discipline, focus their attention on minorities of citizens who are far from politically apathetic, and critically examine the role that journalism and social media play in the construction of these dynamics.

Their analysis focuses on US society. Through the analysis of several available data sources, they show the existence of a deep divide among US citizens that is not linked to the parties they vote for or to the decision to vote. "The other divide" – as Krupnikov and Ryan label it – reveals that US citizens are deeply divided with respect to their level of political engagement. On the one hand, there is a majority com-

19 De Sio, L., Boldrini, B., & Trastulli, F. (2022), *Domande degli elettori e offerta dei partiti: declino dei temi economici (tranne M5S) e "polarizzazione indotta"*, CISE Report (Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali), available at https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2022/09/08/domande-degli-elettori-e-offerta-dei-partiti-declino-dei-temi-economici-tranne-m5s-e-polarizzazione-indotta/.

20 Mancini, P. (2013), *The Italian public sphere: a case of dramatized polarization*, in "Journal of Modern Italian Studies", *18*(3), pp. 335-347, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1080%2F1354571X.2013.780348&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

21 Krupnikov, Y., Ryan, J. B. (2022), *The Other Divide. Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics*, Cambridge University Press.

posed of "inattentive" citizens (who almost never follow politics, are not interested in discussing it, and know little about it) and "attentive" citizens (who are familiar with the main political actors, occasionally check what is happening in politics, sometimes talk about it, vote, but tend to hold negative views of both parties). On the other hand, there is a minority of "deeply involved" citizens who constantly follow politics, talk about it frequently, and are knowledgeable even about the smallest details of political events. It is within this minority of interested and active citizens that – according to Krupnikov and Ryan – the most problematic forms of polarisation emerge. US citizens who are "deeply involved" in politics are in fact hyper-partisan, characterised by high levels of affective polarisation, harbour genuine contempt for supporters of the opposing party, display more pronounced ideological extremism, and have a greater propensity to discuss politics with others and to express their positions on social media.

Although the positions expressed by the "deeply involved" on social media are representative of only a minority, they are amplified by the news media – Krupnikov and Ryan observe, drawing on the analysis of several existing studies on political journalism. As a consequence, they are perceived as the voices of the majority of Americans. The United States thus appear more divided than they actually are, because journalists contribute to fuelling this perception by using stories found on social media – stories they consider interesting for their audiences because they feature ordinary people, angry individuals who embody the political divisions of the elites. It matters little whether these ordinary people, filled with hatred towards their political opponents and holding extreme ideologies, represent only a minority: on social media, journalists mainly encounter their stories and recount them as typical of US society.

We can therefore argue that "the other divide" – conceptualised following the proposal advanced by Krupnikov and Ryan – represents an emerging manifestation of asymmetric political polarisation, which becomes a threat to democracy insofar as minority positions – affectively polarised and ideologically extreme – end up being represented

and perceived as dominant. This occurs as a result of the "hybrid media system" and of "dysfunctional hybridity".[22]

According to Chadwick, the hybrid media system (that is, the systemic interdependence between older and newer media logics in the processes through which political reality is built) has, in recent years, produced democratically dysfunctional outcomes. Dysfunctional hybridity is emerging through a range of phenomena, including the growing inclusion in journalistic narratives of stories characterised by high levels of political hate and ideological extremism. These stories are highly popular on social media because they are amplified by active citizens who – within the hybrid media system – have increasing power to influence news-making processes. The hybrid media logic, fuelled by journalists' obsession with social media metrics, had already emerged as democratically dysfunctional during Trump's first US presidential campaign.[23] Trump's approach, in fact, did not consist in bypassing traditional media, but rather in publishing incendiary content on social media capable of generating high levels of sharing, in order to influence traditional media and to become news.

The dysfunctional hybridity that characterises the contemporary media system therefore poses an important challenge for research on political polarisation. The interdependence between "older" media actors (such as journalists) and "newer" ones (such as politically active and communicatively empowered citizens) can indeed lead to the amplification – even in democratic contexts – of marginal positions that threaten the norms and values of liberal democracy.[24] It is therefore necessary to understand whether and how, also in sociopolitical contexts different from that of the United States and characterised by different journalistic cultures, hybrid media systems reinforce democrat-

22 Chadwick, A. (2017), *The Hybrid Media Systems: Politics and Power*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press.

23 *Ibidem.*

24 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., Iannelli, L. (2025), *Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere*, in "Comunicazione politica, Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione Italiana di Comunicazione Politica", *1*, pp. 3-21, https://ora.uniurb.it/handle/11576/2754911.

ically dysfunctional viewpoints, such as those held by citizens who are "deeply involved" in politics, ideologically extreme, and affectively polarised.

4. The Destructive Polarisation of the Public Sphere

Another recent analytical effort that helps to clearly identify the democratic risks associated with dynamics of political polarisation, as well as the active role of the media in shaping these dynamics, comes from a group of "Internet scholars" at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia, one of the leading international centres for the critical study of digital media. Coordinated by Axel Bruns, these scholars investigate "digital publics", namely social media users who actively participate in the creation and circulation of news, but also in the dissemination of problematic content such as extremist positions or false information.

Bruns and colleagues[25] have proposed a conceptual framework that describes the symptoms of contemporary communicative practices through which a form of polarisation may emerge that can undermine the functioning of the public sphere and, consequently, democracy. What these scholars at the QUT refer to as "destructive polarisation of the public sphere in digital communication contexts" may arise in the presence of five symptoms.

First, the breakdown of communication, which consists in the avoidance of any contact with opposing opinions and divergent viewpoints. This may occur through exposure to information environments characterised by high levels of political similarity (both online and offline); through the activation of social distance (professional, friendly, or romantic) from individuals holding political views different from one's own; through the absence of meaningful interactions on social media

25 Esau, K., Choucair, T., Vilkins, S., Svegaard, S.F.K., Bruns, A., O'Connor-Farfan, K.S., & Lubicz-Zaorski, C. (2024), *Destructive polarization in digital communication con- texts: A critical review and conceptual framework*, in "Information, Communication & Society", pp. 1-22, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127.

and the use of "blocking" practices in response to contacts deemed undesirable because of their political positions; and through the adoption of aggressive and unproductive forms of communication. This symptom, as also acknowledged by Bruns and colleagues, closely resembles the concept of "interactional polarisation" proposed by Yarchi et al.,[26] which is defined by the absence of significant discursive interaction between opposing sides or by dysfunctional forms of communication characterised by personal attacks.

Second, a destructive practice of the public sphere consists in the discrediting and dismissal of information originating from perceived out-group sources or of content that does not align with one's own ideologies, values, and social identities.

A third communicative practice that undermines the quality of public debate is the erasure of complexities, which occurs when politicians and citizens reduce their political identities to a single defining characteristic that distinguishes them from out-groups and enables them to imagine politics and society within a "us versus them" frame.

The penultimate symptom that Axel Bruns and colleagues invite us to examine when searching for forms of destructive polarisation of public debate is the excessive attention journalists devote to extreme voices, driven by algorithmic amplification (to which journalists themselves are drawn). As is evident, this risk factor has also been identified by Krupnikov and Ryan[27] and discussed in the previous section. According to Bruns and colleagues, the disproportionate presence of extreme voices in both legacy and digital media can heighten public perceptions of political divergence and, in turn, weaken the influence of more moderate perspectives, encouraging politicians to adopt increasingly polarising rhetoric and thereby further undermining the democratic public sphere.

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26 Yarchi, M., Baden, C., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2021), *Political polarization on the digital sphere: A cross-platform, over-time analysis of interactional, positional, and affective polarization on social media*, in "Political Communication", *38*(1–2), pp. 98-139, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2020.1785067.

27 Krupnikov, Y., Ryan, J. B. (2022), *The Other Divide. Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics*, Cambridge University Press.

Finally, the strategic use of emotions – an element that is very common in the toolkits of political and electoral campaigns – can also become destructive to democracy when it is employed to exclude those who are perceived as opponents (or even enemies) from meaningful participation in public debate.

Individually or collectively, these communicative practices may undermine and even destroy public debate in democratic societies (or, as Axel Bruns and colleagues acknowledge, may in the long term become constructive elements, insofar as they are capable of generating strong reactions in defence of democracy).

This conceptual framework poses a series of empirical challenges for contemporary research on political polarisation and the media. In order to identify the different symptoms of the destructive polarisation of the public sphere, it is in fact necessary to adopt a mix of techniques (computational methods, social network analysis techniques, content analysis, qualitative and quantitative interviews) and a multi-platform approach (which pays attention to the different logics of the various communication spaces available). Only through such methodological complexity is it possible to assess the presence or absence of interaction on social media, the information sources that are shared or not shared, the language used by the most partisan groups to define their own groups and opposing ones, and the over-representation of extreme voices in journalistic articles and other online information spaces.

5. Political Polarisation and Problematic Information: A Destructive Synergy for Democracy

To understand when citizens' political polarisation becomes threatening to the functioning of democracy, it is also useful to consider scholarly studies that have investigated the relationships between the different possible manifestations of mass polarisation and problematic information.

Problematic information – like polarisation – is not a new phenomenon in the dynamics of political communication, but in recent years it has attracted significant attention from scholars (and commentators). Social media have in fact increased the risk for citizens of encountering and sharing (even without any intention to deceive) various forms of "fake news",[28] as a result of the overabundance of sources available online (including non-journalistic ones, which generate an information overload that hinders verification), the centrality of peer-based gatekeeping (where trust replaces verification), and the diffusion of practices such as clickbaiting and computational propaganda (used to attract the attention of journalists and citizens to specific content).[29]

Problematic information – like polarisation – can represent a serious threat to the democratic public sphere, insofar as it encourages racism, the use of violence, and social exclusion. It therefore becomes important to understand whether and how these two phenomena are connected, producing a potentially destructive combination for democracy.

Moving in this direction is a recent systematic review of the available scientific studies on the relationship between political polarisation and problematic information.[30] This literature review focused on studies published from 2016, the year of two campaigns characterised by a high circulation of "fake news": the first US Presidential election won

28 Jack, C. (2017), *Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information*, in "Data & Society", *3*, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf; Giglietto, F., Iannelli, L., Valeriani, A., Rossi, L. (2019), *"Fake news" is the invention of a liar: How false information circulates within the hybrid news system*, in "Current Sociology", *67*(4), pp. 625-642, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119837536.

29 Anspach, N. M. (2017), *The New Personal Influence: How Our Facebook Friends Influence the News We Read*, in "Political Communication", *34*(4), pp. 590-606, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2017.1316329; Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a village to manipulate the media: coordinated link sharing behavior during 2018 and 2019 Italian elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1739732; Woolley, S. (2018), *Manufacturing Consensus. Understanding Propaganda in the Era of Automation and Anonymity*, Yale University Press.

30 Marino, G., Iannelli, L. (2023), *Seven years of studying the associations between political polarization and problematic information: a literature review*, in "Frontiers of Sociology", *8*, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sociology/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1174161/full.

by Donald Trump and the referendum in the United Kingdom that led to Brexit. The review identified two noteworthy findings. The first is that the majority of the available scientific studies contained ambiguous definitions of the two phenomena under investigation and focused exclusively on the United States context. The second finding is that, in most cases, these studies identified positive associations between political polarisation and problematic information. More specifically, the mechanism emerging from many studies is the following: polarised political identities (radical ideologies, party-aligned positions, or hostile sentiments towards those who hold different political views) predispose individuals to believe news that aligns with their own ideas, even when it is not true, and also increase the likelihood that they will share it (often in good faith, precisely because they believe it to be true). Moreover, in the few studies that considered polarisation as the dependent variable, two additional mechanisms emerge. On the one hand, exposure to fake news that contradicts one's consolidated political beliefs appears to increase the polarisation of attitudes towards controversial issues, following a cognitive mechanism known as the "boomerang effect". On the other hand, the consumption of fake news is associated with low levels of trust in traditional institutions, political parties and journalism, and encourages voting for extremist parties, through which distrust and contempt for institutions are expressed.

Another contribution that highlights the democratically dysfunctional interplay between political polarisation and problematic information comes from Lance Bennett. In a keynote address delivered at an international conference on citizenship in the digital public sphere – building on his earlier reflections[31] – Bennett[32] argued that what concerns many scholars today is the growth – on the right – of a

31 Bennett, W.L., Kneuer, M. (2023), *Communication and democratic erosion: The rise of illiberal public spheres*, in "European Journal of Communication", *39*(2), pp. 177-196, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02673231231217378.

32 Bennett, L. (2024), *Communication, Citizenship and "Culture Wars" in Divided Democracies*, Keynote Lecture, Mediaflow International Conference "Citizenship in the Digital Media Sphere", University of Valencia, 18-20 September.

form of extremism that constitutes an attack on liberal democracy. This extremism is grounded in exclusionary ideologies (such as white nativism), rejects pluralism of ideas, tolerates the use of violence, and calls into question the outcomes of democratic elections. According to Bennett,[33] this anti-democratic extremism adopts a communicative style destructive of the democratic public sphere – marked by disinformation, conspiracy theories and alternative facts – that resonates with far-right audiences. One of the examples cited by Bennett during the conference concerns a piece of fake news that originated in a small Facebook group, was reposted by right-wing activists, amplified by influencers and Republican politicians, and ultimately communicated by Donald Trump during one of the most widely watched televised events in the United States, the 2024 Presidential debate. On that occasion, Trump claimed that in Springfield, Ohio, immigrants were eating the pets of local residents. Millions of US citizens (including those on the left), Bennett explains, reacted by sharing memes depicting armed kittens wearing "MAGA" caps; yet this ended up strengthening Trump's campaign, to the extent that the vice-presidential candidate, Vance, urged supporters to keep the memes circulating, until schools and public offices in Springfield were eventually closed due to bomb threats and rising tensions within the community. This provides an instructive example of how an unfounded story can travel across the complex contemporary media system and ultimately reinforce values such as racism and violence, which underpin anti-democratic extremism.

The threats to democratic values arising from the convergence of algorithmically amplified fake news and specific dynamics of political polarisation pose significant challenges for social research. In particular, they call for the development of critical analyses of the gatekeeping power increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of social media platforms, especially in light of recent changes in the

33 Bennett, L. (2024), *Communication, Citizenship and "Culture Wars" in Divided Democracies*, Keynote Lecture, Mediaflow International Conference "Citizenship in the Digital Media Sphere", University of Valencia, 18-20 September.

content moderation strategies of mainstream platforms such as Meta Platforms and X. By abandoning a model of oversight entrusted to independent fact-checkers, these platforms have shifted towards "user-driven" verification architectures. Within the so-called "Community Notes" system, it is the community of users registered as "contributors" that may append contextualising notes to content deemed potentially misleading – provided that a sufficient number of contributors reach agreement about the note in relation to a given post. To what extent are verification systems on social media platforms able to mitigate the risks associated with the uncontrolled spread of problematic news that may reinforce extreme ideological positions, feelings of contempt towards political opponents, and anti-democratic values? What responses are political institutions and journalists in different countries developing to address these transformations in the content moderation policies of US-based platforms, and how effective are these responses in countering the dangerous combination of problematic information and political polarisation?

Conclusions

Understanding political polarisation among citizens today requires a new perspective. A perspective capable of clearly defining the different forms through which this phenomenon may develop over time. A perspective able to observe the various contexts in which polarisation can take shape. A perspective that focuses on those dynamics of mass polarisation that constitute a genuine threat to contemporary democracies. A perspective that places hybrid media systems at the centre of the analysis of democratically dysfunctional forms of polarisation, since the media – both legacy and digital – do not merely reflect polarisation but actively contribute to constructing it. By revisiting several recent studies, this chapter has shown how such a perspective can be implemented, moving beyond the conceptual tools of traditional political science and highlighting the importance of the complex contem-

porary media system in amplifying the risks that political polarisation (including perceived polarisation) poses to democracy.

Guided by this new perspective, social research on political polarisation must today confront a series of strategic challenges. The dysfunctional hybridity of the contemporary media system calls for sustained research efforts aimed at understanding when and in which socio-political contexts "older" and "newer" media actors contribute to amplifying those polarised voices that constitute a numerically limited but democratically dysfunctional minority. Studying the different symptoms of destructive polarisation of the public sphere requires multi-method and multi-platform empirical approaches. Added to this is the need to critically monitor the role of digital platforms – with their new forms of "user-driven" evaluation of content accuracy – in limiting the risks associated with the spread of problematic information that may reinforce forms of polarisation posing a threat to liberal democracy.

Media Manipulation and Digital Influence: Challenges, Technologies, and Responses

Fabio Giglietto, Nicola Righetti, and Timothy Graham

Introduction

While social media has lowered barriers to communication, it has also created significant challenges related to misinformation, disinformation and manipulation. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has made it much easier and faster to produce misleading content online, necessitating scientific solutions and regulatory interventions. More broadly, the digital revolution has transformed how information is created, distributed, and consumed. Social media platforms have made it easier for individuals, political groups, and organisations to reach vast audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The broadened participation enabled by digital communication has had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it has offered new possibilities for grassroots activism,[1] giving a voice to mar-

1 Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013), *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*, Cambridge University Press.

ginalised communities[2] and allowing for the rapid mobilisation of social movements.[3] On the other hand, it has also opened the door to false information – whether produced and spread intentionally (disinformation) or unintentionally (misinformation) – as well as to influence operations designed to mislead, deceive, or manipulate public perception.[4]

The sheer scale of social media usage and rapid uptake by elite actors such as politicians, celebrities, and news media organisations has made it a central battleground for shaping public opinion. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube facilitate instant communication, allowing information to spread rapidly. These platforms have become digital infrastructures that are now entrenched as standardised systems for political communication globally.[5] While the proliferation of this communication infrastructure has fostered innovation and connectivity, it has also increased the vulnerability of societies to organised efforts aimed at distorting reality.[6] False narratives, propaganda (i.e., biased or misleading information used to promote a particular agenda), and manipulated content can quickly go viral, influencing millions before fact-checkers or authorities intervene.[7] The proliferation of deepfakes – realistic but fake videos or audio created using artificial intelligence – along with AI-generated text (content written by algorithms that mimic human language), further complicates the issue.

2 Freelon, D., McIlwain, C. D., & Clark, M. (2016), *Beyond the hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice*, Center for Media & Social Impact, American University.

3 Jenkins, H. (2006), *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*, NYU Press.

4 Lewis, B., & Marwick, A. E. (2017), *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, in "Data & Society", Data & Society Research Institute, https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.

5 Graham, T. (2025), *How propaganda exploits the infrastructure of truth: A case study of #IStandWithPutin*, in "Critical Studies in Media Communication", pp. 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2025.2473002.

6 McIntyre, L. (2018), *Post-truth*, MIT Press.

7 Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018), *The spread of true and false news online*, in "Science", *359*(6380), pp. 1146-1151.

One notable example of these challenges is "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior" (CIB), where actors deliberately use fake accounts or misleading tactics to manipulate public discourse.[8] This term, first introduced by Meta (formerly Facebook) in 2018,[9] describes efforts by networks of accounts controlled by a central entity to mislead users about who they are and what they want to achieve. They are often aimed at creating the illusion of widespread consensus to distort public perception by making specific ideas appear more popular or credible than they are.[10] Along with elements of traditional disinformation campaigns, which focus primarily on spreading falsehoods, CIB exploits the trust mechanisms of social media platforms to fabricate engagement and manipulate trends.[11]

CIB tactics are observed in various contexts, including election interference, disinformation campaigns, commercial fraud, and state-sponsored propaganda. Political operatives employ CIB to amplify their messages, discredit opponents, drown out dissenting voices, or manipulate voter sentiment.[12] Foreign governments leverage it to destabilise rival nations, fueling division and eroding trust in democratic institutions.[13] Corporations use similar techniques to promote products, suppress negative reviews, or create the illusion of consumer demand.[14]

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8 Chan, J. (2024), *Online astroturfing: A problem beyond disinformation*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(3), pp. 507-528, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221108467.

9 Meta (2018), *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*, Meta, https://about.fb.com/news/tag/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/.

10 Chan, J. (2024), *Online astroturfing: A problem beyond disinformation*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(3), pp. 507-528, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221108467.

11 Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a Village to Manipulate the Media: Coordinated Link Sharing Behavior During 2018 and 2019 Italian Elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891.

12 Keller, F. B., Schoch, D., Stier, S., & Yang, J. (2020), *Political astroturfing on twitter: How to coordinate a disinformation campaign*, in "Political Communication", *37*(2), pp. 256-280; Kulichkina, A., Righetti, N., & Waldherr, A. (2024), *Protest and Repression on Social Media: Pro-Navalny and Pro-Government Mobilization Dynamics and Coordination Patterns on Russian Twitter*, in "New Media & Society".

13 Lukito, J. (2020), *Coordinating a multi-platform disinformation campaign: Internet Research Agency Activity on three US Social Media Platforms, 2015 to 2017*, in "Political Communication", *37*(2), pp. 238-255.

14 Terenzi, M. (2023), *Exploring the Dark Side of Cryptocurrencies on Facebook and Telegram: Uncovering Media Manipulation and "Get-Rich-Quick" Deceptive Schemes*,

While coordinating activities and communication is normatively an acceptable tactic commonly used by activists and advocacy groups to advance their causes,[15] it becomes socially problematic when implemented with deceptive aims and methods – such as using misleading or fake accounts and spreading disinformation to promote a cause.

The increasing sophistication of these tactics, combined with the rise of AI and emerging digital formats such as short-form videos, makes detecting and mitigating digital manipulation a growing challenge.[16] AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, and Sora can generate compelling fake content at scale, making distinguishing between genuine grassroots activity and artificially orchestrated influence campaigns difficult. For instance, a right-wing activist in the United States might create a fabricated image – such as a child crying in a boat while holding a puppy during Hurricane Helene – with the intent of emotionally swaying public opinion and criticising Democrats for allegedly undermining the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the agency responsible for coordinating disaster response in the United States, by withholding funding. Moreover, the algorithmic nature of social media platforms means that content that garners engagement – regardless of its authenticity – is prioritised, further amplifying the impact of manipulative efforts and diminishing social media's democratising potential.

Another crucial factor contributing to the prevalence of CIB is the lack of transparency in platform governance. Social media companies operate within a complex ecosystem driven by business incentives, regulatory pressures, and user engagement metrics. While they claim

Selected Papers of #AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers.

15 Kulichkina, A., Balluff, P., Righetti, N., & Waldherr, A. (2024), *Burning Barriers: Coordinated Twitter Activity during China's COVID-19 Protests*, ECPR General Conference; Righetti, N. (2025), *The Multiple Nuances of Online Firestorms: The Case of a Pro-Vietnam Attack on the Facebook Digital Embassy of China in Italy Amidst the Pandemic*, in "Italian Sociological Review", *15*(1).

16 Vykopal, I., Pikuliak, M., Srba, I., Moro, R., Macko, D., & Bielikova, M. (2023), *Disinformation capabilities of large language models*, arXiv Preprint, https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2023arXiv231108838V/abstract.

to combat disinformation and manipulation, their enforcement of policies is often opaque, inconsistent, or influenced by external interests. Researchers and watchdog organizations frequently struggle to access the data necessary for independent analysis, limiting the ability to hold platforms accountable. Platforms have increasingly shut down their data access features – known as Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) – leading to an inability for researchers and the public to track and evaluate the scale and scope of CIB.[17]

In response to these challenges, this paper aims to provide an overview of the evolution of media manipulation, with a particular focus on Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB). It will discuss the role of AI in facilitating and countering influence campaigns and the importance of regulatory frameworks and transparency initiatives. We explore how media manipulation has evolved, adapting to new technological landscapes and platform policies. We examine the methodologies used to detect CIB, highlighting their strengths and limitations. We also assess the dual role of AI – both as a tool for deception and as a means for detection – considering the ethical and practical implications of AI-driven moderation. Finally, we discuss the need for robust regulatory mechanisms and cross-sector collaboration to mitigate the risks associated with digital manipulation.

Examining these dynamics highlights the urgent need for interdisciplinary cooperation among researchers, policymakers, and technology companies. The challenge of digital manipulation is not one that any single entity can solve; it requires a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders, each playing a role in ensuring the integrity of information ecosystems. The goal is to develop sustainable strategies that protect free expression while preventing bad-faith actors from exploiting digital platforms for manipulation.

As we delve into these topics, we must also recognise that digital manipulation is an evolving threat. Tactics that are effective today may

17 Bruns, A. (2019), *After the "APIcalypse": Social media platforms and their fight against critical scholarly research*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *22*(11), pp. 1544-1566.

become obsolete tomorrow as platforms adapt and adversaries innovate. The continuous evolution of technology necessitates a proactive approach to understanding, detecting, and mitigating CIB and related phenomena. It is not enough to react to manipulative campaigns after they occur; researchers, regulators, and platforms must anticipate emerging threats and develop pre-emptive strategies to safeguard online discourse.

In the following sections, we will explore the historical development of media manipulation, analyse current detection methodologies, assess the impact of AI, and discuss the broader ethical and regulatory landscape. Through this analysis, we seek to contribute to the ongoing discourse on digital trust and offer insights into how societies can navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing information environment.

1. The Evolution of Digital Manipulation

Media manipulation is not new; it has existed in various forms for centuries. From state-controlled newspapers to government-sponsored propaganda during wartime, controlling information has long been a key strategy for influencing public opinion and consolidating power. However, the digital age has significantly altered the landscape, democratising access to media production and distribution while enabling new, more sophisticated forms of manipulation that are harder to detect and capable of reaching global audiences in real time.[18]

Historically, media control was primarily exerted by governments, large corporations, and elite institutions that owned newspapers, television networks, and radio stations. The ability to shape public discourse required substantial financial and logistical resources. Information flow was largely one-directional: state actors, political leaders, and media conglomerates dictated the narratives disseminated to the public. Mechanisms of propaganda, censorship, and biased reporting

18 Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020), *Disinformation as political communication*, in "Political communication", *37*(2), pp. 145-156.

allowed those in power to manage the perceptions of mass audiences.[19]

However, the rise of the internet and social media has radically transformed this model. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok have enabled a decentralised form of communication where virtually anyone with an internet connection can become a content creator and broadcaster.[20] This democratisation of media has empowered independent journalism, facilitated activism, and allowed marginalised voices to challenge dominant narratives. Yet, it has also given rise to new vulnerabilities that manipulators – ranging from state actors to politically and financially motivated groups – exploit for political, economic, and ideological gains.[21]

1.1 From Traditional Propaganda to Digital Disinformation

Propaganda, as historically defined, involves strategically disseminating true, exaggerated, or outright false information to shape public opinion and behaviours. Governments have long used propaganda to rally citizens during wars, justify controversial policies, and control dissent. While traditional propaganda was often spread through newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television programs, digital platforms have introduced more decentralised, targeted, and interactive methods of influence.[22] A key shift has been the advent of "participatory propaganda",[23] whereby the targets of propaganda messaging are enrolled

19 Posetti, J., & Matthews, A. (2018), *A short guide to the history of "fake news" and disinformation*, in "International Center for Journalists", *7*.

20 Bruns, A. (2009), *From prosumer to produser: Understanding user-led content creation*, in "Transforming Audiences 2009".

21 Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. (2017), *Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation*, Computational Propaganda Research Project.

22 Benkler, Y. (2018), *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford University Press; Farkas, J., & Neumayer, C. (2020), *Disguised propaganda from digital to social media*, Second International Handbook of Internet Research, pp. 707-723.

23 Wanless, A., & Berk, M. (2020), *Participatory propaganda: The engagement of audiences in the spread of persuasive communications*, in N. J. Cull, D. Culbert, & D. Welch (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Propaganda and Persuasion*, Routledge, pp. 144-157.

not only as an audience but also as a contributor and instrument of false and misleading narratives. Consequently, in the digital era propagandists infiltrate and target organic communities such as political activist networks, online fandom cultures, and cryptocurrency enthusiast networks to co-opt and cultivate them to legitimise, create, and amplify manipulated media and preferred narratives – whether such narratives are true or misleading. This blurs the line between what is grassroots and authentic versus what is fabricated and inauthentic, thereby complicating efforts to track and counteract it.

Hence, one of the most significant shifts in media manipulation is the move from centralised propaganda to coordinated digital disinformation campaigns. Unlike traditional propaganda, which often emanates from an identifiable source (such as a government agency or political party), modern disinformation campaigns operate through dispersed, networked structures that disguise their origins. Instead of a single government-controlled news outlet broadcasting a state-sanctioned message, today's manipulation tactics involve armies of fake accounts, automated bots, and paid influencers working in concert to manufacture consensus and amplify specific narratives.[24]

For instance, during the 2016 US presidential election, Russian operatives were found to have created thousands of fake social media accounts posing as American citizens, spreading divisive content designed to exacerbate social tensions.[25] These campaigns were about spreading false information and eroding trust in institutions, fostering polarisation, and amplifying existing societal grievances. These networked propaganda campaigns are also domestic in nature. As

24 Zannettou, S., Caulfield, T., De Cristofaro, E., Sirivianos, M., Stringhini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2019), *Disinformation warfare: Understanding state-sponsored trolls on Twitter and their influence on the web*, https://arxiv.org/abs/1801.09288.

25 Lukito, J. (2020), *Coordinating a multi-platform disinformation campaign: Internet Research Agency Activity on three US Social Media Platforms, 2015 to 2017*, in "Political Communication", *37*(2), pp. 238-255; Zhang, Y., Lukito, J., Su, M. H., Suk, J., Xia, Y., Kim, S. J., & others (2021), *Assembling the Networks and Audiences of Disinformation: How Successful Russian IRA Twitter Accounts Built Their Followings, 2015-2017*, in "Journal of Communication".

Starbird et al.[26] argue, the 2020 US presidential election highlighted a number of "participatory disinformation" campaigns. These campaigns involve both political elites and civil society actors improvising and collaborating to stoke distrust and polarisation and to co-opt and manage audience attention.

A critical factor distinguishing modern media manipulation from past forms of propaganda is the role of social media algorithms. Unlike traditional news media, where editorial oversight played a role in determining which stories received prominence, social media platforms rely on algorithmic sorting to prioritise content.[27] These algorithms are designed to maximise user engagement in the attention economy[28] – favouring content that generates clicks, shares, and comments – regardless of its accuracy or intent.

Manipulators exploit these algorithmic mechanisms to amplify certain messages artificially. By coordinating the actions of fake accounts and social bots, they can make a topic appear more popular than it is, tricking both the platform's ranking system and real users into engaging with and further spreading the content.[29] This may be particularly effective during breaking news events, elections, or crises, where emotions run high and people are likelier to share sensationalist or misleading information.

The shift from editorially curated content to engagement-driven content distribution has created an environment where viral misin-

26 Starbird, K., DiResta, R., & DeButts, M. (2023), *Influence and Improvisation: Participatory Disinformation during the 2020 US Election*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943.

27 Srba, I., Moro, R., Tomlein, M., Pecher, B., Simko, J., Stefancova, E., Kompan, M., Hrckova, A., Podrouzek, J., Gavornik, A., & others. (2023), *Auditing YouTube's recommendation algorithm for misinformation filter bubbles*, in "ACM Transactions on Recommender Systems", *1*(1), pp. 1-33.

28 Graham, T. (2025), *How propaganda exploits the infrastructure of truth: A case study of #IStandWithPutin*, in "Critical Studies in Media Communication", pp. 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2025.2473002.

29 Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a Village to Manipulate the Media: Coordinated Link Sharing Behavior During 2018 and 2019 Italian Elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891.

formation can spread faster than factual corrections.[30] Research has shown that false news stories travel significantly farther and faster than accurate stories because they are often designed to provoke strong emotional reactions.[31]

1.2 The Impact of Emerging AI Technologies on Media Manipulation

The evolution of media manipulation is deeply intertwined with technological advancements. While social media and algorithm-driven content distribution have created fertile ground for manipulation, newer technologies – particularly Generative AI – are accelerating the sophistication and reach of digital influence campaigns.

AI-generated content, including deepfake videos and synthetic text, makes it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between factual and fabricated information.[32] Machine learning algorithms can now generate realistic images, audio, and even entire articles virtually indistinguishable from authentic human-created content. This opens the door for more scalable deception – where manipulated content is distributed more widely and more believable than ever before. It has also rescaled the time required to produce propagandistic content, as many generative AI models are freely available (e.g., ChatGPT and Claude) and can be used to quickly generate various kinds of media designed to provoke reactions and persuade audiences. AI has therefore rapidly reconfigured the scope and speed of media manipulation.

Another emerging trend is automated influence campaigns, where AI-driven bots engage in real-time interactions with users to spread

30 Rossi, L., Giglietto, F., & Marino, G. (2023), *Cracking Open the European Newsfeed*, in "Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media", *3*.

31 McLoughlin, K. L., Brady, W. J., Goolsbee, A., Kaiser, B., Klonick, K., & Crockett, M. (2024), *Misinformation exploits outrage to spread online*, in "Science", *386*(6725), pp. 991-996; Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018), *The spread of true and false news online*, in "Science", *359*(6380), pp. 1146-1151.

32 Vykopal, I., Pikuliak, M., Srba, I., Moro, R., Macko, D., & Bielikova, M. (2023), *Disinformation capabilities of large language models*, arXiv Preprint, https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2023arXiv231108838V/abstract.

misinformation or reinforce specific narratives.[33] Unlike traditional social media bots that simply repost prewritten messages, these AI-driven accounts can simulate human-like conversations, respond dynamically to trending topics, and adapt messaging strategies based on user responses.[34] This makes them significantly more challenging to detect and more effective at manipulation.

2. The Example of Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour as a Media Manipulation Strategy

One of today's most sophisticated and prevalent forms of digital manipulation is Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB). CIB refers to the organised efforts of actors who manipulate online conversations through deceptive means, typically by creating networks of fake or compromised accounts that amplify specific narratives.[35]

Meta (formerly Facebook) defines CIB as activities where groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are or what they are doing.[36] Unlike individual cases of misinformation or bias, CIB involves a systematic, deliberate effort to deceive, often with political, economic, or ideological motivations.[37]

Coordinated campaigns often share several common characteristics. One such tactic is using fake engagement networks, where groups of accounts work together to artificially boost the visibility of specific

33 Ferrara, E. (2023), *Social bot detection in the age of ChatGPT: Challenges and opportunities*, in "First Monday"; Grimme, C., Pohl, J., Cresci, S., Lüling, R., & Preuss, M. (2022), *New automation for social bots: From trivial behavior to AI-powered communication*, in "Multidisciplinary International Symposium on Disinformation in Open Online Media", pp. 79-99.

34 Wischnewski, M., Ngo, T., Bernemann, R., Jansen, M., & Krämer, N. (2024), *"I agree with you, bot!" How users (dis) engage with social bots on Twitter*, in "New Media & Society", *26*(3), pp. 1505-1526.

35 Graham, T., Bruns, A., Angus, D., Hurcombe, E., & Hames, S. (2021), *#IStandWithDan versus #DictatorDan: The polarised dynamics of Twitter discussions about Victoria's COVID-19 restrictions*, in "Media International Australia", *179*(1), pp. 127-148, https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20981780.

36 META (2024), *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*.

37 Chan, J. (2024), *Online astroturfing: A problem beyond disinformation*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(3), pp. 507-528, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221108467.

messages through coordinated shares or comments.[38] Another prevalent strategy is astroturfing, in which the actual sponsors of messages or organisations are concealed, making them appear as grassroots movements rather than orchestrated efforts.[39] Troll farms also play a significant role in these campaigns. These are organised groups of individuals, often working for state actors, who are paid to post inflammatory or misleading content.[40] Their goal is to manipulate public discourse by shaping opinions or inciting division. Additionally, bots and automation are frequently employed to amplify messages at scale. By using software programs to generate mass posts, these campaigns create the illusion of widespread support or controversy, further distorting online conversations. CIB is not limited to political influence operations but is also used in commercial contexts. Fraudulent businesses use CIB tactics to fake customer reviews, manipulate stock prices, and artificially inflate the popularity of certain products.[41]

Detecting CIB is an inherently complex task that exemplifies the challenges of countering media manipulation. Countering CIB requires analysing aggregated patterns of online activity rather than simply identifying individual posts or user accounts. Traditional fact-checking methods, which focus on verifying the accuracy of specific claims, are insufficient for addressing CIB because coordinated manipulation campaigns do not necessarily rely on outright falsehoods.[42] Instead,

38 Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a Village to Manipulate the Media: Coordinated Link Sharing Behavior During 2018 and 2019 Italian Elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891.

39 Keller, F. B., Schoch, D., Stier, S., & Yang, J. (2020), *Political astroturfing on twitter: How to coordinate a disinformation campaign*, in "Political Communication", *37*(2), pp. 256-280.

40 Zannettou, S., Caulfield, T., Setzer, W., Sirivianos, M., Stringhini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2019), *Who let the trolls out? Towards understanding state-sponsored trolls*, Proceedings of the 10th Acm Conference on Web Science, pp. 353-362.

41 Terenzi, M. (2023), *Exploring the Dark Side of Cryptocurrencies on Facebook and Telegram: Uncovering Media Manipulation and "Get-Rich-Quick" Deceptive Schemes*, Selected Papers of #AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers.

42 Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a Village to Manipulate the Media: Coordinated Link Sharing Behavior During 2018 and 2019 Italian Elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891.

they often amplify accurate information in misleading ways, fabricate engagement metrics to manipulate social media algorithms, or distort public perception by making certain viewpoints appear more popular than they are. In other cases, fact-checking methods do not work because it is unclear what claims or statements are being made. For example, CIB networks may spread memes or promotional material about cryptocurrency coins, in which case there is often no discernable claim or truth proposition to verify. To complicate these challenges, platforms often do not recognise such networks as CIB and turn a blind eye to the harm they cause.[43]

The difficulty in identifying and mitigating CIB stems from several key factors, including the evolving tactics of malicious actors, the technical limitations of detection methodologies, the lack of standardised criteria for identifying coordination, and the restricted access to critical platform data. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of technological innovation, policy interventions, and cross-disciplinary collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and platform operators.[44] One of the primary challenges in detecting CIB is the adaptability of malicious actors. As detection methods improve, those who engage in manipulative behaviour continuously evolve tactics to evade identification. This dynamic creates an ongoing arms race between researchers developing detection tools and adversaries refining their strategies.

For example, early forms of CIB relied heavily on automated bots – software programs designed to mimic human behaviour and engage with social media content at scale. Once platforms began implementing detection mechanisms that could identify and remove bot networks, manipulators shifted toward human-run troll farms, where individuals are paid to operate fake accounts and engage in deceptive

43 Graham, T., Whelan-Shamy, D. (2023), *In on the grift: How platforms govern authenticity for neo-colonial ends*, AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 2022, https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/13011.

44 Giglietto, F., Graham, T., & Righetti, N. (Forthcoming), *Navigating Coordination and Inauthentic behaviour: Challenges and Innovations in Social Media Detection*, in *Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

activities. Unlike bots, these human operators can engage in nuanced conversations, respond dynamically to real users, and avoid patterns that automated detection systems typically flag.

Additionally, CIB actors often use artificial diversity to avoid detection. Instead of flooding social media with identical messages from multiple accounts (a telltale sign of inauthentic coordination), they may employ content permutation techniques, where the same core message is slightly altered in wording or format across different accounts. This strategy makes it harder to detect coordination using simple text-matching algorithms.

Another evasive tactic involves network obfuscation, where manipulators create seemingly independent clusters of accounts that interact in subtle ways rather than forming a single, easily identifiable coordination network. This method complicates mapping relationships between accounts and detecting the true extent of manipulation efforts.

A fundamental challenge in CIB detection is defining what constitutes "coordinated behavior" in a rigorous and adaptable way to different contexts. While some forms of coordination are deceptive – such as networks of fake accounts operated by a single entity – other cases are more ambiguous.[45] For example, political activists, social movements, and advocacy groups frequently engage in legitimate coordinated action by organising online campaigns, encouraging supporters to amplify specific messages, and using hashtags to spread awareness about issues.[46] Distinguishing between organic and manipulative coordination is challenging, mainly when social media activity follows patterns similar to CIB's.

45 Rogers, R., & Righetti, N. (2024), *Coordinated Inauthentic and Authentic Behaviours Online. A Typology of Attention Hijacking*, AoIR 2024, 25th Annual Conference of The Association of Internet Researchers.

46 Kulichkina, A., Righetti, N., & Waldherr, A. (2024), *Protest and Repression on Social Media: Pro-Navalny and Pro-Government Mobilization Dynamics and Coordination Patterns on Russian Twitter*, in "New Media & Society"; Righetti, N. (2025), *The Multiple Nuances of Online Firestorms: The Case of a Pro-Vietnam Attack on the Facebook Digital Embassy of China in Italy Amidst the Pandemic*, in "Italian Sociological Review", *15*(1).

Researchers and platforms typically rely on key indicators to determine whether coordination is orchestrated.[47] One such indicator is time-based synchronicity, where a cluster of accounts posts identical or highly similar content within a very short time frame. While this pattern can suggest coordinated inauthentic behaviour, it may also arise naturally during real-time activism or breaking news events. However, additional repetitive engagement patterns can signal artificial amplification.[48] While these structural patterns can signal time-specific forms of coordination, many other types, such as revolving around specific narratives, are also possible.[49]

These methods are still limited to specific forms of CIB and are defied by pressing challenges in detecting CIB, such as malicious actors' increasing use of AI-generated content. Generative AI tools, including large language models (LLMs) and text-to-image models, enable the rapid and scalable creation of realistic yet deceptive content. These technologies allow CIB operators to produce high volumes of unique messages that avoid exact duplication and repetition, evading traditional detection methods.

The ability of AI to generate human-like interactions also complicates efforts to distinguish between real users and coordinated networks. AI-powered bots can engage in dynamic conversations, responding to users in real time with contextually appropriate and persuasive messages.[50] Unlike earlier forms of automated influence campaigns, which relied on simple scripted responses, modern AI bots can adapt to changing narratives and generate individualised interactions, making them significantly more challenging to detect.

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47 Righetti, N., & Balluff, P. (Forthcoming), *CooRTweet: A Generalized R Software for Coordinated Network Detection.*

48 Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020), *It takes a Village to Manipulate the Media: Coordinated Link Sharing Behavior During 2018 and 2019 Italian Elections*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *23*(6), pp. 867-891.

49 Smith, D. H., Ehrett, C., & Warren, P. (2025), *Unsupervised detection of coordinated information operations in the wild*, in "EPJ Data Science", *14*(1), pp. 1-24.

50 Ferrara, E. (2023), *Social bot detection in the age of ChatGPT: Challenges and opportunities*, in "First Monday", https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/13185.

Deepfake technology further exacerbates the challenge of detecting AI-generated deception. AI can now produce hyper-realistic videos and audio recordings that impersonate public figures, fabricate events, or simulate authentic grassroots activism.[51] These manipulated media artefacts can undermine trust in legitimate sources, spread false information, and bolster the credibility of CIB campaigns.[52]

AI-powered detection systems have, on the other hand, become an essential part of efforts to combat CIB. Machine learning models and algorithmic detection methods enable researchers and platforms to analyse massive volumes of data in real-time, identifying suspicious behaviours that would be impossible to detect manually.[53] Applications of AI, such as advanced natural language processing (NLP), support textual content analysis on large corpora to detect linguistic patterns used in influence campaigns. These models can identify text that exhibits high degrees of repetition and more subtle forms of semantic similarity or stylistic uniformity – which can be hallmarks of AI-generated or centrally controlled messaging.[54] Advanced NLP tools can also recognise sentiment manipulation strategies, such as the coordinated use of emotionally charged language to provoke outrage or fear.

Computer vision and AI-driven image recognition have also become crucial in identifying manipulated media, including doctored images, memes, and AI-generated deepfakes. Deep learning convolutional neural networks (CNNs)[55] analyse visual content and detect incon-

51 Masood, M., Nawaz, M., Malik, K. M., Javed, A., Irtaza, A., & Malik, H. (2023), *Deepfakes generation and detection: State-of-the-art, open challenges, countermeasures, and way forward*, in "Applied Intelligence", *53*(4), pp. 3974-4026.

52 Botha, J., & Pieterse, H. (2020), *Fake news and deepfakes: A dangerous threat for 21st century information security*, ICCWS 2020 15th International Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security, Academic Conferences and Publishing Limited, p. 57.

53 Wu, J., Guo, J., & Hooi, B. (2024), *Fake News in Sheep's Clothing: Robust Fake News Detection Against LLM-Empowered Style Attacks*, Proceedings of the 30th ACM SIGKDD Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining, pp. 3367-3378.

54 Richard, M., Giordani, L., Brokate, C., & Liénard, J. (2023), *Unmasking information manipulation: A quantitative approach to detecting Copy-pasta, Rewording, and Translation on Social Media*, arXiv Preprint, https://arxiv.org/abs/2312.17338.

55 Heidari, A., Jafari Navimipour, N., Dag, H., & Unal, M. (2024), *Deepfake detection using deep learning methods: A systematic and comprehensive review*, in "Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery", *14*(2), p. 1520.

sistencies indicative of synthetic manipulation. Additionally, AI can support tracking the spread of manipulated images across networks identifying coordinated dissemination strategies.

While AI has significantly improved the ability to detect disinformation, AI-based detection also faces several limitations. Its effectiveness is limited by several factors, including the adaptability of bad actors, the ethical challenges of AI-driven moderation, and the reliance on training data that may not fully capture the diversity of real-world manipulation tactics. Another key issue is the black box problem – many machine-learning models operate in ways that humans do not interpret easily.[56] When an AI system flags an account as engaging in disinformation or CIB, it is often difficult to explain precisely why that decision was made. This lack of transparency complicates efforts to validate detection methods and raises concerns about fairness, especially if innocent users are incorrectly identified as part of a manipulation network.

Another limitation of AI-based detection is its dependence on training data. Machine learning models require large datasets to learn patterns of inauthentic coordination, but reliable, labeled datasets are scarce and expensive to build. Platforms rarely share detailed data about the inauthentic networks they remove, citing privacy concerns and security risks. As a result, researchers often have to rely on limited datasets, which may not fully capture the diversity of real-world CIB and other media manipulation tactics.

Furthermore, AI models are vulnerable to adversarial manipulation. Just as security researchers work to develop AI-based detection methods, CIB actors work to develop techniques that can evade those models. For instance, manipulators can reduce the likelihood of detection by introducing subtle variations in posting behaviour, altering

56 Xu, F., Uszkoreit, H., Du, Y., Fan, W., Zhao, D., & Zhu, J. (2019), *Explainable AI: A brief survey on history, research areas, approaches and challenges*, Natural Language Processing and Chinese Computing: 8th cCF International Conference, NLPCC 2019, Dunhuang, China, October 9-14, 2019, Proceedings, Part II 8, pp. 563-574.

engagement patterns, or using AI-generated text to create more human-like messages.

3. The Importance of Regulatory Frameworks and Transparency Initiatives

Addressing the challenges of media manipulation today requires a multifaceted approach integrating advanced detection methodologies, greater platform transparency, and stronger collaboration among researchers, governments, and civil society organizations. Hybrid detection models that combine AI-driven analysis with human expertise are essential to improve accuracy and interpretability. Also, fostering data-sharing agreements between platforms and independent researchers can facilitate a more comprehensive study of manipulation networks. At the same time, establishing industry-wide standards would create consistency in defining and detecting CIB across platforms.

Public education also plays a crucial role in mitigating digital manipulation. By investing in campaigns that teach users to recognise manipulation tactics and critically assess online information, societies can become more resilient to disinformation.[57] However, media manipulation detection must continually evolve to keep pace with the sophisticated tactics employed by manipulators. An efficient approach must incorporate technology, policy, and education elements to foster a more trustworthy online environment.

A significant challenge in this effort is the lack of access to comprehensive platform data.[58] Social media companies control vast amounts of information about user behaviour, yet much of it remains inaccessible to independent researchers. Although some platforms offer limited access through APIs, these interfaces impose constraints on data retrieval frequency and scope, restricting meaningful analysis. The

57 Moore, R. C., & Hancock, J. T. (2022), *A digital media literacy intervention for older adults improves resilience to fake news*, in "Scientific Reports", *12*(1), p. 6008.

58 Bruns, A. (2019), *After the "APIcalypse": Social media platforms and their fight against critical scholarly research*, in "Information, Communication & Society", *22*(11), pp. 1544-1566.

absence of complete transparency forces researchers to rely on indirect methods, such as scraping public posts or analysing selectively released datasets. This imbalance allows platforms to control the narrative, potentially concealing the true extent of manipulation of their services.

Further complicating detection efforts is the inconsistent enforcement of platform policies. While moderation policies are frequently updated, enforcement varies widely.[59] Some CIB networks, for example, are dismantled swiftly, while others persist for years before any action is taken. This inconsistent approach makes it difficult for researchers to conduct longitudinal studies, as the parameters of platform enforcement are in constant flux.

The evolution of communication formats further complicates media manipulation detection. As AI and emerging media technologies advance, new strategies must be developed to counter increasingly sophisticated manipulation tactics. Multimodal AI detection systems, capable of analysing text, video, audio, and images, are crucial in identifying coordinated narratives across different media. Integrating natural language processing (NLP) with computer vision and speech recognition can enhance detection accuracy in this dynamic landscape.

Moreover, explainable AI is essential for improving transparency in detection methodologies. Many AI-driven systems operate as "black boxes", making it difficult to understand their decision-making processes. Explainable AI techniques can give researchers and content moderators greater insight into flagged content, allowing for refinement and validation of detection methods.[60]

Despite these challenges, AI-based detection tools are continuously being developed and improved to identify synthetic media through advanced approaches, such as forensic analysis and deepfake detec-

59 Graham, T. (2024), *The "inauthenticity" Paradox: How Platforms Profit From And Shape Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour*, in "Platforms & Society", *2*.

60 Xu, F., Uszkoreit, H., Du, Y., Fan, W., Zhao, D., & Zhu, J. (2019), *Explainable AI: A brief survey on history, research areas, approaches and challenges*, Natural Language Processing and Chinese Computing: 8th cCF International Conference, NLPCC 2019, Dunhuang, China, October 9-14, 2019, Proceedings, Part II 8, pp. 563-574.

tion algorithms. In light of the public interest and the considerable costs involved, however, these efforts require economical support by national governments and supranational institutions in collaboration. Examples are the large research and development projects focusing on disinformation analysis and AI-supported verification tools and services Vera.AI and AI4TRUST, involving several universities and research centres across Europe.

Given that CIB campaigns often span multiple platforms, greater cross-platform collaboration is also necessary. Establishing industry-wide data-sharing protocols among technology companies, governments, and researchers would enhance detection capabilities and support a more coordinated response to manipulation efforts.

Ultimately, countering media manipulation requires an adaptive and comprehensive strategy. While human fact-checking remains valuable, it is insufficient, given the scale and speed of modern disinformation campaigns. A more effective approach demands technological innovation, regulatory oversight, and public education. Social media companies must take greater responsibility by refining content moderation policies, increasing transparency in algorithmic decision-making, and facilitating access to independent researchers. Policymakers, in turn, must implement regulations that hold platforms accountable for mitigating CIB and other deceptive practices. Finally, fostering digital literacy is essential in empowering users to navigate the digital landscape critically. As technology continues to evolve, proactive measures will be crucial in safeguarding the integrity of online discourse and ensuring that social media serves as a platform for genuine communication rather than a tool for deception.

Conclusions

The digital revolution, propelled by the ubiquity of social media platforms, has irrevocably altered the dynamics of information creation, dissemination, and consumption. On the one hand, these platforms have democratised communication, enabling grassroots movements

to flourish and marginalised voices to be heard globally. This democratisation has fostered unprecedented connectivity and collaboration, allowing for the rapid mobilisation of social movements and the dissemination of diverse perspectives.

At the same time, this "democratisation" has been heavily shaped by platform design choices, which algorithmically curate content and prioritise quantity of content over quality. In competitive attention economies, it is often the voices of those with the most extreme content or who have the most followers that are heard and can thereby wield influence.[61] This has made platforms fertile ground for manipulation and misinformation. The ease with which false narratives can spread, aided by algorithms prioritising engagement over accuracy, has made societies increasingly vulnerable to coordinated disinformation campaigns. As emerging technologies such as AI-generated content and deepfakes become more sophisticated, the potential for deception grows, posing significant threats to public trust and democratic processes.

To navigate this complex landscape, adopting a multi-faceted approach that involves stakeholders at all levels is essential. Policymakers must work towards creating robust regulatory frameworks that balance the need for free expression with the imperative to protect against misinformation. Regulatory frameworks need to recognise that social media platforms, in their current condition, are fundamentally designed to attract and sustain user engagement, rather than protect and sustain liberal democracies and social trust. Tech companies, for their part, should invest in developing and implementing advanced tools for detecting and mitigating manipulated content while also promoting digital literacy among users. It is imperative that these companies implement measures to promote transparency and accountability for their algorithmic systems and the kind of content that circulates in these online spaces.

61 Graham, T., & Andrejevic, M. (2024), *A computational analysis of potential algorithmic bias on platform X during the 2024 US election*, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/253211/.

Moreover, education is critical in empowering individuals to evaluate online information critically. By fostering a culture of digital literacy, we can equip citizens with the skills necessary to discern credible sources from manipulative content, thereby reducing the impact of disinformation campaigns.

In conclusion, while the digital age presents immense opportunities for innovation, connectivity, and social change, it also demands a collective commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical use of technology. By working together, we can harness the potential of digital media to foster a more informed, engaged, and resilient society where information serves as a force for progress and enlightenment rather than manipulation and division.

Fringe Platforms an Essay: Alternative Technology, Contesting Public Spheres, and Online Models of Democracy

Tim de Winkel

Today, our public debate is notoriously volatile and complicated. Political scientists blame populism,[1] while economists and the scholars of governance will point to economic and democratic institutions,[2] but all include the emergence of a new media system from their analyses. Changes in information and communication technology have effectively ended the dominance of legacy media. With the introduction of personalised media, the democratisation of media production, and the monopolisation of our public sphere by major tech corporations, we now live in a state of *communicative abundance* as well as fragmen-

1 Rooduijn, M., Van der Brug, W., De Lange, S. L., & Parlevliet, J. (2017), *Persuasive populism? Estimating the effect of populist messages on political cynicism*, in "Politics and Governance", *5*(4), pp. 36-145.

2 Robinson, James A., & Acemoglu, D. (2012), *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty*, Profile Books; van Dijck, J. (2020), *Het Nut van Publieke Ruimte Op Internet*, Departement Rotterdam van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen; Meijer, A., & van Dijck, J., (2025), *Universiteit, maak je los van Big Tech*, Trouw 23 february 2025, retrieved from https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/opinie-universiteit-maak-je-los-van-big-tech~bfab2bd5/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

tation and multiplication.[3] In the reality of modern democracies, the decline of the function of the legacy media and the fourth estate intertwines with the decline of democracy.[4] Far-right parties gain ground all over the western world[5] – and beyond,[6] and the global order that has tilted for so long towards the humanism of the enlightenment, seems to have begun to swing the other way. We live in times of the platformised public sphere.[7]

What I will do in this essay – in four parts – is take you through two concepts, make an appeal for the transformation of our online public sphere, and suggest a route for future research. First I will explain the concept of the "platformised public sphere" and that of "fringe platforms". Fringe platforms are alternative and contentious services that present us with alternative models of, *inter alia*, communication and deliberation a way to look at our online public sphere. They challenge us to imagine how we wish the relation between citizens and governments to be. Fringe platforms are what Laclau would call, "the ontological constitution" of our online public sphere.[8] Through them one can see either the overt version of the public sphere, or its antithesis. I suggest a fringe lens, which looks at platforms in relation to the larger platform ecology, and understands them as socio-technical as well as carriers of democratic values and discourses. In the third section, I will propose for a more public, public sphere. I will argue that we need

3 Bentivegna, S., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2020), *Rethinking public agenda in a time of high-choice media environment*, in "Media and Communication", *8*(4), pp. 6-15.

4 Ceccarini, L. (2021), *The digital citizen (ship): Politics and democracy in the networked society*, Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 160.

5 Mudde, C. (2007), *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press; Snyder, T. (2018), *Fascism is back. Blame the internet*, Washington Post, p. 21; de Jonge, L. (2019), *The populist radical right and the media in the Benelux: Friend or foe?*, in "The International Journal of Press/Politics", *24*(2), pp. 189-209.

6 Finchelstein, F. (2019), *From fascism to populism in history*, University of California Press; de Jonge, L., Georgiadou, V., Halikiopoulou, D., Kaltwasser, C. R., & Tanscheit, T. (2025), *Is the far right a global phenomenon? Comparing Europe and Latin America: A scholarly exchange*, in "Nations and Nationalism", *31*(1), pp. 7-24.

7 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University.

8 Laclau, E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, Verso books, p. 67.

technological pluralism, where our vital web infrastructures are publicly owned, and protected by either national or European governance. On these public infrastructures, a thousand services can bloom. Lastly, I will propose the investigation of power-sharing models as a template for a possible technological pluralist platformised public sphere.

1. A Platformised Public Sphere

Throughout history, the emergence of new media technologies has changed the organisation of the public sphere, and therefore re-articulates it. Habermas' central premise was that the public sphere had undergone a transformation when the media changed from the world of letters and salons to that of mass media.[9] Today, our spaces of information and deliberation – where citizens debate among each other, inform themselves, and communicate their ideas to the decision makers in the societal and governmental institutions – have been platformised. This means that not only are platforms prevalent in the public sphere, but the platform is the dominant organisation of the online public sphere. Similarly to Yochai Benkler's suggestion of the "networked public sphere"[10] and Habermas' own *bourgeois* public sphere, we identify another transformation. This transformation deserves to bring forth its own iteration of the concept, since it altered the democratic and public conditions in the publics sphere as a consequence.[11]

The *platformised* public sphere is characterised by, and expressive of, a process of platformisation.[12] Platformisation is best defined as

9 Habermas, J. (1990), *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Revised edition of the 1962 edition incl. a new preface, Suhrkamp; Habermas, J. (1991), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, MIT Press.

10 Benkler, Y. (2006), *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale University Press.

11 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 28.

12 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 136.

"the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" and the "reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms".[13] Through the processes of platformisation[14] and deplatformisation,[15, 16] Big Tech companies have stretched the borders of their software ecology across the entire middle layers of the internet stack, effectively applying a locked-in logic similar to that of the walled garden model, enclosing infrastructures and sectors alike.[17] Meaning, by accumulating essential services and web infrastructures through a process of competition-cum-coordination[18, 19] the GAFAM tech companies[20] have collectively monopolised services that function as vital points of passage for the connectivity and data flows of the web – such as hosting services and Appstores –, which enables them to act as governing institutions of the online.[21] Meanwhile, their platforms seemingly behave like Nymphaeaceae.[22]

13 Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Van Dijck, J. (2019), *Platformisation*, in "Internet policy review", *8*(4), pp. 1-13, pp. 5-6.

14 *Ibidem.*

15 Deplatformisation is defined as an implied governance strategy by Big Tech companies and its partners and a systemic effort to push back encroaching radical right-wing platforms to the fringes of the ecosystem by denying them the infrastructural services needed to function online. de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 141.

16 van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T. (2021), *Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem*, in "New Media & Society", *25*(12), pp. 3438-3454; van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T. (2024), *Deplatforming and deplatformization as governance strategies*, in *Handbook of Media and Communication Governance*, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 500-513.

17 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 109.

18 The oligopolistic tendency of a few dominant companies to share their sector with its primary competitors, thereby closing it off to all new competitors.

19 Van Dijck, J. (2021), *Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Visualizing Platformization and Its Governance*, in "New Media & Society", *23*(9), pp. 2801-2819, pp. 9-10, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820940293.

20 Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft.

21 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, pp. 107-108.

22 Such as water lilies.

Yes, they provide an infrastructure for users and businesses to build on,[23] but simultaneously drown out all other actors who occupied the same space as they do, while under the surface they grow their presence over all the layers of the internet stack. In this way, platformisation is a form of technological enclosure. Through the dual move of centripetal[24] and centrifugal[25] forces platforms grow their software ecologies.[26] All of this has caused the platformised public sphere to be hierarchal and asymmetrical.

The platformisation of the public sphere has had its consequences on all that it contains. For one, the connectivity of the technology has allowed civil society to widen its borders beyond the nation in the sphere of globality, and consequently the traditional model of a political community, of citizenship, has changed.[27] Additionally, the traditional gatekeepers of the public sphere, journalists and editors, largely lost that function,[28] since their professional ethics, norms, and values can now be bypassed.[29] The latter means a transferal – or redistribution – of governing power over the spaces of information and deliberation from the Fourth Estate to the social media platforms and Big Tech companies that own them, effectively making Big Tech a governing entity. All of this has negatively impacted the public dis-

23 Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Van Dijck, J. (2019), *Platformisation*, in "Internet policy review", *8*(4), pp. 1-13.

24 A centripetal force of a platform is the process in which platforms draw users, services, and dataflows within their own borders. de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 109.

25 A centrifugal force of a platform is the process in which major social media companies expand their data capture capabilities outside the platform boundaries. *Ibidem.*

26 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 45.

27 Ceccarini, L. (2021), *The digital citizen (ship): Politics and democracy in the networked society*, Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 160.

28 DeFleur, M., & DeFleur, M.H. (2016), Cognitive Processing: The Contributions of Psychology to Mass Communication Theory, in *Mass Communication Theories*, Routledge, pp. 148-158.

29 Bracciale, R., & Martella, A. (2017), *Define the populist political communication style: the case of Italian political leaders on Twitter*, in "Information, communication & society", *20*(9), pp. 1310-1329.

course within the public sphere, drifting far from Habermas' ideal of rational critical debate. What these changes also mean, is that a technologically different media ecosystem is more than "just a different medium". It reorganises our public sphere in terms of content, publics, discourse, business models, governance models, ownership, and ultimately democratic outcome. This is as much true for social media, as it was with the invention of the television.

The platformised public sphere is centralised yet intricately pluriform. Despite the oligopoly, the platform ecosystem is a plethora of smaller platforms, counter publics,[30] and alternative media ecosystems,[31] all of which are in a constant struggle to escape governance of the current custodians of the internet.[32] Radical platforms present themselves as alternatives and challengers to the hegemony of Big Tech and/or mainstream platforms. In the case of social media – arguably vital spaces of public deliberation and information, and therefore imperative to any liberal democracy –, such contestation does not pertain to solely differences in service technology. Instead, alternative social media platforms represent alternative models of a public sphere, or even alternative models of democracy. These ideological alternative platform services that contest the norms set and dominance of Big Tech platforms online, are called "fringe platforms".[33]

30 Fraser, N. (1999), *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing "Democracy"*, in Calhoun, C. (Eds.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 109-142.

31 Starbird, K. (2017), *Examining the alternative media ecosystem through the production of alternative narratives of mass shooting events on Twitter*, Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, *11*(1).

32 Gillespie, T. (2018), *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, Yale University Press.

33 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University; de Winkel, T., Gorzeman, L., de Wilde de Ligny, S., ten Heuvel, T., Blekkenhorst, M., Prins, S., & Schäfer, M. T. (2024), *The Gab Project: The Methodological, Epistemological, and Legal Challenges of Studying the Platformized Far-Right*, in "Journal of Right-Wing Studies", *2*(1).

2. Fringe Platforms and Fringe Lenses

Much like today, during the second part of the 2010's many online publics were migrating between platforms. Administrative pressure had been building on mainstream social media (MsSM) platforms urging them to take more responsibility for what happened on their services, ever since 2016. Problematic and toxic audiences were moderated from mainstream spaces, and pushed to more alternative and/or obscure online spaces. Numerous alternative technology platforms were willing to scoop up these deplatformed publics, actors, and discourses.[34] Most of them positioned themselves to be free speech or alt-tech platforms. Services such as 4chan and Gab were cesspools of hate,[35] and some of these radical free speech platforms were implicated in far-right terror attacks.[36] This would eventually lead to the deplatformisation of these services, or the uncoupling from the mainstream

34 Zannettou, S., Bradlyn, B., De Cristofaro, E., Kwak, H., Sirivianos, M., Stringini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2018), *What is gab: A bastion of free speech or an alt-right echo chamber*, Companion Proceedings of the The Web Conference 2018; de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, pp. 33, 36.

35 Dehghan, E., & Nagappa, A. (2022), *Politicization and radicalization of discourses in the alt-tech ecosystem: A case study on Gab Social*, in "Social Media+ Society", *8*(3); Lima, L., Reis, J., Melo, P., Murai, F., Araújo, L., Vikatos, P., & Benevenuto, F. (2018), *Inside the Right-Leaning Echo Chambers: Characterizing Gab, an Unmoderated Social System*, Proceedings of the 2018 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining: Barcelona, https://arxiv.org/abs/1807.03688; Zannettou, S., Bradlyn, B., De Cristofaro, E., Kwak, H., Sirivianos, M., Stringini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2018), *What is gab: A bastion of free speech or an alt-right echo chamber*, Companion Proceedings of the The Web Conference 2018; Mathew, B., Ritam, D., Pawan, G., & Animesh, M. (2018), *Spread of Hate Speech in Online Social Media*, in Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science, pp. 173-182, https://doi.org/10.1145/3292522.3326034; Yuchen, Z., Dredze, M., Broniatowski, D., & Adler, W. (2019), *Elites and Foreign Actors among the Alt-Right: The Gab Social Media Platform*, in "First Monday", *24*(9), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i9.10062.

36 Evans, R. (2019a), *Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre*, Bellingcat; Evans, R. (2019b), *The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror*, Bellingcat; Graham, M. (2019), *The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age*, in "CTC Sentinel", *12*(6), pp. 18-29; Turkewitz, J., & Roose, K. (2018), *Who Is Robert Bowers, the Suspect in the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting?*, in "The New York Times".

web. However, what was particularly alarming about these was that they were "designed to refuge users and content before they are again disseminated towards the multitude of audiences of the mainstream spaces".[37] It is merely an illusion to conceive these platforms as disconnected "dark web" entities, cut off from the mainstream web,[38] these platforms were designed to be an integral part of our online public sphere. What's more, they were an explicit critique of it.

I argue that these platforms are best explained through the terminology of "fringe platforms". Fringe platforms, however, are not demarcated by far-right ideology. Instead, fringe platforms are defined as "alternative platform services that were established as an explicit critique of the ideological premises and practices of mainstream platform services that attempt to cause a shift in the norms of the platform ecology they contest by offering an ideologically different technology".[39] The terminology of the "fringe" characterises services on the far reaches of the web, ideologically, infrastructurally, and in terms of power, that strive with mainstream platforms for a more central position in the online public sphere. So while many of the far-right free speech havens could be typified as fringe platforms, the terminology does not delineate platforms with a certain political affiliation, be it far-right or otherwise. It includes a broad spectrum of underlying ideologies and core issues, such as user privacy, infrastructural ownership, open-source ideals, or moderation practices. What the moniker fringe platforms expresses and demands is its subversive nature that contains both the explicit contestation towards their mainstream as the presentation of an ideological alternative technology. And through this positioning as an alternative to a dominant ideology, fringe plat-

37 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 34.

38 Lovink, G. (2019), *Algorithmic Hate: Brenton Tarrant and the Dark Social Web by Luke Munn*, Institute of Network Cultures, http://networkcultures.org/blog/2019/03/19/luke-munn-algorithmic-hate-brenton-tarrant-and-the-dark-social-web/.

39 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 35.

forms attempt, by their very presence and explicit criticism, to move – or stretch – the ideological premises of the (social media) platform ecology somewhat to their own ideological position, thereby influencing what is considered natural or mainstream.[40]

Through fringe platforms we are able to see alternative public spheres. An alternative public sphere can be evoked by far-right or conspiracy platforms that fundamentally disagree over epistemological underpinning of knowledge, moderation strategies and online safety, or fundamental human laws. Such public spheres might evoke different ideas on what expertise is or what grants the right to speak – even during global crises. They might evoke the image of a true market place of ideas libertarian *laissez-faire* public sphere, or an outright white supremacists public sphere. There is indeed a big cluster of fringe platforms that advocates for radical free speech, which varies between an honest libertarian belief in unregulated speech or a far-right spin on a preference for limited restrictions to hatespeech. But for every Gab or Truth Social, there is a Mastodon or a Switter. For every Voat, Epik, Hatreon, or Bitchute, there is a Signal, Telegram, NewPipe, or Nebula. Conversely, other free speech fringe platforms defend free speech from a leftwing perspective and/or in a feminist manner. Some of these platforms ask for increased protections against hatespeech, others ask for less moderation aligning themselves with movements like "free the nipple", "normalise breastfeeding", and "free bleeding", as well as sex work positive movements.[41] There are also fringe platforms that contest completely different issues than the moderation of speech, such as fringe platforms that raise valid concerns over the monopolising tendencies by Big Tech platforms and the opaqueness of their decision making, or fringe platforms that want vital communication infrastructures to be locally owned and governed. These concerns are spurred all across Europe with the ascend of the Trump/Musk/Sil-

40 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 36.

41 *Ibidem*, p. 37.

icon Valley alliance. Other fringe platforms object to the ownership of internet infrastructures by a few private companies, and therefore also object to the idea that they get to regulate such perceived infrastructures. These concerns are shared by the FLOSS (Free/Libre and Open Source Software) communities; the pioneers of the web that champion free and open software, and have a history of providing free, federated, or decentral alternatives to closed source and proprietary software. Understand that such platforms object to both Twitter or X, as well as BlueSky. They would argue for a more decentral internet and social media public sphere.[42]

I argue that to understand fringe platforms it is crucial to grasp their – inherently relational – ideological self-positioning. The word "fringe" is a spatial metaphor for a position opposite a mainstream. The word fringe denotes something on the edge, border, margin, or periphery. A public, network, or community can be fringe due to its non-normative identity, for example the LGTBQIA+ communities, or due to marginal politics and/or ideology, such as flat earthers, the Amish, or anarchists.[43] Perception and reality do overlap when trying to determine whether a group is at the fringes of a structure. For example, the "sovereign movement", but also the toxic deplatformed publics, are victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy, where their perceived autonomy and/or cancellation condemned them to a fringe position. What is fundamental to understand about fringe platforms is that they are "a materialized rhetoric of contention" towards Big Tech and the process of platformisation. Moreover, they are simultaneously "a symptom of, and resistance to, the ongoing platformization of the public sphere, and a renegotiation of the power that Big Tech acquired over the platformized web".[44] The concept of "fringe platforms" thus

42 A decentral platform lacks one central party that controls the flow of information or the storage of data.

43 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 35.

44 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 139.

provides a lens – I call the fringe lens – that analyses these antagonistic platforms as part of a platform ecosystem instead of as individual services. This would encourage a platform ecology instead of platform analysis.[45] Such a shift in perspective allows for an analysis of infrastructures, partnerships, and dynamics. Or as John Durham Peters would say; media are "about environments and infrastructures as much as it is about messages and content".[46] The fringe lens forefronts contention, shifting attention from the centre of the platform ecosystem to the margins instead.

However, by focusing on the counternarrative, on the alternative, on the peripheral, one inextricably also studies the norm, or the mainstream, to which these are exceptions. This is captured by the phrase "studying the thing by looking at its margins".[47] This becomes especially clear in cases of deplatformisation, which entails a systemic effort by Big Tech companies to push unwanted platforms to the fringes of the platform ecosystem by denying them access to basic infrastructural services needed to function online.[48] Here, the contentious nature of radical free speech platforms brings forth moments of disturbance, entire – seemingly independent – platforms are pushed offline, or at the very least to the fringes of the web. We see the hold Big Tech has over the infrastructures of the online. When they enact their power, this causes a moment of disturbance which makes the invisible visible,

45 Boccia Artieri, G., & Gemini, L. (2019), *Mass media and the web in the light of Luhmann's media system*, in "Current Sociology", *67*(4), pp. 563-578; Ibert, O., Oechslen, A., Repenning, A., & Schmidt, S. (2022), *Platform ecology: A user-centric and relational conceptualization of online platforms*, in "Global Networks", *22*(3), pp. 564-579.

46 Durham Peters, J. (2015), *The Marvelous Clouds*, Chicago University Press, p. 4.

47 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 28.

48 van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T. (2021), *Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem*, in "New Media & Society", *25*(12), pp. 3438-3454, p. 2; van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T (2024), *Deplatforming and deplatformization as governance strategies*, in *Handbook of Media and Communication Governance*, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 500-513; de Winkel, T., Gorzeman, L., de Wilde de Ligny, S., ten Heuvel, T., Blekkenhorst, M., Prins, S., & Schäfer, M. T. (2024), *The Gab Project: The Methodological, Epistemological, and Legal Challenges of Studying the Platformized Far-Right*, in "Journal of Right-Wing Studies", *2*(1), p. 47.

demystifies the mythical, and opens up the hegemonic to challengers. It shows the pervasiveness of platformisation, Big Tech as a governing institution, and the absence of public or institutional governance, all of which a general public objects too. We become aware of the power of platforms, and the ways in which platform power functions.[49] Looking at the margins unearths this, but these margins are not always pleasant to look at. They include the illiberal and toxic, yet also the anti-hegemonic or countercultural. They are often considered as outside of the scope of the *bourgeois* public sphere, meaning they are not included in the theorisation of the public sphere.[50] They are "omitted *per vice* from its democratic values, or obfuscated by the unitary and consensual character of Habermas' concept".[51]

3. Alternative Models of Technology Represent Alternative Models of a Public Sphere

The World Wide Web was supposed to be an emancipatory project. At worst, it would haul a libertarian free-for-all space, at best, it would be a technology of revolution. We believed in a positive outcome all the way into the 2000s, where we celebrated it for the "Arab spring". The free internet would export the end of history all over the world, both second and third world. This has passed, and we are quickly approaching winter. It was overly optimistic in hindsight,[52] something Evgeny Morozov had tirelessly warned us about.[53] In his new work *The Santiago Boys* (2023), Morozov tells the tale of "Project Cybersyn", an attempt by president Salvador Allende to construct a

49 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, pp. 141-142.
50 *Ibidem*, pp. 135-139.
51 *Ibidem*, p. 139.
52 Schäfer, M. T. (2011), *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, Amsterdam University Press, p. 39.
53 Morozov, E. (2011a), *Freedom. gov.*, in "Foreign Policy", *184*, p. 34; Morozov, E. (2011b), *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet Freedom*, in "New York: Public Affairs", pp. 245-275.

socialist internet *avant la lettre*.[54] Through it Morozov proclaims one of his core thoughts, and also an important theme of the podcast, that technology is geopolitical.[55] Such a statement understands that technology is power. Also, both Schäfer[56] and Ceccarini[57] explain how the relationship between the citizen and technology, and the discourse about this relationship – and therefore also the imaginary – has to be understood by analysing both the technology as well as the power relations co-constructed by, and mediated through it. The fringe lens accounts for power in its analysis. It sees platforms as socio-technical, and deeply ideological, meaning that an alternative subversive social medium evokes an alternative public sphere. So what is the ideology of the platformised public sphere?

All governance is rooted in ideology. But the ideology of Big Tech is hard to delineate from its governance, as it tries to avoid being seen as a governing institution, but rather disappears as an infrastructure. For the same reason, Mainstream Social Media (MsSM) platforms frame their governance as informed by pragmatism, and limited by technological constraints. In reality, the ideological framework of Big Tech social media is overtly capitalist, and partly silicon valley libertarian. Their core logics are those of the data economy, and therefore it's governance strategies revolve around customer satisfaction. In the 90s the internet went through a process of privatisation, as part of the neoliberal march through the institutions.[58] This ideological dogma explicates a role for the state to create and maintain markets[59] which

54 Beckett, A. (2024), *Pinochet in Piccadilly*, Faber & Faber.

55 Figueroa, F. (2023), *The Political Sins of Cybernetics: A Review of Evgeny Morozov's The Santiago Boys*, in "Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective", *12*(8), pp. 33-41, https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-81l.

56 Schäfer, M. T. (2011), *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, Amsterdam University Press, p. 39.

57 Ceccarini, L. (2021), *The digital citizen (ship): Politics and democracy in the networked society*, Edward Elgar Publishing.

58 Villacañas de Castro, L.S. (2020), *Deweyan Democracy, Neoliberalism, and Action Research*, in "Studies in Philosophy and Education", *39*(1), pp. 19-36, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09664-1.

59 Mellink, B., & Oudenampsen, M. (2022), *Neoliberalisme: Een Nederlandse Geschiedenis*, Boom, p. 9.

was so successful with regards to the online. The logics and justifications of neoliberalism and the incentives of the data economy are different from the democratic values on which a public sphere should be based. Academics and policymakers should not only make these "infrastructures" visible again, show Big Tech as active and ideologically informed governing institution, but also theorise on which ideological framework a public sphere should be based. Dutch collectives such as Pubhubs[60] and Waag[61] are even building alternative public infrastructures.

Due to platformisation's expansive qualities,[62] there is currently little public space inside the corporately run social media platform ecosystem.[63] I argue that we should retrieve what neoliberalism shoves to the side when it creates markets, namely public space. We should retrieve some of the publicness that we lost due to privatisation and platformisation. Usually, our dissatisfaction with our public sphere focusses on the ails of the public itself. But an appeal to a new participatory culture or a better functioning public sphere is not necessarily an appeal for a better functioning public. It can be an appeal for better online infrastructures. We could work towards a platform ecosystem with more public space, infused with democratic and public values. If we go back to the podcast *The Santiago Boys* for one second, it is important to note that the Cybersyn project was – according to an Allende – an attempt to create a new media system in order to circumvent the existing one that was "being co-opted and controlled by powerful and unaccountable corporations".[64] Allende didn't suggest the Chilean people should be a better public, he wanted a system of communica-

60 https://www.pubhubs.net/.
61 https://www.waag.org/en/.
62 Helmond, A. (2015), *The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready*, in "Social Media + Society", *1*(2), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080.
63 Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018), *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press.
64 Figueroa, F. (2023), *The Political Sins of Cybernetics: A Review of Evgeny Morozov's The Santiago Boys*, in "Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective", *12*(8), pp. 33-41, https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-81l.

tion technologies that held a different ideology from the one that was available. This is reminiscent of the vision of the FLOSS communities.

In her speech for the annual lecture of the society of general utility,[65] José van Dijck argues the idea of a platform ecosystem that includes platform infrastructures as public utilities. She tells her audience about the Dutch public utilities called public utility companies, such as drinking water, libraries, and telephone connections. The implementation of such public services came into being in the 19th century, but many of them have been privatised since the 1980s. She advocates for a return to the public utility model, inspired by a European Rijnland model, as a way to guarantee decentralisation, data sovereignty, and diversification.[66] The term *public utility* thus describes the desire for a web where crucial infrastructures are publicly owned and controlled by public oversight. These web services as public utilities, can be run by autonomous institutions as a way to guarantee accessibility.[67] In her subsequent publication[68] she again pleads for a distinct European online infrastructure, imbued with European values. It builds on the idea that (European) governments offer public alternatives to the Silicon Valley private ones.[69] The role for European government(s) is thus to protect the web infrastructures as public service, which requires an admittance that this goal is antithetical to Big Tech's interests.[70]

65 van Dijck, J. (2020), *Het Nut van Publieke Ruimte Op Internet*, Departement Rotterdam van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen.

66 van Dijck, J. (2020), *Het Nut van Publieke Ruimte Op Internet*, Departement Rotterdam van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen; de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 157.

67 van Dijck, J. (2020), *Het Nut van Publieke Ruimte Op Internet*, Departement Rotterdam van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen.

68 van Dijck, J. (2021), *Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Visualizing Platformization and Its Governance*, in "New Media & Society", 23(9), pp. 2801-2819, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820940293.

69 Stikker, M. (2019), *Het Internet Is Stuk: Maar We Kunnen Het Repareren*, Singel Uitgeverijen.

70 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 157.

Similar to José's, my plea is for a diversity of technology, or technological pluralism, where vital infrastructures – hardware and software – are owned either publicly or by governments, and imbued with democratic and public values. Through it, alternative models of online public participation and the revitalisation of the public sphere become visible. "Technological pluralism must be combined with a rigorous commitment to the provision of public and democratic life online".[71] This will bring forth a public that understands itself as public, and act democratically and publicly.

4. What's Next? Consociationalism

In this text, I have argued that fringe platforms provide a lens through which the platformised public sphere can be viewed, while simultaneously providing the image of the alternative to that public sphere. In this final section, I would like to suggest an analytical avenue scholars could take, which builds on my previous investigation of alternative models of online democracy. My suggestion is to study democratic models that rely on segmentation instead of wholeness and uniformity, and contestation instead of consensus, and explore whether such models for democracy are applicable to technological pluralist platform ecosystem. Through the exploration of technological pluralism, or a multitude of parallel yet connected public spheres, we could explore fragmentation as a virtue. A model of democracy that should definitely be considered in this exploration is consociationalism. I will use this final section to explain its potential.

Like Habermas' public sphere, imaginaries of the early internet evoke ideals of connectivity and direct communication between citizens and stakeholders, equal access to the discursive arena, and rational critical debate. In contrast, ideas of a segregated public sphere or a fragmented digital media sphere are met with concern. Ideolog-

71 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Diss. Utrecht University, p. 158.

ically driven platform ecosystems, separating themselves from the mainstream and forming their own infrastructures is often explained as technological or infrastructural fragmentation, and considered to complicate the process of governing. Specifically the efficacy of social media platforms to create online separatism is feared. Media concepts such as filter bubbles and echo chambers are all warnings for algorithmically induced parallel user experiences, which may cause asymmetric polarisation where common truths between political poles are no longer accepted.[72]

Paradoxically, inclinations towards a less centralised online are not controversial and can be found all over the political spectrum. The founder of the radical speech platform and alt-right twitter called Gab, was open about his main objective to build parallel online sphere, as do many far-right figures. One example of such a far-right actor is the Dutch politician Thierry Baudet, who's ambitions transgress way beyond the online, as he strives to create a separate pillar[73] country within the Netherlands called forum land,[74] including separate schools, food supply, dating apps and news outlets. On the left, there is the wish to break up the monopolies of Big Tech specifically because they see the centralisation – of power, of governance, of attention and revenue streams – as a major problem for our online spaces. As said, van Dijck writes about the potential of a publicly or state-owned foundation of the web, on which a plurality of services can "grow".[75] Similarly, Ethan Zuckerman – media scholar and founder of the research Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure – goes as far as to suggest the Dutch public broadcast system, which is considered as a reminiscent of the early and mid-twentieth century Dutch societal state of *verzuiling* or

72 Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020), *Disinformation as political communication*, in "Political communication", *37*(2), pp. 145-156.

73 The pillar is also the logo of his party. Also, as stated on the next page, the word pillar (Dutch translation is *zuil*) is used as a verb in Dutch to describe the Dutch post-war vertical segregation.

74 Forum for democracy is the name of his party.

75 van Dijck, J. (2021), *Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Visualizing Platformization and Its Governance*, in "New Media & Society", *23*(9), pp. 2801-2819, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820940293.

"pillarisation"[76], as a template for creating a model for an internet of the common good. This model would entail several communities who are governing themselves and share common infrastructures.[77] Interestingly enough, the rather famous Dutch democratic model of mid twentieth century that Zuckerman refers to, was adopted as a way to negate the deep segmentation of Dutch society at that time. And it did, successfully. The question I want to ask here is whether adopting such a model to the infrastructures of the web might also prevent the further segmentation of the online public sphere, as it did for Dutch society in the past.

In order to explore this question, we must turn to the frame of *consociationalism*, which is the academic terminology to talk about pillarisation in the field of political science. In the influential comparative study of politics in pluralist societies called "Consociational Democracies",[78] scholar Arend Lijphart proposed a consensus model called consociationalism as beneficial for the maintenance of democracy in "deeply divided societies".[79] Deeply divided societies have mutually reinforced vertical segmentation, and are therefore considered prone to instability and illiberalism. Instead of a control model, where one superordinate segment has firm control over a subordinate segment

76 The term "pillarisation" (translation of the Dutch term *verzuiling*), was first employed by Dutch sociologists (e.g. Kruyt, J.P. (1950), *Verzuiling*, Zaandijk: Heijnis), and is used to describe conglomerates of subcultural organisations (e.g. Lijphart, A. (1977), *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Explanation*, Yale University Press; Andeweg, R.B. (2019), *Consociationalism in the low countries: Comparing the Dutch and Belgian experience*, in "Swiss Political Science Review", *25*(4), pp. 408-425, p. 410).

77 Zuckerman, E., & van Dijck, J. (2021), *"An internet for the common good" Governing the digital society webinar*, Universiteit Utrecht, https://soundcloud.com/utrechtuniversity/an-internet-for-the-common-good-part-1.

78 Lijphart, A. (1969), *Consociational democracy*, in "World politics", *21*(2), pp. 207-225.

79 The terminology of "deeply divided societies" is taken from Eric Nordlinger's "Conflict regulation in divided societies" (1972). Arend Lijphart calls them "culturally fragmented societies, divided by sharp cleavages with no or very few overlapping memberships and loyalties" (1969, pp. 208-209). Both terms refer to societies that are pillarised or vertically segmented to the extent that social and professional life, such as work, schools, unions, political affiliations, sport teams, among other things are all divided according to certain class, ethnic, or ideological traits. Nordlinger, E.A. (1972), *Conflict regulation in divided societies*, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

within a society, consociationalism suggests a "politics of accommodation".[80] A consociational model is theorised to be able to bring stability to deeply divided societies by co-operative efforts of the subculture elites which counteract the fragmenting tendencies.[81] Such elite accommodation, particularly in the socio-economic domain, is also known as "the polder model" in the Netherlands.[82] The phenomenon of "polder politics" described as "an institutional structure and a spirit of peaceful deliberation aimed for consensus in which all parties are more or less equal, do not force a one-sided conclusion and pragmatically acknowledge (societal) pluriformity".[83] My suggestion is to explore the possibilities of fragmented or segmented web by studying the models of accommodation that political theory and history provide us, for example consociationalism.

The idea of a vertically segmented or pillarised online as an alternative to the highly integrated walled garden or trunked[84] platform ecology that is so dominant currently is an interesting one. However, there are a few glaring issues that need to be addressed. For one, is such a platform ecosystem still something common, or does the segmentation lead to affective polarisation? And additionally, are we sure we want to create a separate pillar for the far-right? Let's start with the assertion that the evocations of a plurality of online spheres through the concept of consociationalism are – as opposed to the far-right im-

80 Lustick, I. (1979), *Stability in deeply divided societies: Consociationalism versus control*, in "World politics", *31*(3), pp. 325-344, pp. 327, 330.

81 Lijphart, A. (1969), *Consociational democracy*, in "World politics", *21*(2), pp. 207-225; Lustick, I. (1979), *Stability in deeply divided societies: Consociationalism versus control*, in "World politics", *31*(3), pp. 325-344.

82 The "polder model" evokes the Dutch governance practice of the "water control boards" (Dutch translation *waterschappen*), dating back to the 14th century, in which farmers did not compete, but cooperated to build and maintain the diked marches and reclaimed land (Andeweg, R.B. (2019), *Consociationalism in the low countries: Comparing the Dutch and Belgian experience*, in "Swiss Political Science Review", *25*(4), pp. 408-425, p. 412).

83 te Velde, H. (2010), *The international relevance of Dutch History: Closing comments*, in "BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review", *125*(2-3), pp. 355-366, p. 206.

84 van Dijck, J. (2021), *Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Visualizing Platformization and Its Governance*, in "New Media & Society", *23*(9), pp. 2801-2819, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820940293.

aginaries of parallel spheres for themselves – not a way to cater to all polarised audiences, but rather a means to diminish the polarisation of our public sphere. Asymmetric and affective polarisation are detrimental for the (rational critical) public debate, and the public sphere at large. Technological pluralist models such as consociationalism are remedies for polarisation, not causes or facilitators. They are aimed to counter this polarised debate or at least mitigate their possible dangers and negative effects, if possible.

It's the intricate connection between media technology and democracy, which has its historic and evident contemporary explications, that leads media scholars – in their quest for media infrastructures that shape good deliberation – to contemplate variants of platform pluralism, including segmentation, as options. In aforementioned webinar Zuckerman and van Dijck discuss on how the plural can still be "something common", of which they agree is vital for technological pluralism. The disagreement is on how pluralism that retains the common can be designed. Zuckerman suggests to socially engineer a public sphere according to the suggestion of the common and community. Pluralism, as suggested by power-sharing models of federalism and consociationalism, does not argue for any accommodation of the far-right. Toxicity and the Alt tech can be excluded from the technological plural media ecosystem, without throwing away the idea of pluralism. This requires normative criteria though. Currently, there is no indication that a pluralist model mitigates toxicity or radicalisation. The hope is that it fosters more publicness in the online public sphere, the merit of which mitigates polarisation.

Power-sharing models might provide insightful templates for an alternative platformised public sphere, one that relies on technological pluralism. However, we should take into account that many of the conditions of consociationalism – such as "regime" or "elite accommodation" – are currently not met by the platformised public sphere, and the specifics of making a transition towards a pillarised web are currently unclear. However, for the time being, I argue the exploration of power-sharing models for the web is promising. Take the concept of

the “federation”. This terminology and accompanying power-sharing model is already being connivingly applied to the platform ecosystem and web infrastructures, and is indeed one of the clusters of fringe platforms. What’s more, the idea of a federation stood central in Berner Lee’s conception of the web. The potential of the fediverse is that it already collectively owned, as well as value based. While still speculative, and far from a copy-paste solution, the suggestion of encouraging such models of pluralism to safeguard democratic standards is thus worth entertaining further. Especially since the web and platform architectures that are actually proposed through the terminology of pillarisation are not far-fetched comparisons with state models at all, but concrete suggestions for and descriptions of technology. We can start by identifying the basic premises of democratic theory about ideological segmentation and transferring them to that of a potential platformised public sphere. I would argue that at least one basic premise that could be transferred is that a fragmented public sphere, characterised by deep mutually reinforcing cleavages, needs governing institutions that force and facilitate negotiation.

A Cartography of Algorithmic Politics: Platforms, Protocols, Publics and Power

Emiliano Treré

Introduction: A New Terrain of the Political

In a refugee camp on the outskirts of Gaza, a journalist uploads footage of a bombed-out hospital. Moments later, her Instagram account is shadow banned. The post receives almost no engagement. No alert is sent, no reason given. The algorithm has spoken through invisibility by default.

On the other side of the world, in the Netherlands, a state-run algorithm flags a Somali family for potential welfare fraud. Based on opaque criteria drawn from historical data, their benefits are revoked, and they lose access to healthcare and housing; it will take years and a national scandal to acknowledge the error.

Meanwhile, in Mexico City, feminist collectives flood Instagram with pastel-toned infographics on gender violence. By mimicking influencer aesthetics and hijacking trending hashtags, they game the platform's algorithm to bring their message to the front of the feed.

In France, youth climate activists dance ironically in front of riot police, syncing their protest videos to catchy TikTok sounds. It's not just the public they're addressing – it's the algorithm.

In Kyiv and Kharkiv, citizen journalists document war crimes with shaky smartphone cameras. Yet on YouTube and Facebook, their videos are auto-flagged and removed by moderation algorithms trained to detect "graphic violence". At the same time, polished state propaganda flows freely. In a platformised war, the algorithm becomes a geopolitical actor, deciding which truth circulates and which is suppressed.

Across these vignettes, a new terrain of the political takes shape. Algorithms no longer merely filter information, they govern what becomes visible, what is silenced, what is acted upon. They assign risk, determine relevance, anticipate desire and often do so without any transparency or accountability. By algorithms, I refer not simply to coded instructions or lines of computational logic, but to socio-technical systems that automate decision-making processes, often invisibly, and increasingly govern key dimensions of public and private life. As Klinger[1] notes, they are operations designed to act on our behalf and in the interest of their creators, encoding specific logics, ideologies and priorities. Algorithms are not neutral or abstract – they are material, political and infrastructural, shaping what is seen, what is known, and what is possible. They are not impartial technologies, but become infrastructures of governance, visibility and power. In this sense, as Louise Amoore[2] has powerfully argued, AI is political all the way down. The politics of AI are not confined to its external effects on society or policy; they are embedded in the very architectures of its design and operation. AI systems do not simply generate political consequences but constitute a reconfiguration of what politics is and how it is done. They transform the boundaries of knowledge, reorder

1 Klinger, U. (2023), *Algorithms, power and digital politics*, in Coleman, S., & Sorensen, L. (Eds.), *Handbook of Digital Politics*, 2nd edition, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 210-258, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377585.00024.

2 Amoore, L. (2024), *What does AI do to politics?*, in Edkins, J., Zehfuss, M., & Gregory, T. (Eds.), *Global Politics: A New Introduction*, 4th edition, Routledge.

the conditions of judgment, and reshape the imaginaries of governance. As such, understanding algorithmic systems requires not only attention to what they do to politics, but also to what is political about their very logic, structure, and epistemology. Hence, this chapter begins from a simple but urgent observation: algorithmic systems are reshaping the conditions under which politics is enacted, contested, and imagined. From welfare allocation to content moderation, from viral protest to predictive policing, the political today unfolds through systems of automation, datafication and computation. These systems are integral to what scholars such as Palau-Sampio and López-García[3] define as the post-media public sphere, a fragmented and platformised communicative space where the traditional authority of mass media has declined, and where new forms of algorithmic visibility, asymmetry and manipulation have emerged. While existing scholarship on algorithms and democracy provides essential insights – especially on issues like microtargeting, epistemic inequality and deliberative erosion[4] – this chapter adopts a broader perspective: that of algorithmic politics. Rather than asking what algorithms do to democracy, it asks how algorithmic infrastructures are reconfiguring the very terrain of the political, along with its forms of action, mediation, control and resistance.

By algorithmic politics, I refer not only to the top-down implementation of algorithmic systems by states and corporations, but also to the tactical appropriations, workarounds and refusals enacted from below. It is a field marked by ambivalence, as algorithmic systems simultaneously constrain and enable, discipline and empower, obscure and reveal. This dynamic reflects what Hepp, Jarke and Kramp[5] describe as the irreducible ambivalences of data power, which open up

3 Palau-Sampio, D., & López-García, G. (2025), *News, Media, and Communication in a Polarized World: A Spanish Perspective*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, Springer.

4 Christiano, T. (2022), *Algorithms, Manipulation, and Democracy*, in "Canadian Journal of Philosophy", *52*(1), pp. 109-124, https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2021.29.

5 Hepp, A., Jarke, J., & Kramp, L. (2022), *New Perspectives in Critical Data Studies: The Ambivalences of Data Power-An Introduction*, in *New Perspectives in Critical Data Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan.

both emancipatory possibilities and new forms of domination. To speak of algorithmic politics is thus to recognise both their hegemonic power and their vulnerability to subversion. In order to navigate this complexity, the chapter draws on a cartographic approach, organising the analysis through four analytical sites where algorithmic politics is enacted, contested and reshaped:

- Platforms: the infrastructures that govern visibility, participation and decision-making.
- Protocols: the algorithmic logics and procedures that filter, rank and shape political information.
- Publics: the formation (and fragmentation) of publics through algorithmic visibility and amplification.
- Power and contestation: the asymmetries, resistances and appropriations that emerge within algorithmic systems.

In doing so, the chapter offers a situated cartography of algorithmic politics, mapping the multiple and entangled ways algorithms mediate political life today through control, contestation, through improvisation and potential social transformation.

1. Platforms

> "I am the voice inside your head (And I control you)."
> - Nine Inch Nails, *Mr Self Destruct* (1994)

Platforms are not just digital services; they are infrastructures for social and political life. Defined by their ability to host content, extract data and coordinate user interaction at scale, platforms mediate everything from personal relationships to public discourse. As Gillespie[6] noted early on, their claim to neutrality is a strategic myth since platforms curate, organise and govern. We are living through a broader transformation underway, that of platformisation – the process by

6 Gillespie, T. (2010), *The Politics of Platforms*, in "New Media & Society", *12*(3), pp. 347-364.

which a small number of corporate actors (e.g., Google, Meta, ByteDance, Amazon, etc.) extend their logic of data extraction and algorithmic curation across sectors and domains. This transformation extends beyond digital mediation; it entails a reconfiguration of institutional, communicative, and political structures around computational logics. As Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy[7] have shown, platformisation entails the institutionalisation of platform logics into diverse domains of life. This goes beyond the media industry: in welfare systems, newsrooms, education and creative labour, platforms restructure practices around metrics, automation, and data extraction. Platformisation is thus not just an economic trend, it constitutes a mode of governance by infrastructure, embedding asymmetries of visibility, agency and monetisation into the very fabric of everyday life.

This transformation aligns with the transformations of the post-media public sphere, a digitally mediated communicative ecosystem characterised by fragmentation, polarisation, and the erosion of traditional mass media authority.[8] In this environment, the proliferation of digital platforms and the multiplicity of voices have not necessarily led to a more inclusive public discourse. Instead, they have contributed to the creation of segmented public spaces, where echo chambers and ideological silos can flourish, and consensus becomes increasingly elusive. The traditional gatekeeping role of mass media has diminished, giving way to algorithmically driven content curation that often amplifies divisive narratives and undermines the deliberative processes essential to democratic societies. In the political realm, Lindgren and Kaun[9] describe this transformation as the move from digital politics to programmable politics. While digital politics focused on participation via social media and internet-enabled platforms, programmable politics is

7 Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Duffy, B.E. (2022), *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Polity Press.

8 Palau-Sampio, D., & López-García, G. (2025), *News, Media, and Communication in a Polarized World: A Spanish Perspective*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, Springer.

9 Lindgren, S., & Kaun, A. (2025), *From Digital to Programmable Politics: Reconfiguring the Relationship Between Technology and Democracy*, in "Media, Culture & Society", *47*(2), pp. 267-283.

shaped by software layers, automation and synthetic actants. Political discourse now unfolds through ranking algorithms, recommendation engines and moderation tools. Two interconnected shifts are particularly relevant here: one concerns the transformation of the public sphere, and the other the evolution of public opinion. The first refers to how platforms displace the ideal of a common deliberative space with fragmented, attention-driven circuits of communication. The second concerns how algorithmic systems restructure public opinion itself – not as the aggregated outcome of individual preferences, but as a process increasingly shaped by predictive analytics, curated visibility and automated salience. Hence, platforms function not simply as media technologies but as governing environments. Their algorithms filter, rank and suppress content, shaping what is visible and whose voice counts. These dynamics present deep implications for the public sphere, traditionally conceived as a space for reasoned deliberation and collective will formation.

García-Marzá and Calvo[10] argue that platformisation generates artificial public spheres, i.e. pseudo-deliberative arenas governed by engagement metrics, virality and profit logics. They highlight the incompatibility between computational rationalities and democratic ideals, diagnosing what they call the "algorithmic colonization of the lifeworld". In this context, democratic expression becomes filtered through attention economies and opaque ranking systems. Gandini, Keeling and Reviglio[11] introduce the concept of algorithmic public opinion to designate a process whereby public relevance and salience are no longer determined through collective reasoning but through algorithmic processing and platform prioritisation. Public opinion, they argue, is not simply expressed but produced, calculated, sorted and formatted by digital infrastructures. These dynamics reflect a pro-

10 García-Marzá, D., & Calvo, P. (2024), *Algorithmic Democracy: A Critical Perspective Based on Deliberative Democracy*, Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-53015-9.

11 Gandini, A., Keeling, D., & Reviglio, U. (2025), *Algorithmic Public Opinion: Social Media, Algorithms and the Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in "European Journal of Communication", *40*(1), pp. 55-72.

found epistemological shift: algorithmic systems do not simply reflect the will of the people, they actively anticipate, construct and reshape it. The public is no longer an empirical aggregate, but a predictive artefact generated through interaction with machine learning models and engagement signals.

Similarly, Klinger[12] has shown how algorithmic amplification privileges "superspreaders" – actors who dominate discourse through the invisible hand of platform curation. This undermines the notion of the public sphere as a level playing field. Pasquale's[13] concept of the black box society further reveals the opacity and power asymmetries embedded in these systems, which operate beyond public oversight or control. Palau-Sampio and López-García[14] underline that this transformation is not only technological but political, marked by the rise of emotional discourse, memetic warfare, and the collapse of common reference points. The post-media condition is one of disaggregation, fragmentation and hybridisation, where the boundaries between journalism, activism and propaganda blur under the pressures of algorithmic distribution. One example of algorithmic power operating as discretionary and opaque governance comes from Elon Musk's personal use of X. Following public criticism of his support for controversial visa programs, several far-right influencers – including Anastasia Maria Loupis, Laura Loomer and Owen Shroyer – saw their reach collapse overnight. No official explanation was offered, yet monetisation tools were revoked and visibility across the platform was curtailed. This incident, investigated by *The New York Times* in April 2025, illustrates how algorithmic suppression can be enacted not through direct censorship but through calibrated invisibility, a form of programmable punishment that evades scrutiny and operates according to the

12 Klinger, U. (2023), *Algorithms, power and digital politics, in Coleman*, S., & Sorensen, L. (Eds.), *Handbook of Digital Politics*, 2nd edition, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 210-258, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377585.00024.

13 Pasquale, F. (2015), *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*, Harvard University Press.

14 Palau-Sampio, D., & López-García, G. (2025), *News, Media, and Communication in a Polarized World: A Spanish Perspective*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, Springer.

whims of platform owners or opaque infrastructure logics. As Musk put it already in 2022: "Freedom of speech, not freedom of reach".

Platforms are thus no longer (but were they ever?) neutral grounds for communication but appear as active infrastructures of visibility, control and contestation. They do not merely host public discourse but remake its conditions of possibility. And yet, as Bonini and Treré[15] demonstrates, these infrastructures are not unassailable. Users tactically navigate, resist and reconfigure platform logics. Programmable politics names a contested terrain, structured by code but never entirely controlled. Platforms function as programmed battlegrounds, yet their dynamics remain unstable, open to disruption and unpredictability.

Moreover, as Muldoon, Graham and Cant[16] remind us in *Feeding the Machine*, the apparent seamlessness of platform automation is a carefully sustained illusion. Behind the polished interfaces and algorithmic efficiencies operates a precarious global workforce – made up of annotators, clickworkers, and moderators, often located in the Global South – who train, correct, and clean the data that underpins platform functioning. These invisible workers classify hate speech, remove violent content, and tag training inputs for AI models, often under extreme pressure and with minimal protections. This aligns with Roberts'[17] ethnography of content moderators, which exposes the psychological toll and invisibility of those tasked with scrubbing digital platforms clean. These workers are often underpaid and outsourced and operate within a political economy of invisibility where their labour sustains the "cleanliness" of social media but remains disavowed by platform narratives. Gray and Suri[18] define such labour as *ghost work*, that is the foundational human work hidden behind the rhetoric of AI and automation. Taken together, these insights force us to ex-

15 Bonini, T., & Treré, E. (2024), *Algorithms of Resistance*, MIT Press.
16 Muldoon, J., Graham, M., & Cant, C. (2024), *Feeding the machine*, Bloomsbury.
17 Roberts, S. T. (2019), *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*, Yale University Press, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrcz0v.
18 Gray, M. L., & Suri, S. (2019), *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

pand our understanding of algorithmic politics to include the labour regimes, affective harms, and logistical architectures that quietly underpin platform governance.

2. Protocols

> "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."
> - Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future* (1962)

If platforms constitute the environments of algorithmic politics, then protocols represent the logics, rules, and automated procedures that govern how those environments operate. Protocols filter, rank, suppress, and amplify. They determine what content circulates, how it is prioritised, and whose voice is heard, often without users knowing they are being governed at all. In the realm of politics, these algorithmic protocols enact a subtle but far-reaching shift: they replace open deliberation with automated decision-making and substitute procedural transparency with computational opacity. From news feeds to recommendation engines, protocols thus shape the architecture of political visibility. Christiano[19] offers a normative lens on these developments, warning how filtering, microtargeting, and hypernudging – all techniques embedded in algorithmic design – pose serious risks to democratic deliberation. These mechanisms do not merely distort individual autonomy; they restructure the epistemic environment itself. Citizens are no longer exposed to diverse perspectives, but increasingly subjected to engineered informational bubbles, tuned for engagement and predictability. However, Axel Bruns[20] has challenged the prevailing narrative around filter bubbles, arguing that the phenomenon may be overstated and that users often encounter a variety of viewpoints online. This suggests that while algorithmic curation

19 Christiano, T. (2022), *Algorithms, Manipulation, and Democracy*, in "Canadian Journal of Philosophy", *52*(1), pp. 109-124, https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2021.29.
20 Bruns, A. (2019), *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Polity Press.

influences information exposure, its impact on ideological isolation is more complex than commonly assumed. While Christiano's critique foregrounds the risks of manipulation and epistemic inequality, its focus on democratic participation offers only a partial view. The challenge, as this chapter shows, is not simply what algorithms do to democracy, but how they transform the terrain of the political. The manipulation of attention, the strategic organisation of salience, and the automated modulation of affect and desire are now infrastructural, shaping both the input and output conditions of political agency.

This transformation becomes visible in the rise of shadow banning, algorithmic throttling, and automated moderation. These are not fringe phenomena anymore – they are core to how contemporary political communication is governed. Platforms no longer rely solely on content removal or account suspension. Instead, they implement protocol-based invisibility: reducing reach, suppressing virality, or deranking posts without notification or explanation. A compelling recent example is the recent auto-moderation of Palestinian voices in Gaza. Reports indicate that Meta's platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, engaged in disproportionate content moderation practices that silenced Palestinian perspectives while allowing incitement against them to proliferate.[21] Journalists and activists reported mass flagging of their posts, reduced visibility of hashtags like #CeasefireNow or #FreePalestine, and sudden account suspensions – all enacted not through explicit prohibition, but through automated moderation systems trained on opaque criteria. While content glorifying state violence remained, civilian footage of bombings was deemed "too graphic" and removed. This episode illustrates how protocols act as political filters, calibrating visibility in line with infrastructural biases and revealing themselves not as neutral arbiters of content but as agents of geopolitical consequence.

21 El Houri, W. (2025), *Digital erasure: How social media platforms are silencing Palestinians in 2024*, in "Global Voices".

Such practices reveal a deeper infrastructural shift: from content moderation to audience modulation. The goal is no longer just to block speech, but to subtly determine who gets heard, when they are heard, and how loudly they are amplified, all without formal prohibitions. In this context, visibility itself becomes a site of governance, and protocols operate as levers of political control. But algorithmic protocols do more than govern interaction, they also produce ideology. Power in algorithmic politics operates not only through platforms or policies, but through aesthetics, imaginaries, and symbolic orders. The symbolic power of algorithmic systems often escapes scrutiny, yet it is central to their legitimacy. This is where Vincent Mosco's concept of the digital sublime becomes essential. Technologies such as AI, big data, and cloud computing are not merely tools; they are enveloped in mythologies of transcendence, inevitability, and salvation. They promise escape from politics, liberation from error, and the optimisation of everything. This myth-making function is not incidental, it is part of the legitimacy infrastructure of algorithmic systems.

This belief in technological salvation often borders on a form of technocratic spiritualism. Elon Musk's public statements about algorithmic governance, including his frequent emphasis on the primacy of data-driven decision-making and automation, reflect a worldview in which computation replaces deliberation and automation substitutes for accountability. This is a logic deeply intertwined with *dataism*, as articulated by José van Dijck[22]: the belief that data are inherently objective, neutral, and superior to human judgment. These faith-based imaginaries do real political work. They naturalise asymmetries, obscure design decisions, and make governance appear technical rather than political. They depoliticise judgment, obscure responsibility, and present machine outputs as facts, rather than as the result of contested inputs, training data, and optimisation criteria. Protocols, then, are more than technical specifications: they represent sites of governance,

22 van Dijck, J. (2014), *Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data Between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology*, in "Surveillance & Society", *12*(2), pp. 197-208.

ideology and contestation. They operate through code, but they also operate through *culture*. They shape what circulates, what is prioritised and what is erased – and they do so according to value systems that are rarely made explicit. Within algorithmic politics, power works not only through computation but also through aesthetics, affect, and imagination. The aesthetics of algorithmic systems reinforce the ideologies embedded in their protocols. Generative AI outputs – whether in the form of images, templates, chatbot interfaces or recommendation feeds – embody what we might call a visual grammar of control: flat, affectless, synthetic. These aesthetic forms are not neutral or accidental: they reflect a deeper technocratic imaginary, one that equates polish with precision, standardisation with neutrality, and repetition with reliability. They eliminate ambiguity, suppress contradiction, and flatten complexity, e.g. all the qualities essential to democratic life. Far from being merely "ugly", banal or repetitive, these AI-generated aesthetics are the visual manifestation of an ethical and political worldview. They reflect a society obsessed with optimisation, allergic to unpredictability, and increasingly indifferent to human messiness. They normalise a way of seeing and judging that privileges quantification over care, efficiency over empathy, and algorithmic regularity over democratic deliberation.

This becomes disturbingly clear in algorithmically generated propaganda like the viral *Trump Gaza* video, a surreal and cruel vision of a destroyed Gaza repurposed into a luxury resort, complete with images of Trump and Netanyahu poolside. The video is disturbing not only for its political implications and real-life connections, but also for its synthetic, hyper-controlled aesthetic. It offers a glimpse into the ideological core of generative technologies: technocratic, decontextualised, and emotionally vacant.[23] As Gareth Watkins[24] has ar-

23 Watkins, G. (2024), *AI: The New Aesthetic of Fascism*, in "New Socialist"; Treré, E. (2025), *Quando l'estetica rivela l'etica dell'IA: Immaginari, algoritmi e potere nell'era della disumanizzazione automatica*, Fondazione Feltrinelli, https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/pubblico/quando-lestetica-rivela-letica-dellia/.

24 Watkins, G. (2024), *AI: The New Aesthetic of Fascism*, in "New Socialist".

gued, we may be facing a "new aesthetic of fascism" that does not rely on symbols or uniforms, but on a visual logic that reduces politics to management, empathy to data points, and imagination to synthetic blandness. These are not superficial traits, but cultural articulations of political power that speak with the voice of those who design and control the systems. This is why the characterisation of AI as a neutral instrument is increasingly challenged by evidence of its role in reinforcing systemic inequalities. The narrative that technologies can be used "well or badly" depending on human intent conceals the structural realities of algorithmic governance. It erases the asymmetries of power embedded in design, deployment and regulation and their ideological underpinnings. An ideology that is not evenly distributed, but cultivated by platform elites, inscribed into interface design, and sustained through infrastructural opacity. Its function is to obscure contestation, to depoliticise decisions, and to present computation as inevitable. It cloaks normative choices in the language of technical optimisation. These aesthetic and ideological logics do real political work shaping what appears rational, what counts as legitimate, and what is rendered invisible. They influence how publics are formed and how authority circulates. In this sense, algorithmic systems are not just technical infrastructures, but symbolic regimes that encode moral hierarchies, epistemic assumptions, and political values. To expose the visual and symbolic dimensions of algorithmic power is not a peripheral task, but a central act of critical engagement. It means making visible the values that lie beneath design, the exclusions rendered natural by interface, and the politics that are reproduced in the name of automation and progress. Protocols embody the invisible syntax of algorithmic governance, shaping behaviour, belief, and belonging. At the margins of this system, we also observe forms of tactical adaptation. This reveals that protocols are not simply instruments to be redirected, but rather comprise terrains to be reimagined. Protocols must be interrogated not only for how they sort and rank, but for what kind of political futures they allow, foreclose, or silently encode. In this sense, to read protocols politically is to treat them as cultural

blueprints – aesthetic, affective, ideological – that organise how we see, what we know, and how we act.

3. Publics

> "What is the use of a new world if you have no freedom to be anything other than what they say you must be?"
> - Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974)

If platforms constitute the infrastructures of algorithmic politics, and protocols determine the logics by which content circulates, then publics are the emergent formations produced at their intersection. Publics are not static entities but contingent, relational, and continuously reconfigured. They take shape through patterns of attention, engagement, and amplification – processes that are increasingly governed by opaque algorithmic systems. In this environment, what we call "the public" is no longer a neutral space of expression or deliberation, but a product of infrastructures that listen, filter, and rank according to shifting and often asymmetrical priorities. Recent work has shown how platformisation has redefined the conditions of public formation. Rather than simply providing arenas for participation, platforms intervene in what becomes visible, who gains traction, and how legitimacy is distributed.[25] As van Dijck and Poell[26] argue, the platformisation of the public reflects a transformation in how collectivity is assembled. Publics are now constituted through a convergence of participatory cultures and algorithmic infrastructures, where user activity and platform logics combine to curate and shape communicative dynamics. These hybrid formations are rarely organic: they are seg-

25 Fischer, C., & Jarren, O. (2023), *The platformization of the public sphere and its challenge to democracy*, in "Philosophy & Social Criticism", *50*(4), pp. 425-448; van Dijck, J. (2024), *Governing platforms and societies*, in "Digital Society", *1*(1), pp. 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624241255922.

26 van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013), *Understanding Social Media Logic*, in "Media and Communication", *1*(1), pp. 2-14; van Dijck, J. (2024), *Governing platforms and societies*, in "Digital Society", *1*(1), pp. 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624241255922.

mented, ranked, and often strategically modulated by infrastructures whose priorities are driven by commercial imperatives, political pressures, and technical affordances. In the post-media public sphere,[27] the boundaries between journalism, activism, propaganda, and entertainment have collapsed, and attention has become the primary currency. Within this ecology, visibility is not earned merely through merit or relevance but managed algorithmically. Publics become fragmented and polarised, with the lines between mainstream and fringe continually redrawn by recommendation systems, trending algorithms, and virality logics. The notion of algorithmic public opinion, as proposed by Gandini, Keeling and Reviglio,[28] is a critical contribution to this debate. In their account, public opinion is no longer the reflective aggregation of individual views mediated through institutions. Instead, it is produced algorithmically in real time, shaped by systems that determine what topics gain prominence, which fade from view, and which interpretations circulate most widely. This redefinition challenges classical democratic ideals, where public deliberation is imagined as grounded in exposure to plural views and reasoned exchange. In algorithmic environments, salience is increasingly pre-empted by systems optimised for engagement, not enlightenment.

Such dynamics also alter the structure of visibility. As Klinger[29] notes, algorithmic amplification favours "superspreaders" actors who, by virtue of their platform positioning or follower base, are algorithmically privileged. This produces a skewed field where influence is concentrated and where dissenting or marginal voices may struggle to gain traction. The invisibility of these processes – such as shadow banning, algorithmic throttling, or deranking – means that suppression occurs not through overt censorship but through the silent with-

27 Palau-Sampio, D. & López-García, G. (2025), *News, Media, and Communication in a Polarized World: A Spanish Perspective*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, Springer.

28 Gandini, A., Keeling, D., & Reviglio, U. (2025), *Algorithmic Public Opinion: Social Media, Algorithms and the Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in "European Journal of Communication", *40*(1), pp. 55-72.

29 Klinger, U. (2023), *Algorithms, power and digital politics*, in Coleman, S., & Sorensen, L. (Eds.), *Handbook of Digital Politics*, 2nd edition, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 210-258, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377585.00024.

drawal of attention. Yet publics are not simply imposed from above. They are also constructed from below, through tactical engagement with platform logics. As we argue[30] in *Algorithms of Resistance*, users often learn to navigate and appropriate algorithmic infrastructures in ways that generate critical visibility. Resistance in this context is not a matter of exiting the system but of bending it through exploiting its logics, mimicking its aesthetics, and hijacking its attention mechanisms (see next section). A telling example can be found in the mobilisation strategies of Latin American feminist movements. As recent studies document, feminist collectives in Mexico and Argentina have adopted visual styles native to Instagram culture – pastel infographics, animated reels, and shareable slogans – to disseminate political messages about gender violence and reproductive rights. These practices reflect a broader trend of feminist artivism that leverages digital platforms and aesthetic strategies to challenge and reshape gender norms.[31] These formats are not chosen simply for their aesthetic appeal, but because they align with the logics of algorithmic distribution. Through these interventions, activists are not merely participating in the public sphere but reshaping it from within. They operate within constraints, shaped by the same logics of optimisation, virality, and gamification that underpin the dominant order.

A further expression of this tactical engagement with algorithmic infrastructures can be found in what Boccia Artieri et al.[32] conceptualise as *fringe democracy*, i.e. a condition in which non-mainstream actors operate from positions of partial integration and strategic dissent. Rather than rejecting platform systems, these actors embed themselves within them, manipulating the logics of virality, recommendation, and meme culture to gain traction. Their interventions blend irony,

30 Bonini, T., & Treré, E. (2024), *Algorithms of Resistance*, MIT Press.

31 Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, D. (2024), *The Power of Feminist Artivism to Change Gender Norms*, ALIGN Report, ODI Global, retrieved from https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-feminist-artivism-change-gender-norms.

32 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025), *Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *1*(2025), pp. 3-22.

disinformation, satire, and affective provocation, complicating easy distinctions between subversion and co-optation. In this framework, fringe publics do not stand fully outside dominant circuits of visibility; rather, they inhabit them uneasily, exploiting algorithmic affordances while contesting their normative order. This entangled positioning reminds us that in the post-media public sphere, political expression is rarely pure or oppositional; it is negotiated, layered, and often ambivalent. Visibility can empower critique, but also reproduce hierarchies, feed platform economies, and legitimise reactionary discourse. Understanding publics today thus requires attention not only to those who speak truth to power, but also to those who play with power's instruments to amplify contentious, hybrid forms of expression.

To account for such dynamics, scholars like Kavada and Poell[33] suggest moving beyond static notions of "the public" or "counterpublics". Instead, they propose analysing publicness as a process, that is a series of mediated interactions that are temporally and spatially situated, and materially embedded in media infrastructures. This perspective foregrounds the role of technology not just as a backdrop, but as an active participant in the shaping of publics. Media, and particularly algorithmic platforms, do not simply host political discourse, they co-produce it, influencing what becomes visible, legitimate, or ignorable. In this new configuration, publicness becomes unstable, volatile, and uneven. Publics flare into being through moments of virality, only to dissolve as quickly when attention shifts, or algorithms reconfigure their priorities. Visibility is no longer a stable condition but a dynamic variable: what appears today as a central political issue may be algorithmically side-lined tomorrow. Understanding algorithmic publics thus requires not only examining who speaks and who listens, but more crucially interrogating how platforms structure intelligibility, relevance, and voice. What is at stake is not only the capacity to speak in public, but the very conditions under which speech becomes legi-

33 Kavada, A., & Poell, T. (2021), *From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media*, in "Communication Theory", *31*(2), pp. 190-208.

ble and consequential. In this shifting terrain, visibility is no longer a neutral backdrop to politics: it is politics by other means.

4. Power and Contestation

> "When we revolt, it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe."
> - Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

If platforms provide the infrastructure and protocols determine the logics of circulation, then power and contestation are the forces that animate the terrain of algorithmic politics. Algorithmic systems do not merely govern silently in the background, but provoke responses, generate friction, and open spaces for creative interruption. While their authority may largely remain invisible, it remains continually negotiated, contested, and, at times, subverted.

Hence, to reflect on algorithmic resistance means to reject the narrative of inevitability that surrounds these systems. As we have seen throughout this chapter, algorithms are not passive tools but denote socio-technical assemblages imbued with power. They encode decisions about what counts, who matters, and what is worth seeing. They rank, classify, and predict, and in doing so, they also exclude, obscure, and discipline. Yet this power is not absolute since algorithms are incomplete, leaky, and vulnerable to disruption. Resistance often emerges not through grand refusals, but in subtle, tactical engagements: ironic hashtags, aesthetic mimicry, the strategic misuse of platform affordances that invert the intended logic of algorithmic curation. These practices inhabit the cracks of the system: what cannot be indexed, what escapes the interface, what misfires the machine. Bonini and Treré[34] illustrate that such resistance is not a rare exception, but an endemic feature of algorithmic societies. It emerges ubiquitously across social life, manifesting in multiple registers – individual and collec-

34 Bonini, T., & Treré, E. (2024), *Algorithms of Resistance*, MIT Press.

tive, covert and visible, ephemeral and sustained. It is not confined to the digitally literate or politically organised, but surfaces wherever people seek to reassert agency against infrastructures that shape their visibility, value, or behaviour. Crucially, it is key to not to romanticise these acts. Resistance unfolds within profound asymmetries of power; its effects are often limited, its spaces constrained. Yet these practices matter, not because they overturn systems, but because they interrupt them, disrupt their presumed inevitability, and expose their contingencies. This ambivalence is further underscored by the condition of fringe democracy, a concept explored by Boccia Artieri et al.,[35] where non-mainstream actors engage with platforms from positions of partial integration and strategic dissent. Rather than rejecting algorithmic infrastructures outright, these actors inhabit them uneasily, exploiting virality logics, platform affordances, and meme cultures to gain traction. Their actions blend critique with irony, disinformation, and provocation, revealing both the fragility of these systems and the constraints that continue to shape them. Fringe publics do not stand outside the system but are deeply entangled with the very infrastructures they seek to contest. Their visibility is granted by the same protocols they aim to subvert, blurring the boundaries between resistance and complicity, between disruption and reproduction of platform logics. This ambiguity matters: visibility can empower critique, but it can also legitimise reactionary discourse, feed engagement economies, and reproduce inequality through other means. Tactical resistance is not inherently progressive. It is shaped by the same optimisation logics, extractive incentives, and gamified architectures it attempts to bend. As such, *fringe democracy* reminds us that contestation within algorithmic systems does not automatically produce liberation. It reveals the contradictions of programmable politics as well as the urgent need

35 Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025), *Fringe Democracy and the Platformization of the Public Sphere*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *1*(2025), pp. 3-22.

to think beyond mere adaptation. Dan McQuillan[36] offers a sharper refusal in his anti-fascist approach to AI. For him, the harms of contemporary AI systems are not hypothetical but already embedded in infrastructures that classify, optimise, and exclude. He argues that algorithmic systems enact violence not despite their neutrality, but precisely through it. His call is not to design "better" systems, but to refuse the logics of technocratic dehumanisation that underpin them. Yet not all resistance must operate through negation. As Sadowski[37] argues, political contestation can take many forms: from refusal and opt-out, to redesign and reimagination. It may involve withdrawing algorithmic tools from sensitive domains such as education or welfare, or designing systems grounded in justice, care, and pluralism rather than extraction and efficiency. Just as importantly, it requires recognising that values like transparency and accountability are not technical defaults but political commitments that must be intentionally embedded, vigilantly enforced, and actively protected. In this context, abolition becomes one imaginary among others, offering a critical horizon that encourages us to think beyond reform while remaining open to diverse and intersecting pathways of resistance and transformation. As Ruha Benjamin[38] reminds us in *Imagination: A Manifesto*, resistance must also be imaginative. It is not only a refusal of what is, but a demand for what could be. To imagine otherwise is not an act of escapism; it is a political intervention, a way of reclaiming the future from systems that relentlessly insist it must replicate the past. Within the post-media public sphere,[39] infrastructures of visibility are inseparable from infrastructures of power. In this context, resistance does not simply oppose algorithmic governance; it moves alongside it, disrupts its flows, and insists on the possibility of alternatives.

36 McQuillan, D. (2022), *Resisting AI: An Anti-fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence*, Bristol University Press.

37 Sadowski, J. (2020), *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*, MIT Press.

38 Benjamin, R. (2024), *Imagination: A Manifesto*, W.W. Norton & Company.

39 Palau-Sampio, D., & López-García, G. (2025), *News, Media, and Communication in a Polarized World: A Spanish Perspective*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science, Springer.

Conclusions: Navigating Ambivalence, Reclaiming Possibility

> "Imagination is a field of struggle, not an ephemeral afterthought that we have the luxury to dismiss or romanticize."
> - Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024)

This chapter has proposed a situated cartography of algorithmic politics, offering a conceptual and analytical framework to make sense of how digital infrastructures shape, govern, and disrupt political life. By mapping four key sites – platforms, protocols, publics, and power and contestation – it has traced the entanglement of algorithmic systems with processes of visibility, legitimacy, and resistance throughout the contemporary media ecosystem. Rather than limiting the focus to the ways in which algorithms threaten democratic ideals, I have argued for a broader perspective, one that recognises democracy as only one of several possible registers of the political. From shadow banning and predictive classification to tactical repurposing and memetic dissent, algorithmic politics does not present itself as a singular danger or opportunity, but instead reveals itself as a shifting terrain marked by tensions, ambivalences, and appropriations. Algorithms do not act in a consistent or totalising manner; they discipline and enable, obscure and amplify, dominate and malfunction. Engaging with this ambivalence is not a sign of analytical indecision but a necessary step toward understanding the political realities of computational governance.

In this cartographic approach, platforms are not passive arenas for expression but infrastructural environments that govern visibility, extract attention, and condition participation. Protocols, similarly, are not just sets of computational instructions; they are ideological devices that encode hierarchies and distribute power, often under the veil of neutrality and efficiency. These protocols modulate what becomes visible, who gains recognition, and how political possibilities are framed, constrained, or foreclosed. Publics, rather than being pre-constituted collectives, emerge as fluid and unstable configurations assembled

through algorithmic processes. They take shape in economies of attention, through the rhythms of recommendation systems and within the aesthetic constraints of platform architectures. Whether shaped by feminist collectives or far-right influencers, publics today are simultaneously performative and infrastructural, composed not only by the content they produce but by the algorithmic mechanisms that determine how that content is seen, shared, and legitimised.

Resistance, finally, does not reside in an external or oppositional space, nor does it manifest in a single, coherent form. As explored throughout this chapter, resistance emerges through a variety of practices that include tactical navigation, subversive mimicry, strategic exploitation of platform logics, and the construction of alternatives. These acts may originate from within dominant infrastructures or from their peripheries; they may be reactive, visionary, ironic, or ambivalent. What they share is a refusal to accept algorithmic governance as inevitable or invulnerable. To highlight the ambivalence of these acts is not to diminish their significance, but to underscore the complex conditions under which resistance unfolds.

This commitment to ambivalence should therefore be understood not as theoretical hesitation, but as a political intervention. Engaging critically with algorithmic politics does not mean denying that some systems are clearly oppressive or that others may enable emancipatory practices. Rather, it calls for resisting simplistic narratives that treat these outcomes as inherent or inevitable. It requires sustained attention to the frictions, negotiations, and contradictions through which algorithmic systems operate, and to the conditions under which they come to serve specific political ends. It also demands a commitment to reimagining what technological infrastructures can be. Following Ruha Benjamin's[40] call to "imagine otherwise", this chapter concludes by proposing that resistance must go beyond opposition. It must involve the construction of new political and technological imaginaries – ones that are not grounded in extraction, control, and optimisation,

40 Benjamin, R. (2024), *Imagination: A Manifesto*, W.W. Norton & Company.

but in care, plurality, justice, and accountability. This reorientation means shifting from predictive modelling to participatory deliberation, from algorithmic opacity to transparency, and from systems designed to automate to systems designed to imagine. Algorithmic politics is already embedded in our institutions, cultures, and relationships. It shapes how we govern, how we communicate, how we relate to others, and how we understand ourselves. But its meanings, implications, and trajectories remain open. The terrain is being contested through code, through protest, and through critical reflection. What we choose to do with this awareness is a political question, and it is one we must continue to confront.

Alternative or Fringe? Exploring the Italian Telegramsphere

Stefano Brilli and Elisabetta Zurovac

Introduction

In January 2021, in just 72 hours, Telegram gained 25 million new users, in what was described as one of the fastest digital exoduses in the history of social media.[1] Triggered by the privacy controversies surrounding WhatsApp, this event brought to the surface two dynamics that are central to today's digital landscape. On the one hand, it highlighted users' growing attention to data security, now widely recognised as a key skill within digital literacy. On the other, it revealed the capacity of publics to move *en masse* toward alternative platforms, often in response to crises of trust involving Big Tech.

This second element connects to discussions of users' migratory behaviour online, increasingly marked by a tension between centralisation and fragmentation. Mainstream platforms tend to concentrate power, visibility, and resources in a small number of global actors,

1 "RaiNews" (2021), *TECH Social, Telegram: record nuovi utenti, 25 milioni in 3 giorni*, https://www.rainews.it/archivio-rainews/articoli/telegram-record-nuovi-utenti-925ba402-151e-4fe2-9892-10802a4e29f1.html.

yet trust in these infrastructures is never unconditional. A fracture in the symbolic contract between user and platform can be enough to activate migratory flows toward spaces perceived as freer, less controlled, more "authentic". These movements are far from random. They also respond to cultural and identity logics: the search for anonymity, opposition to hegemonic logics, or the desire to belong to more like-minded communities.

It is within this context that what Abidin[2] calls *refracted publics* takes shape: publics that strategically reorganise themselves, moving across digital environments in search of new affordances and new spaces of visibility, often in rupture with surveillance capitalism[3] and with the algorithmic "rules of the game" of Big Tech. Telegram perfectly embodies this tension. Conceived as a response to state censorship and symbolically positioned against the mainstream, it has attracted over time highly diverse groups of users, brought together by a shared pursuit of autonomy and/or of strategic marginality. Yet precisely this openness, both technical and ideological, has also made Telegram fertile ground for controversial content, disinformation, and activities that are difficult to regulate.

This chapter aims to contextualise the phenomenon of so-called *fringe platforms*,[4] questioning the ambiguity of "marginality" in the contemporary scenario and using Telegram as a test case for a broader phenomenon that concerns both platforms and the public sphere. The chapter is organised into three main sections: first, a discussion of the concepts of marginality and alternativity in relation to the platformised public sphere; second, an analysis of Telegram focused on three key thematic clusters, namely its origins and features, the scholarship

2 Abidin, C. (2021), *From "networked publics" to "refracted publics": A companion framework for researching "below the radar" studies*, in "Social Media + Society", *7*(1), https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1177%2F20563051209844458&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

3 Zuboff, S. (2019), *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, PublicAffairs.

4 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University.

on its uses, and its coverage in the Italian press. The conclusion then asks how, today, the very meaning of "marginality" is being redefined through online spaces and practices.

1. Constructing the Margin in the Online Public Sphere

In order to understand the relationship between digital platforms and the concept of "the margin" within the public sphere, it is important to recognise that the distinction between centre and periphery online operates on multiple levels. To apply this dichotomy, we must analyse the different layers on which the relationship manifests and is reiterated.

The first, and simplest, meaning of "fringe" is a space that hosts discourses and practices at the boundaries of democratic debate, challenging its norms. Consider, for example, how the Stormfront hate community has served as an online reference point for white supremacism since the early days of the World Wide Web.[5] It embodies an ideological marginality that is deliberately antagonistic and anti-system. This definition of "fringe" as a discursive field predates the internet and the developments associated with platformisation in media studies. For example, sociologist Christopher Bail[6] speaks of a "fringe effect" to describe how extremist anti-Islam organisations gained increasing visibility in US mainstream newspapers and on television in the aftermath of 11 September 2001.

Yet it is not only content that defines the margin. In its early phases, the very nature of the internet as a medium marked a threshold of marginality in relation to everyday offline life. In Web 1.0, dominated by imaginaries of cyberspace, anonymity, and identity play, the internet appeared as a space inclined toward the margin. So much so that various scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s turned to the concept of

5 Törnberg, A., & Törnberg, P. (2024), *Intimate communities of hate: Why social media fuels far-right extremism*, Routledge.

6 Bail, C.A. (2012), *The fringe effect: Civil society organizations and the evolution of media discourse about Islam since the September 11th attacks*, in "American Sociological Review", *77*(6), pp. 855-879.

"liminality" to describe it as a space where the rules of ordinary life exerted less force. The dislocation between physical space and digital identity fueled an "ecstatic potentiality",[7] in which "everywhere is any place": niches and mainstream seemed equidistant, lacking a centripetal force capable of distinguishing centre and periphery.

This view of the digital as a decentralising force persisted even beyond the 2000s, when the popularisation of the internet meant it was no longer an "alternative threshold" in itself. At the cultural level, theories such as the "long tail"[8] celebrated the digital's capacity to level niche and mainstream, making niche hobbies and experimental artistic expressions appear equidistant from mass culture. However, such narratives underestimate the dynamism of the processes through which the mainstream is defined.

With the rise of social media and the centrality of algorithmic visibility, the "centre" is no longer determined by traditional editorial choices (prime-time scheduling or mass distribution), but emerges retroactively through circulation: what is noticed, shared, and optimised for algorithmic selection produces a new mainstream. In this way, a new cultural topology takes shape within the dominant platforms of the first two decades of the 2000s. Although content that differs in form, audience, and style coexists more easily than within traditional media, the need to distinguish centre and periphery does not disappear.

First, because the internet not only hosts the mainstream of other media, but also continuously produces its own "hits" and "catchphrases", as the dominance of virality as a cultural logic clearly shows. Second, users develop classificatory practices to define their own position within platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter.[9] For example, folksonomic mechanisms, that is, bottom-up tagging, separate the "good part" of a platform from its "weird part". Around 2011, the ex-

7 Waskul, D.D. (2005), *Ekstasis and the Internet: Liminality and computer-mediated communication*, in "New Media & Society", *7*(1), pp. 47-63, p. 57.

8 Anderson, C. (2006), *The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more*, Hachette Books.

9 Boccia Artieri, G. (2012), S*tati di connessione. Pubblici, cittadini e consumatori nella (Social) Network Society*, FrancoAngeli.

pression "I'm in That Weird Part of YouTube"[10] began circulating within YouTube's digital folklore[11] to describe the sense of disorientation produced by incomprehensible or eccentric content suggested by the recommendation system. Initially perceived as a deviation from the user's search intent, this disorientation later became a subcultural aesthetic canon embodied by specific forms of user-generated content.

Around 2015, even on platforms then considered the mainstream social media par excellence, namely Facebook and Twitter, niches proudly labeled as "weird" began to form. The expressions "Weird Twitter" and "Weird Facebook"[12] started to circulate to identify pages, groups, and profiles cultivating an aesthetic of disorientation, strangeness, nonsense, and chaos. Precisely when these platforms appeared increasingly continuous with everyday life and personal identity, a desire emerged to recover a liminality that had been lost.[13] In this sense, unlike the early internet, we see an affective geography in which content-creation practices generate space, rather than the other way around. Defining content as alternative or marginal thus activates a process of *enplacement* that spatialises the materially "flat" reality of digital interfaces.

This brief overview helps us reflect not only on the coexistence of multiple margins in the digital ecosystem, but also on the variety of ways distance from the centre, or exclusion from it, can be understood. There is a content-based marginality, when we speak of discursive spaces at the limits of democracy, as in the case of Stormfront. There is also an access-based marginality, understood as material separation from the everyday internet, typical of early web phases or, more recently, the dark web. Finally, there is a marginality grounded in an imagined position, in which the margin is less a material or ideological place than a symbolic space, such as the "weird parts" of mainstream

10 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/im-in-that-weird-part-of-youtube.
11 de Seta, G. (2020), *Digital folklore*, in Hunsinger, J., Allen, M., & Klastrup, L. (Eds.), *Second international handbook of internet research*, Springer, pp. 167-183.
12 https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/02/weird-facebook-became-cool-again.html.
13 Tanni, V. (2023), *Exit reality: vaporwave, backrooms, weirdcore e altri paesaggi oltre la soglia*, NERO editions.

platforms, defined through shared perceptions more than structural boundaries.

Over the last decade, however, we have witnessed a convergence between these forms of marginality in online environments. The mainstream social platform model, understood as the infrastructure of a new public sphere built on *networked publics*,[14] has gradually proven increasingly inadequate for capturing ongoing transformations. On the one hand, growing polarisation, informational disorder, and incivility within public debate[15] have resulted in a rethinking of platform governance policies. On the other, publicness and the persistence of digital content, once defining traits, have given way to an increasing emphasis on privacy and ephemerality.[16]

Among the consequences of these processes, we observe the emergence of spaces where the three dimensions of marginality described above converge: environments hosting extremist or explicitly anti-system communities, active on platforms external to the mainstream ecosystem and which, at the level of imagination, perceive (and narrate) themselves as anti-mainstream communities of practice. In these contexts, ideological extremism intersects with technical marginality and with an oppositional ethos that feeds a sense of belonging and legitimacy rooted in exclusion from dominant platforms.

14 boyd, d. (2010), *Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications*, in Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*, Taylor & Francis, pp. 39-58.

15 Bentivegna, S., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2021), *Voci della democrazia: il futuro del dibattito pubblico*, Il Mulino.

16 Boccia Artieri, G., Brilli, S., & Zurovac, E. (2021), *Below the radar: Private groups, locked platforms, and ephemeral content – Introduction to the special issue*, in "Social Media + Society", *7*(1), https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=-Below+the+radar%3A+Private+groups%2C+locked+platforms%2C+and+ephemeral+content+%E2%80%93+Introduction+to+the+special+issue&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

2. Deplatformisation, Fringe, and Alt-tech: The New Lexicon of Marginality in the Platform Society

Within this context, the concept of *deplatformisation* emerges as a key dynamic in the new configuration of the online public sphere. The term refers to the process through which certain actors, or in some cases entire networks and communities, are excluded permanently or indefinitely from major digital platforms after violating their rules of conduct. In milder, often preventive forms, the sanction may take the form of demonetisation: the account remains active but is deprived of tools to generate revenue, for example through advertising or donations.

In the platformised economy, where visibility functions as a crucial currency, such interventions directly affect the public life of those involved. Deplatformisation, therefore, is not only a content-moderation practice, but a form of social moderation: it acts on the public legitimacy of actors, particularly the most visible ones, who end up becoming exemplary cases through which the threshold of what is acceptable is communicated. Unlike other regulatory tools, this process is also sometimes influenced by public pressure: organised groups actively push platforms, typically reluctant to enact drastic measures, to limit the visibility of those spreading hate, discrimination, or disinformation. After Trump's election in 2016, for example, the activist group Sleeping Giants launched campaigns urging advertisers and financial providers (such as PayPal and Stripe) to cut ties with sites like Breitbart News or 8chan.[17]

At least two boundary-making processes are at stake around deplatformisation and demonetisation: on the one hand, the definition of what is admissible in the digital public sphere; on the other, the negotiation of platforms' newly centralised power and the degree of influence civil society can exercise over it. In this sense, deplatformisation, understood as a public form of moderation, has become one of the

17 Hill, S. (2024), *"Definitely not in the business of wanting to be associated": Examining public relations in a deplatformization controversy*, in "Convergence", *30*(6), pp. 2131-2151.

main devices through which the centre/periphery and mainstream/alternative relationship is structured online. It is also on this terrain that a shift occurs in the very definition of "what alternative means".

The hypothesis proposed here is that alternativity can no longer be understood solely as the product of conflict in struggles for voice acquisition, but must also be understood as a position increasingly shaped by platforms' governance strategies. What is now considered *fringe* or *alt* is not defined so much by distance from public or media consensus, but by exclusion from mechanisms regulating and distributing digital speech. Alternativity increasingly appears defined by a position within an "ecology of the sayable", rather than by a position within struggles for cultural hegemony.

The geography drawn by deplatformisation, however, is anything but stable. On the one hand, these flows are often reversible, consider the reinstatement of Trump or Andrew Tate on Twitter after Elon Musk's acquisition. On the other, the growing simplicity with which new platforms and parallel services can be launched reduces the effectiveness of exclusion as a containment measure.

Empirically, existing studies do not offer a uniform picture of the effectiveness of these policies. Rogers[18] showed that removing so-called "extreme celebrities" from mainstream social media significantly reduced their visibility and disrupted cycles of monetisation and attention. Jhaver et al.[19] and Ali et al.[20] likewise find declines in engagement and visibility among the followers of banned figures. Other studies,

18 Rogers, R. (2020), *Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media*, in "European Journal of Communication", *35*(3), pp. 213-229.

19 Jhaver, S., Boylston, C., Yang, D., & Bruckman, A. (2021), *Evaluating the effectiveness of deplatforming as a moderation strategy on Twitter*, in "Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction", *5*(CSCW2), pp. 1-30.

20 Ali, S., Saeed, M.H., Aldreabi, E., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Zannettou, S., & Stringhini, G. (2021), *Understanding the effect of deplatforming on social networks*, in "Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021", pp. 187-195.

such as Horta Ribeiro et al.[21] and Russo et al.,[22] point instead to unintended counter-effects: increased toxic activity on less regulated platforms or, in some cases, greater radicalisation among remaining followers in response to the perceived attack on their reference figures. Exclusion can become confirmation of a suspicion already deeply rooted in many anti-mainstream communities, namely that they are targets of systemic censorship.[23] This mechanism feeds a sense of exclusion, reinforces identity dynamics, and stimulates the search for alternative sources of support, such as direct crowdfunding, which strengthens cohesion and self-sufficiency within these groups.[24]

It is important to clarify that the aim here is not to delegitimise deplatformisation as a measure to protect the public sphere, but to recognise its complexity and its costs. In a fragmented media environment where it is technically simple to create new connective spaces, exclusion can translate not only into migration, but also into reorganisation and reinforcement of alternative discursive circuits. Rather than erasing content or silencing a voice, it may end up producing new forms of centrality in the periphery.

This does not mean that platforms should view protective measures with suspicion. It does mean, however, that the current socio-media environment, with its capacity to sustain a higher degree of fragmentation than in the past, increases the complexity and cost of exclud-

21 Horta Ribeiro, M., Hosseinmardi, H., West, R., & Watts, D.J. (2023), *Deplatforming did not decrease Parler users' activity on fringe social media*, in "PNAS nexus", *2*(3), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369434522_Deplatforming_did_not_decrease_Parler_users'_activity_on_fringe_social_media.

22 Russo, G., Verginer, L., Ribeiro, M.H., & Casiraghi, G. (2023), *Spillover of antisocial behavior from fringe platforms: The unintended consequences of community banning*, in "Proceedings of the international AAAI conference on web and social media", *17*, pp. 742-753.

23 Grusauskaite, K., Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2024), *Reactionary exiles. How conspiracy theorists deal with socio-technological exclusion*, in "Cultural Sociology", https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1177%2F17499755241248726&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

24 Siapera, E. (2023), *Alt Tech and the public sphere: Exploring Bitchute as a political media infrastructure*, in "European Journal of Communication", *38*(5), pp. 446-465; Wade, M., Baker, S.A., & Walsh, M.J. (2024), *Crowdfunding platforms as conduits for ideological struggle and extremism: On the need for greater regulation and digital constitutionalism*, in "Policy & Internet", *16*(1), pp. 149-172.

ing toxic or anti-system voices, precisely because both the technical potentials (of platforms) and the discursive potentials (of groups) to transform exclusion into usable material for building new fragments of the public sphere are now greater.

To understand the shape of the expanding ecosystem of so-called "alt-tech" platforms, one of the most useful contributions is Julia Ebner's. In *Replatforming Unreality*,[25] Ebner maps platforms born, or repurposed, in response to the growing moderation of mainstream social media. This constellation of digital spaces, where moderation is minimal or absent and where disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy content can circulate freely, does not simply function as a set of "refuges". It constitutes cultural and political spaces where antagonistic collective identities are built, and where shared imaginaries and lexicons consolidate, such as repertoires of memetic references and hostile frames directed at political, scientific, and journalistic elites.

Ebner proposes a four-part classification. The first category comprises platforms created by extremists for extremists: environments explicitly designed to host radical content and promote identitarian, supremacist, or anti-democratic worldviews. Examples include Hatreon, an alternative to Patreon for banned creators, or Patriot Peer, designed to facilitate networking among members of the radical right. The second category includes ultra-libertarian platforms, formally created to defend freedom of expression in absolute terms but which in practice tolerate, or sometimes incentivise, the spread of hate speech and conspiratorial content. Gab, Minds, and Thinkspot are emblematic: born without an explicit ideological orientation, these environments rapidly filled with users excluded from other spaces, becoming ideologically marked places. The third type is *hijacked platforms*: digital spaces created for other purposes (gaming, group organisation, file sharing) that have been "colonised" by radical actors thanks to flexible architectures and weak moderation. Discord is the best-known case:

25 Ebner, J. (2019), *Replatforming unreality*, in "Journal of Design and Science", *6*, pp. 1-14.

designed for gaming communities, it has been widely used by supremacist groups to organise in closed, anonymous, and hard-to-monitor channels. Finally, the fourth category is that of *fringe platforms*. For Ebner, these are the discursive and subcultural hubs of digital extremism. Environments such as 4chan, 8chan (now 8kun), or Endchan are characterised by anonymity, the fleeting nature of discussions, and an aesthetic of disorder, which favours the production of radical and toxic frames later re-launched into more visible spaces.

This last category is among the most contested in current academic and journalistic vocabularies. Tim de Winkel's[26] definition of *fringe platforms*, for example, differs from Ebner's in both approach and focus. Ebner associates the concept with the nature and radicality of content and with specific communicative codes linked to an aesthetic of the margin. De Winkel instead adopts a more structural perspective: fringe platforms are not defined by what they contain, but by how they position themselves in relation to the mainstream platform ecosystem. They are oppositional spaces emerging in reaction to the concentration of power in large platforms, contesting their moderation and algorithmic logics, their economic model, and their technical infrastructures. Although minoritarian, this field also includes political and technological projects claiming autonomy and decentralisation in modes of production and monetisation, not only in terms of free speech.

Thus, if for Ebner fringe platforms are incubators of cultural and discursive radicality, for de Winkel they represent antagonistic infrastructures, alternatives to dominant forms of digital governance. Both approaches, despite different emphases, converge on the idea that the marginality of the alt-tech universe is not only a product of exclusion, but is constructed through a mix of political antagonism and market opportunism.

26 de Winkel, T. (2023), *Fringe platforms: An analysis of contesting alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms in a platformized public sphere*, Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University.

From what has been outlined so far, we can identify a set of elements distinguishing the sense of alternativity at work in alt-tech and fringe-platform semantics from that developed in debates on alternative and community media. The latter, well before the rise of digital platforms, has always been characterised by definitional difficulty. Even if scholars do not fully agree on universal features, one shared point is that alternative media should not be understood simply as containers of content different from the mainstream, but as forms of alternative media production.[27]

It is significant, in this sense, that many alt-tech platforms would hardly fit any of the four approaches to alternative media identified by Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier.[28] The first is the community media approach, ce on community members' active participation in managing and organising the medium. The second emphasises small-scale, independent, non-hierarchical media producing non-dominant discourses. The third understands alternative media as counter-hegemonic, a "third voice" between state and commercial media. Finally, the fourth is the rhizomatic media approach, which functions as connective nodes among social movements, institutions, and other actors.

In alt-tech and fringe platforms, by contrast, opposition to the mainstream is articulated primarily through a rhetoric of free speech, often in negative terms, as a rejection of moderation, rather than through a genuine challenge to the productive, organisational, or ownership models of the digital ecosystem. In other words, the claim to alternativity remains within the boundaries of platformisation, where the platform continues to operate as a centralised service provider, rather than as a medium truly co-managed or transformed by its users. This represents a significant discontinuity with the theoretical and political genealogy of alternative media, where the "alternative" was not only

27 Atton, C. (2002), *Alternative media*, SAGE Publications; Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B., & Carpentier, N. (2007), *Understanding alternative media*, McGraw-Hill Education,; Fuchs, C. (2010), *Alternative media as critical media*, in "European journal of social theory", *13*(2), pp. 173-192.

28 Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B., & Carpentier, N. (2007), *Understanding alternative media*, McGraw-Hill Education.

in content and rules, but above all in the mediation processes and the power relations they implied.

A further difference follows: the relationship between mediation and collective identity. In traditional alternative media, the platform is often a direct expression of the group that creates and inhabits it, establishing a strong bond between media production and sense of belonging. Mediation is integral to an identity process: it is not simply a matter of transmitting alternative content, but of doing so through organisational and productive forms that reflect shared values. In alt-tech and fringe platforms, by contrast, the relationship to collective identity appears weaker. Since, by their very positioning as facilitators of free expression, they do not tie media use to any form of belonging, the relationship rests more on a principle of differentiation, based on an "anti-" rhetoric, than on identification. A shift, one might say, from alternativity as identity to alternativity as contingency.

In this sense, the digital spaces discussed here seem to occupy less the position of a counter-public, understood as aspiring to exit marginality, and more the logic of a *parallel space*.[29] Their logic of the alternative is less aligned with the meaning inherited from alternative media studies and perhaps closer to the distinction Raymond Williams[30] draws between *oppositional culture* and *alternative culture*: the former aims to critique actively and even overturn dominant hegemonies and power structures, while the latter builds different, separate paths alongside hegemony, coexisting next to it.

In light of these reflections, we can now turn to the Italian case of the *Telegramsphere*.

29 Donovan, J., Lewis, B., & Friedberg, B. (2019), *Parallel Ports: Sociotechnical Change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech*, in Fielitz, M., & Thurston, N. (2019), *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 49.

30 Williams, R. (1980), *Culture and materialism*, Verso Books.

3. Understanding Telegram

To understand the ambivalent role that Telegram plays today in the digital ecosystem, we will analyse three fundamental dimensions: the history and technical features of the platform; the way it has been studied by the sociology of digital media; and its coverage in the press, observing how Italian mainstream media have presented it.

3.1 Genesis and Characteristics of the Platform

Telegram can be defined as an instant messaging platform, launched in 2013 by brothers Pavel Durov and Nikolai Durov, already known for founding the so-called "Russian Facebook", *VKontakte*. From the outset, the platform's identity became intertwined with the tensions Pavel Durov had with the Russian government.[31] After refusing to hand over *VKontakte* user data to the authorities, he was forced to relinquish control of the social network.

This episode represents both a biographical and ideological turning point. In response, Telegram was designed to guarantee the privacy of communications and to provide an alternative to mainstream spaces, which were often perceived as less secure or more inclined to cooperate with state institutions. For this reason, the platform has distinguished itself since its early days through a strong emphasis on privacy and freedom of expression, elements that have become central to its identity. In practice, this commitment has taken shape through a series of structural choices that make Telegram a space that extends well beyond simple instant messaging. It differs from other applications of this type through a combination of technical features and its broader cultural and political positioning.

Unlike *WhatsApp* (launched in 2009 and acquired by Meta in 2014) or *Signal* (a non-profit app focused exclusively on privacy), Telegram adopts a hybrid model that combines messaging functions, typical

31 Hakim, D. (2014), *Once Celebrated in Russia, the Programmer Pavel Durov Chooses Exile*, in "The New York Times", https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/technology/once-celebrated-in-russia-programmer-pavel-durov-chooses-exile.html.

social-network tools, and a highly scalable infrastructure approach. One of the most relevant aspects concerns its encryption model. *Signal* represents the most advanced reference point in this field, thanks to the adoption of end-to-end encryption by default for all communications, the absence of cloud backups, and a minimal data-collection policy. *WhatsApp*, although it also provides end-to-end encryptions for all chats, raises concerns related to metadata collection and the use of cloud backup systems that are often not encrypted. Telegram, by contrast, applies end-to-end encryption only to secret chats, whereas in standard chats, messages are encrypted during transmission but stored in an accessible form on the platform's servers. This enables extremely smooth multi-device synchronisation but entails greater exposure in terms of privacy.[32]

In terms of functionality, Telegram offers a significantly broader range of features than most instant messaging applications. It does not require users to publicly share their phone numbers and supports groups of up to 200,000 members. It also allows the creation of public or private channels (spaces where only administrators can publish content), automated bots for content management, and the sharing of files up to 2 GB in size. These technological affordances transform the application into a complex socio-technical ecosystem.

A distinctive feature of Telegram is the possibility for users to create a public nickname associated with a handle (@username). This allows individuals to participate in groups and channels without revealing their phone numbers, marking a significant departure from the dominant model of instant messaging applications and enabling participation while maintaining a degree of anonymity. On Telegram, digital identity is therefore not necessarily tied to pre-existing offline relationships, as is typically the case with messaging apps that rep-

32 Johansen, C., Mujaj, A., Arshad, H., & Noll, J. (2021), *The snowden phone: a comparative survey of secure instant messaging mobile applications*, in "Security and Communication Networks", *1*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326550093_The_Snowden_Phone_A_Comparative_Survey_of_Secure_Instant_Messaging_Mobile_Applications_authors'_version.

licate the structure of the telephone contact list. Instead, identity is constructed through a selective and performative presence mediated by visual and textual elements (such as profile pictures, bios, and usernames) and often shaped by shared thematic interests. Indeed, many Telegram groups and channels can be discovered through the platform's internal search function.

In this sense, Telegram resembles a modular communicative environment, closer to a dynamic forum or a thematic public chat than to a traditional messaging service.

This configuration facilitates the emergence of publics that are difficult to map and enables communicative practices less constrained by norms of personal reputation or traceability. The possibility of hosting extremely large groups breaks with the "intimate" logic typical of one-to-one messaging or small family and work groups that characterise other messaging platforms. A group with 200,000 members constitutes a quasi-public space, situated somewhere between a chat and an online forum.

From an interactional perspective, this scale turns communication into a semi-public and asymmetrical process: not everyone speaks, not everyone is read, and implicit hierarchies between "central speakers" and "silent audiences" become more pronounced. Participation is often passive and observational, resembling the behaviour of lurkers in forum-based environments. At the same time, the possibility of belonging to very large groups reinforces a sense of community among users who share ideological positions, interests, or common causes. From the perspective of symbolic power, these groups can become spaces of mutual legitimation, where alternative narratives are constructed, and shared interpretative frames are reinforced.[33]

Channels, in turn, function as tools for vertical content dissemination, allowing administrators to broadcast messages to followers who may forward (and sometimes comment on) individual posts. This con-

33 Zurovac, E. (2023), *Screenshot society. Come le fotografie dello schermo raccontano il nostro stare online*, FrancoAngeli.

figuration combines the broadcasting logic of traditional media with the accessibility of mobile messaging apps, enabling the creation of autonomous information networks that can reach large audiences.

The possibility of sharing very large files without forced compression makes Telegram an effective distribution channel: documents, videos, e-books, films, and software can circulate quickly and directly without passing through external cloud services. From a cultural and political perspective, this feature strengthens Telegram's role as an alternative archiving infrastructure, frequently used to store and distribute marginal, controversial, or otherwise difficult-to-access content, including materials removed from other platforms. Telegram's file-centric architecture therefore resembles a centralised version of peer-to-peer distribution systems more than a conventional messaging service. This infrastructure enables not only educational and participatory uses, but also the circulation of borderline, pirated, or restricted content, as will be discussed later.

Finally, Telegram supports bots that allow the automation of a wide range of actions: from scheduled messaging and group moderation to content distribution and the management of complex interactive interfaces (i.e. quizzes, chatbots, archives, and mini-applications). Compared to other messaging platforms, which impose strict limits on such functionalities, Telegram provides a semi-programmable infrastructure that can be accessed even by users without advanced technical expertise. This can facilitate forms of community self-organisation in which bots become shared tools for coordination and service provision. As with all technologies, understanding Telegram requires examining not only its technical affordances but also the ways in which these affordances are used and interpreted by its users, as discussed in the following sections.

3.2 Patterns of Use

From a socio-political perspective, Telegram can therefore be understood as an ambivalent infrastructure. On the one hand, it has sup-

ported protest movements and dissident communication in authoritarian contexts,[34] becoming a prominent example of digital resistance to state surveillance as well as a site of tension between mechanisms of control and practices of resistance.[35] In this sense, Telegram functions not only as an operational tool but also as an affective and symbolic environment in which collective identities are developed, and forms of collective action are experimented with.

On the other hand, the same technical features that enable these practices (limited centralised moderation, possibilities for anonymity, and high scalability) have also made Telegram an attractive platform for the circulation of borderline, conspiratorial, or illegal content. Wijermars and Lokot[36] note that the platform's ability to withstand attempts by the Russian government to block it has reinforced Telegram's reputation as an alternative space of freedom, often chosen precisely in opposition to institutional forms of control. In short, Telegram has increasingly come to be perceived as a "safe haven" for political dissidents, ideological minorities, and controversial communities.[37]

As a result, a growing body of scholarship has focused on the use of Telegram by extremist groups, radicalised networks, and deplatformed communities. Studies conducted in different countries show that Telegram has become a refuge platform for far-right movements, conspiracy-oriented communities such as QAnon, jihadist networks, and neo-Nazi groups, many of which were previously removed from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.[38]

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34 Urman A., Ho J.C.-t., & Katz S. (2021), *Analyzing protest mobilization on Tele-gram: The case of 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill movement in Hong Kong*, in "PLoS ONE", *16*(10), https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0256675.

35 Akbari, A., & Gabdulhakov, R. (2019), *Platform surveillance and resistance in Iran and Russia: The case of Telegram*, in "Surveillance & Society", *17*(1/2), pp. 223-231.

36 Wijermars, M., & Lokot, T. (2022), *Is Telegram a "harbinger of freedom"? The performance, practices, and perception of platforms as political actors in authoritarian states*, in "Post-Soviet Affairs", *38*(1-2), pp. 125-145.

37 Peeters, S., & Willaert, T. (2022), *Telegram and digital methods: Mapping networked conspiracy theories through platform affordances*, in "M/C", *25*(1), pp. 1-10.

38 Prucha N. (2016), *IS and the Jihadist information highway – Projecting influence and religious identity via Telegram*, in "Perspectives On Terrorism", *10*(6); Urman A., &

In the Italian context, some studies have examined Telegram groups dedicated to the exchange of adult content, highlighting the emergence of forms of mediated intimacy built around practices such as voice messaging,[39] as well as the use of the platform for the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images.[40]

Other research has instead focused on Telegram's informational role and its function in the circulation of news,[41] opinions, and alternative narratives. Several empirical studies[42] show that the platform hosts a highly heterogeneous information ecosystem in which professional journalism, verified scientific content, "junk news", and conspiracy theories coexist. What distinguishes Telegram from other digital environments is that information is often received in private or semi-private settings (such as closed groups and channels) while remaining immediately shareable, commentable, and potentially subject to viral circulation.

The private reception of news disrupts the traditional distinction between individual media consumption and public dissemination, fa-

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Katz S. (2020), *What they do in the shadows: examining the far-right networks on Telegram*, in "Information, Communication & Society", https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1080%2F1369118X.2020.1803946&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8; Hoseini, M., Melo, P., Benevenuto, F., Feldmann, A., & Zannettou, S. (2021), *On the Globalization of the QAnon Conspiracy Theory Through Telegram*, airXiv Preprint, https://arxiv.org/abs/2105.13020.

39 Boccia Artieri, G., Brilli, S., & Zurovac, E. (2020), *Voices from the locker room: a qualitative analysis of voice messages within Italian NSFW groups*, AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.5210%2Fspir.v2020i0.11174&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

40 Semenzin, S., & Bainotti, L. (2020), *The use of Telegram for non-consensual dissemination of intimate images: Gendered affordances and the construction of masculinities*, in "Social Media + Society", *6*(4), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305120984453.

41 Zurovac, E. (2025), *Screenshot News Within Italian Fringe Telegram Channels*, in "Comunicazioni Sociali", *25*(3), https://ora.uniurb.it/retrieve/a19e7e73-35d3-4091-98d0-601c0b0b2648/Zurovac%20%281%29.pdf.

42 Walther, S., & McCoy, A. (2021), *US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism*, in "Perspectives on Terrorism", *15*(2), pp. 100-124, https://pt.icct.nl/article/us-extremism-telegram-fueling-disinformation-conspiracy-theories-and-accelerationism; Herasimenka, A., Bright, J., Knuutila, A., & Howard, P.N. (2022), *Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: the case of telegram*, in "Journal of Information Technology & Politics", *20*(2), pp. 198-212.

cilitating a hybridisation between information and group affiliation. A study conducted in Italian Telegram channels linked to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines[43] shows that information is frequently shared through what might be described as "screenshot news": articles, tweets, graphs, or posts captured as screenshots and redistributed within Telegram channels or groups, often without context or traceable links. Despite this lack of contextualisation, such information is often perceived as credible and subsequently recirculated through user sharing.

In these environments, therefore, information is validated not only (or even primarily) through its factual accuracy, but also through mechanisms of belonging. Groups and channels tend to function less as neutral communication tools and more as narrative devices. Users who encounter a piece of news within a Telegram channel often do so as members of a community that shares similar worldviews, making them more likely to respond favourably and contribute to its diffusion.

Research by Alvisi and colleagues,[44] conducted on public Italian Telegram channels and groups, similarly highlights a strong degree of thematic and ideological homophily. Within these spaces, narratives associated with both the far-left and the far-right intersect, particularly around specific geopolitical issues. Further reinforcing the idea that Telegram operates as a gathering space for like-minded users (often with radicalising effects) is the platform's internal channel recommendation system. These recommendation mechanisms can expose users to ideologically biased content even in the absence of active searching, thereby reinforcing echo chamber dynamics.[45]

43 Zurovac, E. (2023), *Screenshot society. Come le fotografie dello schermo raccontano il nostro stare online*, FrancoAngeli.

44 Alvisi, L., Tardelli, S., & Tesconi, M. (2025), *Mapping the italian telegram ecosystem: Communities, toxicity, and hate speech*, arXivPreprint, https://arxiv.org/abs/2504.19594.

45 Peeters, S., & Willaert, T. (2022), *Telegram and digital methods: Mapping networked conspiracy theories through platform affordances*, in "M/C", *25*(1), pp. 1-10.

3.3 Public Discourses

The way Telegram has been portrayed in the Italian media has evolved considerably over time, reflecting not only the platform's technical and strategic development but also the gradual maturation of the national debate around "alternative" digital media. In its early years, Telegram was largely framed with technological curiosity and a sense of innovation-driven optimism. The platform was perceived primarily as a new opportunity within the digital media ecosystem. Several Italian news outlets (such as Wired Italia, Vice News, and La Stampa) began experimenting with Telegram channels as novel tools for news distribution.[46]

Between 2018 and 2020, however, the tone of Italian media coverage began to shift. Telegram increasingly became associated with problematic content, starting with the widespread circulation of pirated newspapers and books through channels commonly referred to as "Telegram newsstands". These practices were strongly contested by publishers and reported to the authorities.[47] During this period, Telegram began to be framed not merely as a platform but as a technological actor perceived as opaque (if not outright irresponsible) and largely beyond the reach of Italian and European regulation. Media narratives started describing it as a "digital free zone", reinforcing the idea of a platform resistant to institutional oversight. The discourse gradually took on a more securitised tone: Telegram was repositioned from a space of technological experimentation to a site of deviance, with growing attention paid to the circulation of illicit content.

Two episodes were particularly influential in shaping this narrative. One was a major operation conducted by the Italian Postal Police against revenge pornography networks operating on Telegram, widely reported by Il Fatto Quotidiano in 2020. Another was the mass seizure of Telegram channels distributing pirated PDFs, ordered by the

46 EJO - European Journalism Observatory (2016), *I giornali italiani arrivano su Telegram*, https://it.ejo.ch/digitale/i-giornali-italiani-scoprono-telegram.

47 Monaco D. (2020), *Giornali e non solo: cosa si "vende" nelle edicole pirata su Telegram*, https://www.wired.it/internet/regole/2020/04/23/telegram-edicole-giornali/.

Bari Public Prosecutor's Office and covered extensively in the press.[48] Within Italian media discourse, Telegram increasingly came to be framed as a technological infrastructure of risk.

Over time, media coverage of the platform became even more closely intertwined with criminal cases and illicit activities. In 2021, for instance, the Italian Postal Police carried out "Operation Fake Pass", aimed at dismantling Telegram networks involved in the sale of counterfeit COVID-19 vaccination certificates.[49] Another widely covered episode occurred in 2023, following a gang rape case in Palermo. In the aftermath of the assault, Telegram groups with more than 14,000 members were created with the explicit aim of locating and sharing videos of the attack.[50]

In 2024, Italian media reported on two major police operations: one targeting a network of Telegram groups involved in neo-Nazi propaganda,[51] and another dismantling network connected to child sexual abuse material.[52] In the same year, media coverage also highlighted the presence on the platform of a bot known as *DeepNude*, capable of generating manipulated images that simulate the removal of women's clothing from photographs.[53] In 2025, journalists uncovered the existence of the Telegram group "Girls of Vinted", where photos and sales

48 Borrillo, M. (2020), *Telegram, sequestrati 17 canali: diffondevano Pdf pirata di giornali e libri*, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_aprile_27/pdf-pirata-giornali-libri-17-canali-telegram-via-sequestri-7d1066bc-886c-11ea-96e3-c7b28bb4a705.shtml.

49 "La Stampa" (2021), *Green Pass falsi in vendita online tra 150 e 500 euro: 32 i canali Telegram sequestrati da Polizia*, https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2021/08/09/news/green-pass-falsi-in-vendita-online-tra-150-e-500-euro-32-i-canali-telegram-sequestrati-da-polizia-1.40583077/.

50 "Open" (2023), *La chat degli orrori su Telegram dopo lo stupro di Palermo, parte la caccia: "Avete il video?"*, https://www.open.online/2023/08/22/telegram-chat-caccia-video-stupro-palermo/.

51 Di Vito, M. (2024), *Presi i neonazisti di Telegram: "Pensavano di colpire Meloni"*, https://ilmanifesto.it/presi-i-neonazisti-di-telegram-pensavano-di-colpire-meloni.

52 "RaiNews" (2024), *Pedopornografia: infiltrati Polizia su Telegram, 3 arresti e 33 perquisizioni*, https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/10/pedopornografia-infiltrati-polizia-su-telegram-3-arresti-e-33-perquisizioni-e8e2671b-f5b8-439d-960f-a82c86520b8e.html.

53 "Fanpage" (2024), *Siamo entrati nelle chat di Telegram dove il corpo di una ragazza vale solo qualche click*, https://www.fanpage.it/innovazione/tecnologia/siamo-entrati-nelle-chat-di-telegram-dove-il-corpo-di-una-ragazza-vale-solo-qualche-click/.

information belonging to women selling items on Vinted were shared without consent, leading to waves of sexually explicit messages directed at them.[54]

More broadly, the media representation of Telegram has also become entangled with geopolitical narratives that emerged following the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Within this context, the platform has frequently been portrayed as a vehicle for Russian propaganda and positioned as a central node in the circulation of transnational disinformation.[55] Telegram increasingly appears in media narratives as a key infrastructure for information warfare, propaganda campaigns, and visual manipulation.[56] Disinformation is thus framed not merely as a technical issue but as a symbolic weapon capable of reshaping the boundaries between truth and falsehood, information and propaganda, and between "legitimate" platforms and fringe digital spaces.

A major turning point in the public representation of Telegram occurred with the arrest of Pavel Durov in Paris in August 2024. The accusations (ranging from money laundering to drug trafficking and failure to cooperate with authorities) framed Telegram as a platform potentially subject to criminal liability and brought the question of platform responsibility to the forefront of public debate.[57] Durov's arrest also opened a broader discussion about the biography and political positioning of the platform's founder, as well as about the geopolitics of digital infrastructures and the politics of technological sovereignty. Particularly at a moment when the rise of Donald Trump has been ac-

54 "Il Post" (2025), *L'inchiesta sul canale Telegram che diffondeva foto di donne prese da Vinted*, https://www.ilpost.it/2025/05/05/inchiesta-girls-of-vinted/.

55 Ottolina, P. (2022), *Ucraina, perché la guerra passa da Telegram (e perché l'app non è sicura quanto si crede)*, https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/24_agosto_25/ucraina-perche-la-guerra-passa-da-telegram-e-perche-l-app-non-e-sicura-quanto-si-crede-f9f59d2a-984f-4fee-ba0b-ebada47a2xlk.shtml.

56 De Vincentiis, F. (2024), *Fake sull'Ucraina. Newsguard punta il dito contro Telegram*, https://formiche.net/2024/09/disinformazione-ucraina-telegram-newsguard/#content.

57 "Il Post" (2024), *Le indagini sul fondatore di Telegram Pavel Durov*, https://www.ilpost.it/2024/08/26/francia-indagini-pavel-durov-telegram/.

companied by strong support from major technology and social media entrepreneurs.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here invites us to rethink the notion of digital marginality in relational, processual, and non-essentialist terms. Marginality should not be understood as an inherent property of specific platforms, but rather as the outcome of dynamic interactions among actors, technologies, norms, and discourses. From this perspective, marginality is not a fixed condition but a shifting position, which is constantly negotiated within the broader socio-technical ecosystem.

Within this framework, Telegram can be understood as a liminal node where multiple systemic tensions converge. It is not marginal in its popularity, as its global diffusion and rapidly growing user base clearly demonstrate otherwise. Instead, it is perceived and enacted as an alternative space. Its "marginality" lies in the way it positions itself outside the dominant logics of algorithmic visibility, commercial surveillance, and automated moderation that characterise major Western platforms. In this context, the notion of contingent alternativeness becomes particularly useful, as it captures a form of marginality that is situated, relational, and historically contingent. Telegram is *alternative* not because of an intrinsic essence, but because of how it is positioned, narrated, and experienced within the digital ecosystem.

Adopting this perspective entails a double responsibility. On the one hand, it requires moving beyond rigid categories such as centre and periphery, mainstream and fringe, in favour of more flexible conceptual tools capable of capturing the grey zones, ambivalences, transformations, and processes of deterritorialisation that characterise contemporary digital environments. On the other hand, it calls for methodological approaches that are equally situated and reflexive: approaches that treat media not simply as technologies or containers of content, but as performative environments continually negotiated by

a plurality of social actors: users, developers, journalists, activists, and regulators.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that ideas once considered radical or extreme (discourses that were banned, censored, or pushed to the margins of digital platforms) are increasingly finding space and legitimacy within mainstream media, political agendas, and institutional discourse. Racist, sexist, denialist, and authoritarian narratives that once circulated primarily in marginal or insular online spaces are today openly articulated and publicly claimed. What we are witnessing is, in many respects, a reversal of marginality: reactionary ideas once thought to have been buried under the weight of history are re-emerging and asserting themselves with renewed symbolic and normative force.

Repression and exclusion at the margins do not eliminate marginality; rather, they tend to reproduce it elsewhere, often in forms that are even more opaque, impermeable, or radicalised. What exists at the edges does not simply disappear. It mutates, migrates, and reinvents itself. And, eventually, it moves beyond the margins.

Political Leaders and Their Fandom[1]

Donatella Campus and Marco Mazzoni

1. The Phenomenon of Political Fandom

For some time, scholars of political communication have been examining the relationship between politics and celebrities.[2] In doing so, they emphasise that politics has become a hospitable environment for celebrities who come from a variety of extra-political fields and who actively devote themselves to political causes of many kinds.[3] They also note that politicians themselves have increasingly become figures who arouse curiosity among the public and the media for their private

1 This study was funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1 (PRIN 2022 D.D. 104, 2 February 2022). Project title: "Fandom democracy?"; CUP F53D2300634006.

2 Street J. (2004), *Celebrity Politicians. Popular Culture and Political Representation*, in "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations", *6*(4), pp. 435-452; Wheeler, M. (2013), *Celebrity politics*, Polity Press; Campus, D. (2020), *Celebrity leadership. Quando i leader politici fanno le star*, in "Comunicazione politica", *2*, pp. 185-203.

3 West, D. M., & Orman, J. (2007), *The Evolution of Celebrityhood*, in Negrine, R., & Stanyer, J. (Eds.), *The Political Communication Reader*, Routledge, pp. 239-244; Harvey, M. (2017), *Celebrity Influence*, University Press of Kansas.

lives and personalities. The outcome of this process is that political celebrities appear in public and communicate in ways similar to entertainment stars. It makes little difference whether they are leaders with established political careers behind them or individuals who attained fame before entering politics: one way or another, they are all stars.

And wherever there are stars, there are also fans – that is, people who go beyond mere curiosity about a public figure and develop admiration and a genuine sense of affection for their preferred celebrity. This occurs in politics as well, although it remains a dimension that has not yet been thoroughly explored.[4] Exceptions include the work of Sandvoss,[5] Dean,[6] Dean and Andrews,[7] Lee and Moon,[8] and Campus et al.[9] Despite certain differences, all of these authors place affect at the centre of their analysis, treating it as a defining dimension of political fandom.

The fan feels affection for "their" leader and experiences them as close through what is termed a *parasocial* relationship – an asymmetrical relationship, in the sense that the leader obviously cannot reciprocate the same feelings toward each of their fans (whom, in most cases, they do not even know), but can at most acknowledge them and address them as a collective. The bond between the two sides nonetheless exists, and it is a tie that both have an interest in sustaining and nurturing over time through a range of communicative practices.

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4 Street J. (2020), *Popular Culture and Political Communication*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *20*(1), pp. 127-138.

5 Sandvoss, C. (2012), *Enthusiasm, trust and its erosion in mediated politics: On fans of Obama and the Liberal Democrats*, in "European Journal of Communication", *27*(1), pp. 68-81; Sandvoss, C. (2013), *Toward an understanding of political enthusiasm as media fandom: Blogging, fan productivity and affect in American politics*, in "Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies", *10*(1), pp. 252-296.

6 Dean, J. (2017), *Politicising fandom*, in "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations", *19*(2), pp. 408-424.

7 Dean, J., & Andrews, P. (2021), *Celebritization from Below: Celebrity, Fandom, and Anti-Fandom in British Politics*, in "New Political Science", *43*(3), pp. 320-338.

8 Lee, S., & Moon, W.-K. (2021), *New Public Segmentation for Political Public Relations Using Political Fandom: Understanding Relationships between Individual Politicians and Fans*, in "Public Relations Review", *47*(4), pp. 1-12.

9 Campus, D., Mazzoni, M., & Mincigrucci, R. (2024), *Engaging with Fandom and Politics: The Case of Giuseppe Conte's Fans on Instagram*, in "International Journal of Press/Politics", https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231218424.

Fans publicly express their affection for their leader-celebrity in many ways, both offline and online. For instance, they may attend one of the leader's rallies and acclaim them as if they were a pop singer. They may wear T-shirts bearing the leader's name or image. Or they may post large quantities of online content in which they praise the leader, express support, and defend them against attacks. It follows that, in order to understand political fandom, one must analyse its practices – that is, what fans concretely do to support their leader. At a basic level, the prototypical fan needs to consume information about their star. In politics as well, they will therefore want to follow the leader's activities, become an attentive follower of their social accounts, and read articles and biographies. They will want to see and hear the leader: they may attend events in person when possible, perhaps taking the opportunity to take a selfie with him or her, or they may follow the leader's livestreams on social platforms. They may also wish to do more, and above all the networks can provide numerous opportunities. They will then post content, create memes, and take part in viral campaigns.[10]

Another salient feature of fandom is that fans experience a sense of belonging to a community that, for instance, shares defined spaces such as a fan page on social networks. In a historical phase in which older forms of belonging have waned as a consequence of the decline of the political actors that once nurtured and transmitted them, it becomes reasonable to ask whether being a fan may amount to acquiring a political identity. Some scholars, such as Juarez Miro,[11] identify strong similarities between the group dynamics of fan communities and those of supporters of populist parties. Are there grounds, then, for taking the next logical step – namely, to claim that fans are the new political activists? And that the success of new movements and

10 Dean, J. (2019), *Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics*, in "Political Studies Review", *17*(3), pp. 255-266.

11 Juarez Miro, C. (2021), *Who are the people? Using fandom research to study populist supporters*, in "Annals of the International Communication Association", *45*(1), pp. 59-74.

parties is also rooted in their capacity to mobilise the language and culture of fandom in order to build consensus?

To answer these questions, the crucial issue is to understand how political fandom differs from traditional political activism and what its elements of novelty are, if any. First, an important difference between being a fan and being an activist in the classic sense concerns the degree of ideological involvement. Activists certainly operated according to that logic: they offered loyalty and devoted their efforts to political actors who expressed beliefs and values – those they recognised as their own. In fandom this is not universally the case. To be sure, there are forms in which value-based rootedness is present, sometimes coupled with an intention to challenge the status quo within political organisations (for instance, by supporting outsider leaders against a party leadership). One case that appears to fall into this category is Jeremy Corbyn, who had behind him a group of radical Labour supporters such as Momentum, who recognised him as the spokesperson for their demands.[12] Yet even here, within the broader community of people who supported Corbyn through fan-like modes, there were individuals with diverse aims and backgrounds[13]. There are also situations that can be defined as political fandom in which fans' ideological involvement appears very weak. For example, the fans of Giuseppe Conte[14] – today leader of the M5S and Prime Minister during the COVID pandemic – long appeared only marginally interested in strictly political aspects and instead primarily fascinated by Conte's personality.[15] In short, political fandom spans a broader spectrum

12 Dean, J. (2017), *Politicising fandom*, in "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations", *19*(2), pp. 408-424.

13 Sandvoss, C. (2019), *Last fan standing: Jeremy Corbyn supporters in the 2019 General Election*, in "UK Election Analysis", https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2019/section-8-personality-politics-and-popular-culture/last-fan-standing-jeremy-corbyn-supporters-in-the-2019-general-election/.

14 Cantale, C. (2022), *Fandom and Politics-Pop. A Research on Le Bimbe Di Giuseppe Conte with Small Data Approaches*, in "Mediascapes Journal", *22*, pp. 3-25.

15 Campus, D., Mazzoni, M., & Mincigrucci, R. (2024), *Engaging with Fandom and Politics: The Case of Giuseppe Conte's Fans on Instagram*, in "International Journal of Press/Politics", https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231218424.

than traditional activism: in some cases it displays similarities, while in others it diverges sharply.

Another characteristic of political fandom concerns play, irony, and enjoyment.[16] It would be reductive, however, to conceive of fandom as merely a form of activism in which participants take themselves less seriously than earlier party members did and allow themselves to joke about their leaders by posting or sharing memes that tease them benevolently (as occurred, for instance, in the above-mentioned cases of Corbyn and Conte).

In fact, the popular culture underpinning celebrity and fandom is a culture whose primary purpose is entertainment. Consequently, in politics too, the fan is above all someone who seeks enjoyment and therefore expresses themselves through memes, humorous posts, and participation in forms of gaming. Enjoyment is thus inseparable from everything else and, for at least some fans, may even be the initial reason for joining a fandom. Drawn in by the ludic opportunity, beginning to follow a fan page can become the first step toward turning into more active – and also more politically aware – fans. As shown by Campus et al.,[17] this was the trajectory of the online community *Le Bimbe di Conte*: at first it consisted largely of declarations of love and heart emojis; then, gradually, the account began to circulate more explicitly political content.

In other words, the pathways of fandom are more varied and perhaps more tortuous than those of traditional activism. The very element of play suggests that relationships between leaders and fans are more egalitarian than in the past. "If I tease you, perhaps I do not regard you as either untouchable or infallible", contemporary supporters of political leaders seem to imply. Even if they appear to favour celebrities who present themselves less as superheroes and more as

16 Campus, D., & Giorgi, A. (forthcoming), *Politici celebrities e cittadini fans: come si crea coinvolgimento politico attraverso il fandom*, in "Quaderni di Teoria Sociale".

17 Campus, D., Mazzoni, M., & Mincigrucci, R. (2024), *Engaging with Fandom and Politics: The Case of Giuseppe Conte's Fans on Instagram*, in "International Journal of Press/Politics", https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231218424.

ordinary people, the fan nonetheless remains an admirer – and admiration must be cultivated with care. This is why the way a political leader succeeds in creating and sustaining a following of fans acquires strategic significance of the highest order. The next section will address these political activities, planned to solicit and cultivate fandom. The third section will examine the wide range of strategies at work in a concrete case: the 2024 US presidential elections. Finally, the concluding section will propose a set of explanatory hypotheses that may orient future research on political fandom.

2. The Leader and Their Supporters

Leaders now need a "fandom of supporters" that cheers them on during electoral contests and is ready to follow and celebrate them both in public squares and on social media. Most people expect politicians to be competent, serious, focused, and committed exclusively to addressing the many problems citizens encounter in everyday life. The point is that this is not entirely the case. This is one part of the truth; the other is that, under the prevailing logic of entertainment mentioned above, politicians are also called upon to build an affective dimension with their voters, to the point of turning them into supporters in the full sense of the term. Much as football discourse speaks of a "team of the heart" and the sympathy one feels for it, so too in politics leaders must win their supporters' hearts by eliciting strong empathy and identification. This process of political "falling in love" is a key element in the formation of fandoms, where loyalty and affection toward the leader transcend mere adherence to a political program, becoming a genuine passion.

Let us consider, for a moment, the reasons why recent electoral campaigns have witnessed a return of rallies.[18] In the current phase of communication – one in which the human factor, direct contact,

18 Novelli, E. (2018), *Le campagne elettorali in Italia. Protagonisti, strumenti, teorie*, Laterza.

and proximity to voters/supporters become the backbone of electoral campaigning – we observe the re-emergence of features typical of pre-modern and pre-media campaigns, including rallies and so-called "huge crowd". This is, however, a "return to the future", in which traditional and modern elements are combined. The traditional two-hour rally is no longer devoted exclusively, as it was during Italy's First Republic, to the leader's oratory, through which the political proposal was presented by means of quotations and metaphors that lent the message a solemn aura, alongside language that was often obscure and ambiguous. Today, rally planning typically entails a sharp division between an initial oratorical moment – characterised by language that invokes less formal and less complex concepts, immediately intelligible, without mediation or re-elaboration, lasting at most under an hour – and a second moment of "immersion in the huge crowd", in which the leader steps down from the stage and, amid supporters' chants, engages in direct contact with attendees through handshakes, hugs, and selfies. The crowd is the body of supporters who follow the political leader "on every away match": it is this following that has transformed the rally into a spectacle and has stimulated the return of electoral tours (Salvini tour, Tsunami tour, and so forth), as in the past. Compared with earlier periods, however, there is the novelty of social media. Thanks to these "huge crowd", timelines are flooded with photos and selfies posted by ordinary citizens attending the rally, which – once shared – allow the leader's face to reach, via indirect pathways, even users who did not attend and may not be interested in politics.[19]

The rally in the post-media period, therefore, closely resembles a media event: it is tightly localised, yet still able to be followed – also thanks to various livestreams – by a broad public, and it provides tangible evidence of the leader's popularity, thus becoming a powerful instrument for the formation and strengthening of political fandoms. Livestreaming and social media create a shared experience, fuel affec-

19 Mazzoni, M., Mincigrucci, R., & Stanziano, A. (2020), *Umbria cuore verde di Italia: il "ritorno" dei comizi nel processo di tematizzazione*, in "Comunicazione Politica", *3*, pp. 419-442.

tive polarisation, and reinforce emotional ties between the leader and their supporters, in line with the concepts of affective polarisation and affective publics.[20] In this way, the rally is transformed into a genuine initiation rite for members of the fandom: a moment of emotional communion that reinforces their loyalty and sense of belonging.

In fact, the very existence of a leader presupposes the presence of supporters, and Ventura[21] cites Edelman to explain this: "Leadership [...] is always defined by a specific situation and is recognized in supporters' responses to an individual's words and actions. If the response is positive and a following forms, there is leadership; otherwise there is none". These words make clear the intimate bond that develops between leaders and supporters: the former mobilise the latter by fostering in them a sense of collective identification, which in turn legitimates and strengthens the leader's action. In this regard, Bordignon[22] speaks of a leader who, on the representational plane, sets out to respond to the need to re-tie the threads of an increasingly fragmented, multiple, and complex social landscape. The leader is entrusted with "the task of suggesting new narratives that enable the citizen to recognize themselves in a shared story, one that interweaves their own history with the leader's. And it becomes all the more effective the more the leader manages to assume the role of protagonist".[23] Bordignon's and Ventura's positions confirm much of what has been presented so far; the additional element we propose is that the mobilisation of one's emotions, biography, private life, and body not only creates a new bridge between society and politics – once erected by parties – but also aims to transform the voter's role, encouraging them to assume the stance of a convinced supporter, a "fan of the leader", that is, an active member of a fully-fledged political fandom.

20 Papacharissi, Z. (2015), *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford University Press.
21 Ventura, S. (2019), *I leader e le loro storie: Narrazione, comunicazione politica e crisi della democrazia*, Il Mulino, p. 14.
22 Bordignon, F. (2014), *Il partito del capo*, Maggioli Editore.
23 *Ibidem*, p. 10.

In the current era, therefore, every leader has an audience of supporters that demands to be constantly cultivated and gratified: a kind of "Curva Nord" transplanted into the political arena, composed of flatterers whose permanent and structural task is to exalt and applaud the "chief", to follow them on every away match, to the detriment of any reflection. "There is only one captain: amid stadium chants and applause, Matteo Salvini is welcomed on his electoral tour"[24]; "there is also room for stadium chants during Matteo Renzi and Italia Viva's dinner-gathering to discuss the current political crisis the government is experiencing"[25]; "stadium chants for Giorgia Meloni's exit from the party's tenth anniversary"[26]; "stadium chants welcomed Berlusconi at the Forza Italia youth meeting [...] There is only one President".[27] These are some of the many examples drawn from the press or social media that testify to the existence of partisan "support", which, however, also directs our attention to another dimension of leadership: the leader is now divisive. There are those who love them, but also those who detest them (supporters of their political opponents). Leaders generate emotions, but these are emotions of joy, trust, expectation, and surprise for their supporters, and of disgust, sadness, fear, and anger for supporters of their opponents. An "empathetic" management of interaction between leaders and their supporters– amplified by social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which have become privileged terrains for leaders' self-promotion – is the outcome of a situation in which public opinion has fragmented and polarised. Faced with a public opinion that no longer reflects the space of confronta-

24 Cerami, G. (2015), *Matteo Salvini al Teatro Brancaccio di Roma acclamato come Francesco Totti: "Un capitano, c'è solo un capitano"*, in "HuffPost", https://www.huffingtonpost.it/politica/2015/05/12/news/matteo_salvini_al_teatro_brancaccio_di_roma_acclamato_come_francesco_totti_un_capitano_c_e_solo_un_capitano_-5797271/.

25 Il Messaggero (2020), *Renzi e Italia Viva a cena a Roma: "Goliardia e cori da stadio, cantavano Juve m..."*, https://www.ilmessaggero.it/politica/renzi_juve_cena_ristorante_roma_cosa_e_successo_febbraio_2020-5062042.html.

26 alanews (2023), *FDI, cori da stadio per l'uscita di Giorgia Meloni dal decennale del partito*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2MMleJXgrk.

27 la Repubblica (2013), *Giovani Forza Italia, Berlusconi accolto da cori: "C'è solo un presidente"*, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/11/23/video/giovani_forza_italia_berlusconi_accolto_da_cori_ce_solo_un_presidente-422648559/.

tion, dissent, dialogue, and participation envisioned by Habermas, but increasingly appears as a set of spheres forged by personal emotions and convictions – where we witness the multiplication of truths,[28] the exaltation of differences, and the transformation of public disagreement from encounter into clash between leaders and rival "fan bases" – political fandom emerges. Indeed, just as a football supporter views the match in a "partisan" manner, to the point of protesting heatedly over a penalty not awarded to their team even after VAR intervention, the fandom member is ready to spark controversy to defend their leader even in the face of an evident mistake or gaffe. In this context, the leader is no longer merely a politician but a "commander" who embodies the values and aspirations of their fandom, generating unconditional loyalty and a strong sense of belonging.

There is, however, another aspect that deserves emphasis and has still been relatively under-investigated. Traditionally, political fandom has been interpreted as a spontaneous manifestation of identification and support on the part of ordinary citizens who become genuine "supporters" of a leader. Up to this point, we have discussed what Jenkins[29] terms "grassroots creativity", namely a fandom that emerges from below. This perspective assumes, in particular, that content and discussions – especially online – supporting a leader arise spontaneously from individuals' passion and enthusiasm. Such materials are, in essence, characterised by originality and spontaneity. Observation of social media, however, reveals a more complex reality. Contrary to the traditional view of political fandom as a spontaneous grassroots movement, social media analysis shows that part of the online support is orchestrated by political actors. Candidates, parties, and committees close to the leader employ sophisticated communication strategies to create and disseminate content that simulates the enthusiasm and spontaneity of traditional fandoms. Through the phenomenon of a "guided" or "constructed" fandom, these actors strategically deploy

28 Lorusso, A. M. (2018), *Postverità: Fra reality tv, social media e storytelling*, Laterza.
29 Jenkins, H. (2006), *Cultura convergente*, Maggioli Editore, p. 133.

images and narratives of the leader in order to amplify their visibility. On social media, this practice takes shape through the sharing of visual and textual content that imitates the style and aesthetics of traditional fandoms, thereby generating an (artificial) sense of belonging and loyalty.

This instrumentalises emotions in order to secure political advantages. The phenomenon carries significant implications for the study of digital publics and participatory democracy, insofar as it blurs the boundary between grassroots engagement and orchestrated political messaging. In other words, messages disseminated through these fandomesque practices can become indistinguishable from those conveyed by ordinary voters who have been transformed into political fans. Such posts can, consequently, lead a user to believe that a politician is especially beloved or, conversely, that they face a large cohort of opponents. Moreover, this content polarises digital spaces, reinforces ideological divisions, and shapes the public's interaction with political figures, sustaining the strong partisanship typical of fans. In conclusion, these dynamics invite questions about the nature of online political participation and the role of emotions in the formation of consensus. It is not far-fetched to argue that this phenomenon may facilitate the manipulation of emotions and the construction of artificial communities, thereby undermining the effectiveness of participatory democracy. It is therefore necessary to develop future studies that analyse the real effects of these practices on online political participation.

3. The 2024 US Presidential Campaign: Many Shades of Political Fandom

The intertwining of celebrities and US presidential elections is anything but new. In fact, every electoral campaign is a race to secure as many endorsements as possible from famous figures[30] – an arena in which Democratic candidates have often appeared advantaged, given

30 Harvey, M. (2017), *Celebrity Influence*, University Press of Kansas.

their ability to draw on a large progressive constituency within the entertainment industry. Some endorsers can be regarded as true evergreen figures, such as Bruce Springsteen. An enthusiastic supporter of Barack Obama (the two even co-authored a book[31]), the US rock legend also took the stage to sing for several other Democratic candidates, including Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris, and later lent his voice and music to a Biden campaign advertisement. Among Democratic supporters there are also more recently recruited endorsers who are equally famous, such as Taylor Swift. The contemporary pop icon – who had already urged citizens on previous occasions to exercise their right to vote[32] – took a clear public stance in the 2024 election in support of Kamala Harris.

Taylor Swift's stance, in particular, is a litmus test of how seriously endorsements are taken in the United States and are therefore coveted by candidates and feared by their opponents. After the end of the first Trump/Harris debate, the singer declared on Instagram that she would vote for Harris.[33] Followers reacted immediately, with millions of likes on the post and, apparently, a spike in voter registrations.[34] Donald Trump's angry response was not long in coming: on social media he declared, "I hate Taylor Swift". Even today, Trump appears so animated by resentment that he has not missed an opportunity to mock the singer when she was booed at the Super Bowl.[35] The fact that Trump, even after being elected, rather than adopting a posture of superiority, continues to seek polemic with Swift suggests that the Pres-

31 Obama, B., & Springsteen, B. (2021), *Renegades: Born in the USA*, Penguin, where they talk about their life, music, and the American dream.

32 Sullivan, B. (2023), *A Taylor Swift Instagram post helped drive a surge in voter registration*, in "npr", https://www.npr.org/2023/09/22/1201183160/taylor-swift-instagram-voter-registration.

33 Il Post (2024), *Taylor Swift ha detto che voterà Kamala Harris alle elezioni presidenziali statunitensi*, https://www.ilpost.it/2024/09/11/taylor-swift-kamala-harris/.

34 Lebowitz, M. & Marquez, A. (2024), *More than 337,000 people visit Taylor Swift's link to register to vote*, in "NBC News", https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/over-300000-people-visit-taylorswift-link-register-vote-rcna170740.

35 Ramachandran, N. (2025), *Donald Trump Celebrates as Taylor Swift Booed at Super Bowl: "MAGA Is Very Unforgiving"*, in "Variety", https://variety.com/2025/music/news/donald-trump-taylor-swift-super-bowl-booedmaga-1236302246/.

ident – an emblematic example of a celebrity leader and a frequent presence within the entertainment industry – sees in the singer, more than in his political opponents, his true rival for the coveted position of "celebrity in chief" in American society. We will return later to this point, which is highly indicative of the collapse of the dividing lines between politics and the world of entertainment.

Beyond Taylor Swift, in 2024 the cohort of celebrities supporting Kamala Harris was particularly substantial. Pop queens Lady Gaga and Beyoncé appeared at her rallies. Many others publicly endorsed her, including sports stars (such as LeBron James),[36] film stars (such as Jennifer Lopez, Anne Hathaway, and George Clooney),[37] and musicians (such as Billie Eilish).[38] Among her supporters were also celebrity chefs, who organised a live virtual event, "Cooking for Kamala".[39] Special mention should be made of Harrison Ford, who produced two especially significant campaign advertisements in support of the Democratic vice president.[40]

If, as noted, Democratic presidential candidates are typically "well supplied" with endorsements, Trump nonetheless had famous supporters as well, such as actors Dennis Quaid and Mel Gibson and the wrestling champion Hulk Hogan.[41] Above all, however, he relied on a different kind of entertainment figure: not necessarily global icons, but personalities with their own well-defined and highly loyal follow-

36 LeBron James' post on X, https://x.com/KingJames/status/1852093996350275595.

37 Diop, A. (2024), *Chi appoggia Kamala Harris o Donald Trump? Un elenco aggiornato degli endorsement delle star*, in "Vanity Fair", https://www.vanityfair.it/article/chi-appoggia-kamala-harris-donald-trump-elenco-aggiornato-endorsement-star.

38 Sky News (2024), *Billie Eilish: "We are voting for Harris"*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S_AjTgd-m8.

39 Stevens, A. D. (2024), *"Cooking for Kamala": How the Harris-Walz campaign is winning over America's chefs*, in "Salon", https://www.salon.com/2024/09/09/cooking-for-kamala-how-the-harris-walz-campaign-is-winning-over-americas-chefs/.

40 Rolling Stone (2024), *Harrison Ford Endorses Harris: "We Need a President Who Works for Us All"*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Biws4eiwOk.

41 Walfisz, J. (2024), *Who are the stars publicly supporting Donald Trump?*, in "euronews.", https://www.euronews.com/culture/2024/11/02/who-are-the-stars-publicly-supporting-donald-trump.

ing.[42] The Republican candidate therefore made extensive appearances on podcasts and livestreams hosted by right-wing American personalities who might be considered niche, yet are listened to and followed by minority groups that are nonetheless strategically important.

In light of all these endorsements, can we speak of a genuine political fandom in support of Harris and Trump? These initiatives are certainly grounded in the expectation of converting the fans of the celebrity in question into voters – or, even more hopefully, into donors. Not by chance, many of these celebrities – often accustomed to engaging in fundraising for other causes[43] – take part in events whose explicit purpose is to raise money.

Social media endorsements, moreover, lend themselves to having celebrities' fans circulate pro-candidate statements by reposting or replying to their star's posts. In other words, when a famous figure publicly discloses their voting intentions, this can generate some form of participation among their fans. That said, an affirmative answer is not self-evident. Not by chance, the candidate who secures the most endorsements does not always win; indeed, after Harris's defeat, some commentators asked whether this form of celebrity activism has any real political power.[44]

In reality, it would make little sense to expect a celebrity endorser to shift millions of votes. Even where a celebrity has millions of fans, many of them may be subject to cross-pressures which – Lazarsfeld and colleagues argued in the 1950s – produce internal conflict. In such cases, the final choice tends to favour the strongest motivations. Put plainly, there will have been Taylor Swift fans who, despite loving her deeply, had other reasons to vote for Trump. And the reverse likely

42 Barrett, B. (2024), *Trump, gli influencer di destra gli hanno tirato la volata*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.it/article/trump-vittoria-influencer-podcast-elezioni-usa-2024/.

43 Budabin, A. C., & Richey, L. A. (2021), *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development*, University of Minnesota Press.

44 Helmore, E. (2024), *Dozens of stars backed Harris's campaign and yet she lost. Is the era of celebrity endorsements over?*, in "The Guardian", https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/17/harris-celebrity-endorsements.

holds as well: most Trump-supporting admirers of Swift will continue listening to her music even if Trump finds her so irritating.

Reasoning in terms of large numbers, it is therefore logical that endorsements matter only up to a point. Nonetheless, political fandom as we have defined it can intersect with these phenomena, and the 2024 US campaign shows what might occur even more extensively in the future. The core issue lies in leaders' capacity to turn other people's fans into their own – or, reversing the argument, in the celebrity's capacity not merely to orient fans' political choices but to transfer their affection onto the political actor. For this to happen, a genuine identification must be triggered between the candidate and the fan base of the endorsing celebrity.

From this perspective, the most interesting example was the singer Charli XCX, who did not simply invite her fans to support Kamala Harris because she is capable and defends "our values", but instead declared: "Kamala Harris is brat". *Brat* (the title of one of her albums) signifies, for the singer and her followers, a "smart and independent girl". Charli XCX's message thus sought to assert that "Kamala is one of us" and to generate identification. This sparked a viral campaign of posts and memes inspired by the *brat* imaginary, with its distinctive acid-green colour.[45]

Regardless of what the operation's actual electoral impact may have been, the fact that the Harris campaign adopted the aesthetic of the "brat" initiative – intercepting an already existing trend[46] and encouraging an association between that trend and the candidate – shows the direction in which politicians can move in order to exploit mechanisms of "transferring pre-existing fandom", using them to swell the ranks of their own fans.

45 Armelli, P. (2024), *Che cosa significa che Kamala Harris è brat? La spiegazione della frase virale*, in "Wired", https://www.wired.it/article/kamala-harris-brat-significato-campagna-virale-charlie-xcx/.

46 The Conversation, *"Kamala IS brat": an expert explains the Kamala Harris memes flooding the internet*, https://theconversation.com/kamala-is-brat-an-expert-explains-the-kamala-harrismemes-flooding-the-internet-235250.

What occurred on the other side of the divide likewise rests on a similar mechanism of identification with a lifestyle model. As noted, Trump did not rely on global celebrities – perhaps with the partial exception of Elon Musk, who is more an ally than a celebrity endorser – but instead sought to build his own political fandom, channelled through a set of influencers aligned with the so-called *manosphere*,[47] that is, a constellation of online spaces populated exclusively by men, where stereotypes of masculinity are celebrated. An active role also appears to have been played by Trump's young son Barron,[48] who reportedly advised him on how to navigate "bro" subcultures[49] – male communities bound together by a masculinist ideology and, at times, by specific passions such as martial arts.[50] Here it is evident that the adhesive between the elderly President and his young fans is not generational identification but value-based identification. Trump has become an icon for a group seeking a role in society, including by advancing claims to which the current President promised to give voice.

In conclusion, the case of the most recent US presidential elections leads to two considerations. The first is that pop culture, in its primary form of celebrity, is now inseparable from politics. Political leaders are themselves celebrities and therefore struggle to assert themselves in an environment that is no longer separate from the rest of cultural life. This helps explain, for example, why Trump engages in polemic with a global celebrity such as Taylor Swift, as if he sensed that a threat to his primacy could emerge from that front.

The second consideration concerns the wide room for manoeuvre that politicians have – at least potentially – in building their own fan-

47 Haskins, C. (2024), *Rogan, Musk and an emboldened manosphere salute Trump's win: "Let that sink in"*, in "The Guardian", https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/07/joe-rogan-elon-musk-heterodoxy-trump-win-reaction.

48 Liddell, J. (2024), *How Barron Trump helped his father win the young male votes in the US election*, in "Independent", https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/barron-trumpdonald-podcasts-election-b2643192.html.

49 Wendling, M. (2024), *"He's just a bro": Trump's attempts to woo the "manosphere"*, in "BBC", https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj9j43890k7o.

50 Il Post (2024), *Come Barron Trump ha aiutato suo padre a ottenere i voti dei giovani maschi*, https://www.ilpost.it/2024/11/09/bro-vote-manosfera-trump/.

dom and using it as a reservoir for political mobilisation. In this respect, they can also rely on the intervention of other celebrities, but they must pay attention to transforming others' fans into their own through a mechanism of identification that then generates the affective and enthusiastic responses typical of the relationship between a star and their following. If this mechanism does not activate, having the support of many celebrities may help with certain campaign activities – such as fundraising and generating visibility – yet fail to produce the hoped-for effects on building electoral consensus.

Conclusions

Political fandom concerns a minority of citizens, at least if we understand it in a narrow sense and refer to a set of subjects who are affectionate and willing to express their support in multiple ways. In a context in which many choose abstention and not a few declare that they do not know where to position themselves, it is evident that today the masses are affectively lukewarm toward politics and all those associated with it. Nonetheless, fandom's significance should not be underestimated for that reason. Fans are – much like the activists of the past – a resource that can prove highly valuable. One can observe that the post-modern campaign has rediscovered forms that had been relegated to the background with the advent of the modern campaign. In this sense, just as campaigns in the past relied on volunteers, contemporary campaigns can make room for active supporters, above all online. For the most part, this takes the form of online volunteering organised by parties and coordinated through websites and a range of digital supports,[51] but fandom is far more fluid in nature and can unfold through more autonomous and creative practices.

As highlighted, political fandom is linked to a ludic dimension in which political engagement is combined with irony, play, and the pur-

51 Bentivegna, S., Rega, R., & Artieri, G. B. (2024), *Who is more sensitive to informational incivility? Incivility in everyday politics and electoral campaign in Italy*, in "Comunicazione politica", *25*(2), ch. 7.

suit of experimentation through which the fan gives free rein to imagination – as occurs in meme production, a tool that clearly reveals the nature of this kind of digital participation.[52] It is up to leaders to decide how far to intervene in these processes, first in order to create their own fandom and subsequently to use it as a reservoir for political mobilisation. Indeed, there are leaders who seem to have become fan-objects almost without realising it.[53] In other cases, politicians are so engaged in these activities that their conduct – especially on social media – appears very similar to the *modus operandi* of influencers.[54] Like any other online celebrity, these political leaders provide information about themselves and details of their private lives for fans' consumption. Moreover, as observed, guided fandom originates in the political environment surrounding the leader, while distinguishing itself by its artificially constructed character. Unlike traditional fandoms, which emerge spontaneously from fans' enthusiasm, guided fandom is orchestrated by political actors to create a sense of belonging and loyalty.

An important role is played by other celebrities who are willing to offer their support. Although this does not always occur and there are forms of fandom in which it carries negligible weight, one often observes an operation of "fan transfer", as the US example has shown. There may be classic situations in which a star offers an endorsement

52 Dean, J. (2019), *Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics*, in "Political Studies Review", *17*(3), pp. 255-266.

53 For example, Ed Miliband, leader of the Labour Party from 2010 to 2015, had a fan base of young girls who rallied around the hashtags #cooledmiliband and #milifandon. This community expressed its admiration for the leader and, in a playful vein, appreciation for his appearance (for instance, by producing memes that paired Miliband's face with photos of actors widely regarded as attractive, such as James Dean and Harrison Ford). Miliband said he was grateful for the support, while also surprised by what he described as "the most unlikely cult of the 21st century". Dean, J. (2019), *Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics*, in "Political Studies Review", *17*(3), p. 417.

54 Boccia Artieri, G. (2019), *Popolarizzazione della politica online: ambivalenza, performatività e algoritmi*, in "Comunicazione politica", *20*(2), pp. 251-256; Starita, G.D., & Trillò, T. (2022), *"Happy Monday friends! Coffee?" Matteo Salvini, good morning selfies, and the influencer politician*, in "Contemporary Italian Politics", *14*(3), pp. 331-351.

and invites their fans to support a candidate, or cases in which political influencers channel interest toward candidates and help them generate identification. A frequently cited case is the support that the well-known anchorwoman Oprah Winfrey gave the young Barack Obama, contributing to the launch of his 2008 campaign.[55] Here, identification evidently activated on the basis of Winfrey's and Obama's shared membership in the African American community. At other times, however, identification between star and fans occurs in less predictable ways, as shown by younger generations' enthusiasm for politicians far older than themselves, such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders.

In conclusion, political fandom is a fluid and shifting phenomenon in which bottom-up and top-down forces converge: spontaneity and propaganda, old-style proselytism and influencer-like modalities. Fandom is both an interesting mode of participation and a resource that politics draws upon in order to build consensus. The challenge for scholars who seek to study fandom is to reconstruct the intricate pathways that may connect spontaneous movements with potential political intervention.

55 Chadwick, A. (2013), *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford University Press.

The Weapon of Political Incivility

Sara Bentivegna and Rossella Rega

1. Political Incivility: From Exception to Rule of the Game

Over the past decade, political incivility has shifted from being an exception to becoming the rule, from an occasional mishap to a deliberate and strategic choice. Contrary to what might be expected, the tendency to demonise political opponents, resort to offensive and contemptuous epithets, delegitimise institutions, and fuel polarisation has rarely resulted in negative consequences for those who engage in such practices. The most emblematic case is undoubtedly Donald Trump who, having become globally known as the "Insulter-in-Chief" because of his provocative, uncivil, and divisive behaviour, was surprisingly re-elected President of the United States in 2024. This outcome demonstrates how certain forms of aggressiveness are capable of resonating with broad segments of the electorate.

Yet the phenomenon is global in scope. The polarising rhetoric of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the *ad hominem* attacks of Argentina's ultraliberal Javier Milei, the provocative style of Santiago Abascal in Spain, or that of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands all illustrate how

numerous political leaders routinely rely on offensive language and disdainful tones. In doing so, they profoundly reshape the parameters of political communication and the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in public debate. One should also recall the discursive codes of Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), steeped in hostility towards minorities and democratic institutions, as well as the divisive campaigns of the French ultraconservative Éric Zemmour, who has already been convicted of incitement to hatred. By tapping into citizens' anger and resentment and presenting themselves as authentic spokespersons for popular grievances, these actors offer clear evidence of how political incivility has become a key instrument for capturing attention and asserting dominance within the public arena.

However, it is important to emphasise from the outset that this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Striking episodes of political incivility can be traced back to nineteenth-century politics, such as the incident in 1856 when Democratic Congressman Preston Brooks physically assaulted Republican Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor following a speech on the abolition of slavery. What has changed, however, is the frequency with which incivility is employed to pursue specific objectives: media visibility, supporter mobilisation, and the strengthening of identities and group affiliations. Many political leaders exploit negative emotions and the frustration of citizens impoverished by the global economic crisis, labour market precarisation, and growing social inequalities. In doing so, they systematically draw on the full repertoire of incivility – slander, insults, falsehoods, personal attacks, and contempt for institutions – to construct a distinctive political "brand" that sets them apart from the traditional establishment.

Beyond individual cases, what is particularly striking is the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, facilitated by broader structural trends such as rising political polarisation, the advance of populist and anti-system forces, and the diffusion of digital platforms whose algorithms reward divisive and aggressive content. This occurs within a hybrid media ecosystem in which such content circulates between old and new media alike. In this context, political incivility finds especial-

ly fertile ground in which to proliferate, emerging as a communicative "shortcut" for politicians seeking to occupy the centre of the media arena by securing visibility and resonance through provocation and confrontation.[1]

Given the scale of this trend, it becomes essential to understand the implications of the "normalisation" of political incivility for democracy. This concern stems from the fear that, over time, the growth of this phenomenon may erode the foundations of public debate and make constructive engagement between differing viewpoints increasingly difficult – despite such engagement constituting one of the cornerstones of democratic life. At the same time, disagreement and confrontation between competing positions are essential to the functioning of a democratic system, as it is through dialogue with actors holding different political orientations and perspectives that citizens form their opinions on issues of public interest and learn to recognise the viewpoints of others.[2]

However, when political exchanges are dominated by aggressive tones, personal attacks, and a lack of mutual respect, it becomes far more difficult to foster the kind of constructive dialogue that should underpin civic life. In a healthy democratic dialectic, confrontation should serve not to reinforce divisions, but to explore and create points of convergence.[3] When this dialectic is compromised by pervasive incivility, the very essence of democracy is placed at risk. There is little doubt, therefore, that political incivility in contemporary societies is profoundly political in nature, as it strikes at the foundations of civil coexistence and the representative system itself.

1 Bentivegna, S., & Rega, R. (2024a), *(Un)civil democracy. Political incivility as a communication strategy*, Palgrave Macmillan.
2 Barber, B. (2003), *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*, University of California Press.
3 Dahl, R. A. (1971), *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*, Yale University Press.

2. The Many Shades of Political Incivility: An Open Debate

One of the first issues that arises when discussing political incivility concerns the very definition of the concept. While certain manifestations – such as personal insults or verbal brawls – are relatively easy to recognise, it is far more difficult to delineate precisely the boundaries of incivility in politics. Scholars themselves propose different interpretations depending on the analytical perspective adopted, yet concern about the growth of the phenomenon appears to extend across the Atlantic. In the United States, according to a Pew Research Center survey,[4] the majority of Americans (70%) believe that elected officials should avoid inflammatory or aggressive rhetoric. Similarly, in Italy, 80.7% of citizens surveyed in the four weeks preceding the 2024 European elections stated that politics has become more uncivil in recent years.[5]

As mentioned above, however, resolving the definitional issue is far from straightforward. Political incivility represents an intrinsically "slippery" concept, one that shifts according to the sensitivity of the observer, the characteristics of the communicator, and the political and cultural context in which communication takes place. The difficulty in reaching a shared understanding of what constitutes political incivility lies precisely in its subjective nature. As Susan Herbst[6] aptly summarised, "incivility is in the eye of the beholder". What one individual perceives as uncivil behaviour may be considered entirely acceptable – or even necessary – by another.

If the concept thus eludes rigid and unequivocal definitions, it is nevertheless possible to identify the main perspectives adopted by

4 Hatflied J., & Silver L. (2024), *U.S. adults under 30 have different foreign policy priorities than older adults*, Pew Research Center, Washington D.C.

5 Bentivegna, S., Rega, R., & Boccia Artieri, G. (2024), *Who is more sensitive to informational incivility? Incivility in everyday politics and electoral campaign in Italy*, in "Comunicazione politica", Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione Italiana di Comunicazione Politica, *2*, pp. 171-194.

6 Herbst, S. (2010), *Rude democracy: Civility and incivility in American politics*, Temple University Press.

scholars to analyse the phenomenon. In particular, two approaches emerge as dominant.

The first interprets political incivility primarily as a form of rudeness, namely the violation of behavioural norms and "good manners" that are expected to guide interactions among political actors. This perspective includes the use of offensive language, vulgar expressions, and insults, as well as interruptions, shouting, and sarcasm.[7] While this approach offers a simple and immediate way of identifying incivility, it risks missing the core of the problem. When political confrontation degenerates and interlocutors come to view one another as enemies to be silenced or defeated at all costs, the very possibility of open and constructive dialogue is threatened. Moreover, the problem of incivility cannot be reduced solely to tone and language,[8] because democracy may at times require a temporary rupture of civil conventions in order to revitalise political debate. What ultimately matters is respect for collective democratic traditions.[9]

The second approach takes a wider view, extending beyond the interpersonal sphere to encompass the rules and principles of democrat-

7 Brooks, D. J., & Geer, J. G. (2007), *Beyond negativity: The effects of incivility on the electorate*, in "American Journal of Political Science", *51*(1), pp. 1-16; Gervais, B. T. (2015), *Incivility online: Affective and behavioral reactions to uncivil political posts in a web-based experiment*, in "Journal of Information Technology & Politics", *12*(2), pp. 167-185, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2014.997416; Mutz, D. C., & Reeves, B. (2005), *The new videomalaise: Effects of televised incivility on political trust*, in "American Political Science Review", *99*(1), pp. 1-15; Rossini, P. (2020), *Beyond toxicity in the online public sphere: Understanding incivility in online political talk*, in Dutton, W. H. (Ed.), *A research agenda for digital politics*, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 160-170; Sydnor, E. (2018), *Platforms for incivility: Examining perceptions across different media formats*, in "Political Communication", *35*(1), pp. 97-116.

8 Schudson, M. (1997), *Why conversation is not the soul of democracy*, in "Critical Studies in Mass Communication", *14*(4), pp. 297-309, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039709367020.

9 Papacharissi, Z. (2004), *Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups*, in "New Media & Society", *6*(2), pp. 259-283.

ic coexistence as a whole.[10] From this perspective, political incivility can be examined through three fundamental dimensions.[11]

The first dimension concerns respect for others and includes both so-called "discursive incivility", "vulgar incivility", and the use of derogatory nicknames designed to discredit political opponents. The second dimension relates to respect for democratic values and manifests itself in behaviours such as the deliberate dissemination of false information to discredit opponents, the use of discriminatory stereotypes, and systematic attempts to silence those who hold different views. Particularly troubling within this domain is the use of racist, sexist, or religious epithets, as well as the stigmatisation of minorities. The third and final dimension concerns respect for democratic institutions and encompasses the most serious forms of incivility, ranging from physical threats to the assault of institutional buildings – a phenomenon that is unfortunately on the rise in many countries.

This broader perspective reveals that political incivility is not merely a matter of political "etiquette". What is at stake are the very pillars of democracy, namely the capacity for cooperation, inclusion, reciprocity between opposing sides, willingness to listen, and openness to dialogue. It is also important to note that deeply uncivil messages may be conveyed through seemingly polite and respectful tones, such as when discriminatory stereotypes are articulated through formally impeccable language.

Today, however, we appear to be witnessing a progressive diffusion of all these forms of incivility within the political sphere. On the one hand, rudeness is increasingly becoming a successful communicative style, particularly among anti-political and neo-populist forces, though not exclusively so. On the other hand, the delegitimisation of

10 Muddiman, A. (2017), *Personal and public levels of political incivility*, in "International Journal of Communication", *11*, pp. 3182-3202; Papacharissi, Z. (2004), *Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups*, in "New Media & Society", *6*(2), pp. 259-283; Stryker, R., Conway, B. A., & Danielson, T. J. (2016), *What is political incivility?*, in "Communication Monographs", *83*(4), pp. 535-556.

11 Bentivegna, S., & Rega, R. (2024b), *What are the predictors of political incivility perceptions?*, in "European Journal of Communication", *39*(4), pp. 375-394.

political opponents and institutions is being used ever more frequently as a strategic tool to win votes and secure the loyalty of segments of the electorate.

3. Giving Voice to Citizens: How Italians Define Political Incivility

Before analysing in detail citizens' responses concerning what they consider to constitute political incivility,[12] it is worth examining how familiar they are with the concept and how they assess its evolution over time. The figures are unequivocal. Seven out of ten Italians report some degree of familiarity with the phenomenon, and almost 38% state that they know exactly what it refers to. Only 30% of respondents admit that they are unfamiliar with the concept, confirming the extent to which the issue has become embedded in collective awareness.

Even more striking is the perception of growth. A total of 70.5% of Italians believe that political incivility has increased in recent times, with 43.3% describing this increase as marked and a further 27.2% reporting a moderate rise. Only 19.9% consider the phenomenon to be stable, while a mere 9.6% perceive a decline. An even more intriguing finding emerges when familiarity with the concept is cross-referenced with assessments of its evolution over time. As many as 46% of those who claim never to have heard of political incivility nonetheless report a sharp increase in the phenomenon – a proportion that exceeds that of respondents who state that they know exactly what the concept entails (44.4%) and those who have merely heard of it (39.5%).

How can this apparent contradiction be explained? One plausible interpretation lies in the increasingly negative image of politics that has spread among citizens in recent years. This perception, amplified by feelings of political distrust and hostility towards formal political

12 The data are based on a survey (conducted using the CAWI method) of a representative sample of 1,000 individuals, stratified by gender, age, geographical area and the size of their municipality of residence.

institutions,[13] may end up "contaminating" any form of political expression, leading it to be perceived as intrinsically uncivil. In short, even without a clear understanding of the contours of the phenomenon, many citizens tend to regard the lack of civility as a defining trait of contemporary politics.

These initial findings already point to a strong association between politics and incivility in the perceptions of many citizens. Although this association is based more on general impressions than on systematic analysis, it nonetheless signals a widespread sense of unease. The transversal nature of this perception suggests that the issue is deeply felt across society.

An analysis of respondents' open-ended answers sheds further light on this interpretation. The most frequently cited category, accounting for 22.5% of responses, concerns the violation of the rules of the democratic game. From politicians who disregard the Constitution to physical altercations in Parliament, from underhand tactics during electoral campaigns to a lack of institutional responsibility, citizens depict a political class that tramples on the basic rules of democratic coexistence. Such behaviour is described as manifesting through systematic misconduct, democratic deficits, and patterns of conduct that frequently fail to comply with institutional norms. The prevailing perception is that of a political system operating outside the framework defined by modern democratic arrangements.

Criticism does not end there. In second place, cited by 20.3% of respondents, are attacks against political opponents by any means necessary – a form of politics conceived as warfare without rules. Incivility is perceived to manifest in an arsenal of attacks that has replaced genuine political debate: orchestrated dossiers, deliberately fabricated fake news, and systematic smear campaigns in which virtually anything appears permissible. The tendency to regard those who belong to a different political camp as enemies, the criminalisation of oppo-

13 Mete, V. (2022), *Anti-politics in contemporary Italy*, Routledge, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003109273.

nents, and the constant demonisation of dissenting voices are seen as having supplanted constructive discussion. Citizens report that political actors appear far more concerned with discrediting adversaries than with addressing concrete problems, suggesting that politics has lost its function as an arena for deliberation and has been reduced to a clash between factions.

An even harsher judgement is expressed by the 19.9% of respondents who portray politicians as veritable "demons" of public life – figures who systematically abuse power, betray voters' trust, and distort their representative mandate in pursuit of personal interests. This view highlights the perceived inability of the political class to listen, the inconsistency between electoral promises and concrete actions, and forms of behaviour that deliberately undermine the common good. In this perspective, political representatives are seen as betraying the mandate entrusted to them by citizens by engaging in politics against those they are meant to serve.

Closely following is the 19.3% of respondents who condemn the lack of respect for individuals and differing opinions. Politics is described as being characterised by insults and offences, where debate systematically degenerates into shouted confrontations and a closure to any genuine attempt at dialogue. Citizens denounce the impossibility of authentic debate in an environment in which opposing voices are silenced, denigrated, or excluded, and where the capacity to identify common ground between different perspectives is entirely absent.

Finally, completing the picture is a significant 18% of respondents who make no distinctions and condemn bad politics in all its forms. For this segment of the sample, incivility coincides with politics itself, which is perceived as inherently corrupt, ineffective, and harmful. This radical judgement reflects a broader anti-political sentiment, defined as a set of attitudes of aversion, contempt, and hostility towards the symbols and actors of democratic politics.[14] What is particularly

14 Mete, V. (2022), *Anti-politics in contemporary Italy*, Routledge, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003109273.

striking is the transversal nature of this sentiment, which characterises both those who are familiar with the concept of political incivility and those who admit to knowing little about it.

Taken together, these findings point to a generalised condemnation of political elites that increasingly characterises contemporary societies, extending beyond the conduct of individual actors.

4. Citizens and Scholars Confronting Political Incivility: A Multi-voiced Encounter

If citizens' open-ended responses allow us to identify the spontaneous categories through which political incivility is interpreted, another way of probing perceptions is to present respondents with a list of pre-formulated definitions and ask them to select the one that best reflects their own understanding. This approach makes it possible to empirically assess the robustness of interpretations proposed in the academic literature.

The most striking result is the relative marginalisation of anti-politics – represented by the definition that "politics itself has become uncivil" – which ranks comparatively low. This outcome is likely due to the presence of more specific behavioural descriptions, whereas spontaneous responses tend to adopt a broader accusatory tone.

By contrast, interpersonal incivility, defined as a lack of respect towards others expressed through insults, interruptions, and similar behaviours, emerges as the most frequently selected definition. Courtesy and "good manners" thus remain central to citizens' perceptions, despite increasing desensitisation to informal and confrontational communicative styles that now dominate both social media and traditional arenas of political debate.[15]

At the same time, substantial weight is attributed to definitions that locate incivility on a broader political and systemic plane, identifying it with the distortion of democratic rules, the denial of others' right

15 Bentivegna, S., & Rega, R. (2022), *Searching for the dimensions of today's political incivility*, in "Social Media + Society", *8*(3), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221114430.

to speak, the demonisation of political opponents, and the manipulation of electoral mechanisms. These definitions all point, to varying degrees, to violations of the principles that underpin democratic coexistence.

Positioned between the interpersonal and institutional dimensions is an ethical – moral dimension, which associates incivility with dishonest behaviour by elected representatives and the failure to honour electoral promises. These behaviours constitute a violation of the trust relationship between representatives and voters and fuel a broader sentiment of distrust towards the political class.[16]

Taken together, these findings illustrate how perceptions of political incivility are distributed across multiple dimensions. While interpersonal disrespect remains central, systemic-democratic and ethical-moral concerns also play a significant role. The dialogue between citizens and scholars thus converges on a crucial point: political incivility cannot be reduced to a mere lack of good manners, but rather calls into question the very foundations of democratic coexistence.

5. Profiles and Predictors: Who is Most Sensitive to Political Incivility?

Who, then, are the citizens who most readily recognise uncivil political expressions and judge them most severely?

An examination of the factors that most strongly influence sensitivity to political incivility reveals that trust in democratic institutions and a sense of political efficacy play a crucial role. In other words, individuals who retain confidence in the political system and perceive their individual actions as having an impact on political processes are also more likely to react with indignation to disrespectful, aggressive, or rule-breaking behaviour on the part of political elites.

16 Flinders, M. (2012), *Debating demonization: in defence of politics, politicians and political science*, in "Contemporary Politics", *18*(3), pp. 355-366, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1080%2F13569775.2012.702978&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

This finding is particularly noteworthy in a country such as Italy, where the relationship between citizens and politics has become increasingly strained. If, as we have seen, incivility is becoming a widely exploited resource for leaders and parties seeking visibility and electoral mobilisation, it is legitimate to ask to what extent this strategy may further erode the already fragile reservoir of authority enjoyed by representative institutions.

A different pattern emerges with regard to anti-political attitudes, which – somewhat surprisingly – do not appear to make citizens less sensitive to politicians' lapses in civility. As discussed earlier, anti-politics can be traced back to feelings of hostility and discomfort towards the political class, often accompanied by the belief that political representatives are corrupt, self-interested, and detached from citizens' real problems. One might therefore expect individuals with strong anti-political sentiments to be less inclined to express outrage at the misconduct of individual politicians, viewing such behaviour as merely symptomatic of a system perceived as irredeemably compromised. However, the data suggest that, in a context of widespread scepticism towards the political "caste", condemning inappropriate conduct has become a transversal reaction, observable not only among those who espouse anti-political attitudes but also across other segments of the population.

Turning to the relationship between information consumption and sensitivity to political incivility, an interesting pattern emerges. Individuals who tend to avoid news and informational media – the so-called "news avoiders" – appear to develop a greater tolerance for uncivil behaviour by politicians. This can be explained by their general lack of interest in politics. Those who do not follow political affairs are also less exposed to political news and commentary and therefore pay less attention to, and react less strongly against, aggressive statements or personal attacks emanating from the political sphere. When politics does not arouse interest, disrespectful or confrontational expressions by political leaders are more likely to go unnoticed.

The opposite pattern emerges in relation to social media use. Individuals who spend less time on social media platforms tend to be more sensitive to political incivility. The study suggests that limited exposure to digital environments – where provocative language and offensive tones are often normalised – helps preserve a greater capacity to perceive and feel discomfort in response to behaviour that disrespects institutions, democratic values, or the opinions of others.

Moreover, focusing specifically on those who use social media to follow political discussions and issues, it becomes evident that expressions charged with hostility are more likely to be perceived as acceptable and "normal". This finding confirms what has already been documented in the literature[17]: frequent users who rely on social media primarily for political content are exposed on a daily basis to polarised and uncivil material. Over time, this repeated exposure leads to habituation, fostering a progressive desensitisation to the often toxic communicative climate that characterises digital political environments.

Finally, the analysis confirms established findings in the literature concerning the relationship between education, political orientation, and sensitivity to political incivility. Individuals with higher levels of education display greater sensitivity to incivility in public debate, likely due to closer attention to political dynamics and a heightened awareness of the importance of mutual respect and constructive dialogue in democratic life.

Similarly, self-placement on the left of the political spectrum is associated with a stronger perception of political incivility. Research conducted both in Italy and in the United States has shown that individuals who identify with left-wing positions tend to be more attentive to this issue than those who place themselves on the right or

17 Anderson, A. A., & Huntington, H. E. (2017), *Social media, science, and attack discourse: How Twitter discussions of climate change use sarcasm and incivility*, in "Science Communication", *39*(5), pp. 598-620, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1075547017735113; Oz, M., Zheng, P., & Chen, G. M. (2018), *Twitter versus Facebook: Comparing incivility, impoliteness, and deliberative attributes*, in "New Media & Society", *20*(9), pp. 3400-3419; Phillips, W., & Milner, R. M. (2017), *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*, Polity.

hold more conservative views. One possible explanation lies in the different value priorities that characterise political orientations. Those aligned with the left tend to emphasise equality, inclusion, and respect for minorities, and may therefore perceive incivility as a direct threat to these principles. Conversely, those who identify with right-wing positions often prioritise tradition, order, and security, and may be more inclined to view aggressive communication styles as legitimate when they serve to defend the *status quo*. This perspective can lead to a relative devaluation of dialogue in favour of confrontation, legitimising communicative practices that political opponents may interpret as uncivil.

Overall, what emerges is a complex and multifaceted picture in which sensitivity to political incivility is shaped by a constellation of factors that define different relationships with politics. Some citizens retain trust in institutions and in their own capacity to exert influence, and therefore demand behaviour from representatives that is commensurate with the institutional roles they occupy. Others feel increasingly alienated from politics and consequently display indifference even towards conduct that violates norms of respect, whether in the form of personal attacks or expressions of contempt towards democratic institutions. Still others follow political debate critically, distinguishing between legitimate confrontation and uncivil degeneration. Finally, there are those who, through sustained exposure to toxic content on social media, come to internalise such communicative styles.

This fragmentation of perceptions both reflects and contributes to the broader crisis of public discourse, with significant repercussions for the quality of democracy as a whole. It underscores the urgency of reaffirming respect and responsibility as fundamental pillars of a renewed culture of political civility.

6. Politics in Search of Civility

Political incivility has evolved from an occasional lapse in style into a structural feature of contemporary political debate, as clearly

demonstrated by our research on citizens' perceptions. This shift does not merely signal a decline in "good manners", but rather points to a deeper crisis affecting the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions.

What stands out most clearly is the transversal nature of the phenomenon. Political incivility is perceived and condemned regardless of citizens' level of familiarity with the concept itself. A widespread common sense appears to have taken root, one that almost automatically associates politics with uncivil behaviour. This equation is particularly problematic, as it risks undermining the legitimacy of political representatives and democratic institutions at their very foundations.

Citizens' accounts portray a landscape in which multiple dimensions of incivility intersect: the systematic violation of democratic rules, personal attacks, verbal aggressiveness, the deliberate use of misinformation, the delegitimisation of political opponents, and even explicitly violent behaviour directed against the political system and its rules. What emerges most forcefully, however, is a sense of betrayal of the expectations invested in politics as a civil means of managing conflict and pursuing the common good.

The dialogue – albeit indirect – between citizens' perceptions and the analytical categories developed by scholars reveals both significant convergences and meaningful divergences. While the centrality of interpersonal disrespect is confirmed, a strong anti-political component also emerges, suggesting that academic research may have underestimated the extent to which incivility is intertwined with broader crises of political legitimacy. The issue at stake is not simply the condemnation of specific uncivil behaviours, but a more profound questioning of politics' capacity to function as an arena for civil confrontation between competing visions.

Particularly significant is the correlation between sensitivity to political incivility and factors such as trust in the representative system and a sense of personal political efficacy. Those who continue to believe in democratic institutions and in the possibility of exerting influence through participation also appear to be more attentive to, and

critical of, manifestations of incivility. This suggests that attachment to democratic values and institutions remains a crucial predictor of the ability to recognise and condemn behaviours that threaten their foundations.

At the same time, the analysis sheds light on the complex relationship between media consumption and perceptions of incivility. Individuals who systematically avoid news media tend to show lower sensitivity to uncivil behaviour by politicians, whereas heavy exposure to social media – particularly for political content – appears to foster a progressive normalisation of aggressive and disrespectful communication.

The risks associated with this situation are twofold. On the one hand, political incivility is increasingly legitimised as a strategic tool employed by political actors, media organisations, and citizens alike. On the other hand, the normalisation of incivility threatens to further erode the already fragile reservoir of trust upon which democratic systems depend, generating a vicious circle of hostility and mistrust.

For this reason, the central challenge highlighted by the voices of Italian citizens does not concern merely curbing the most blatant manifestations of incivility – such as insults, fake news, or hate speech – but rather entails a deeper rethinking of the very notion of democratic civility in an era of hyper-connected and polarised communication. Such civility must be capable of recognising dissent without demonising it, guaranteeing everyone the right to speak, and accepting conflict as a vital element of democracy, provided it remains within the bounds of mutual respect.

Combating political incivility thus emerges as a collective endeavour involving political actors, media systems, educational institutions, and citizens themselves. Democracy, in this view, is not a definitive achievement but a continuous process that requires informed participation and constant collective vigilance. Attention to political incivility therefore represents neither a purely moralistic exercise nor a nostalgic invocation of an idealised past, but rather a necessary condition for preserving the spaces of dialogue and confrontation without which no democracy can genuinely thrive.

Conspiracy Theories and the Crisis of Truth: A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into Power, Belief, and Media

Pari Esfandiari

Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become defining features of the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. Once considered fringe beliefs confined to the margins of public discourse, they now circulate widely across mainstream media, political rhetoric, and digital platforms, shaping elections, undermining public health campaigns, and inciting acts of violence. From climate change denial and anti-vaccine movements to QAnon and the "Great Replacement" theory, conspiratorial narratives have gained unprecedented visibility and influence in the 21st century. Their persistence and impact have generated a surge of scholarly interest across disciplines, raising urgent questions about truth, trust, power, and the conditions under which knowledge is produced and contested.

This study offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary examination of conspiracy theories, treating them not merely as pathological beliefs or deviations from rational discourse but as socially embedded phenomena with deep philosophical, psychological, political, and cul-

tural roots. Drawing on insights from epistemology, media studies, sociology, cognitive science, and political theory, it seeks to understand why conspiracy theories endure, how they spread, and what functions they perform for individuals, communities, and regimes.

The first section introduces foundational definitions and provides a historical overview, tracing the evolution of conspiratorial thinking from classical antiquity through the Enlightenment to the digital age. By distinguishing between actual conspiracies and conspiracy theories, it clarifies the epistemological stakes of the subject while illustrating how such narratives have historically been used to explain crises, justify violence, and mobilise resistance.

The second section engages with the philosophy of conspiracy theories, focusing on debates surrounding justification, falsifiability, and the boundaries between skepticism and paranoia. It examines the tension between Karl Popper's critique of conspiratorial reasoning and David Coady's argument for epistemic openness, ultimately advocating for a critical approach that balances skepticism toward power with evidentiary standards.

The third section explores the psychological underpinnings of conspiracy beliefs, analysing the cognitive, emotional, and motivational mechanisms that predispose individuals to conspiratorial thinking. Drawing on empirical research, it identifies key psychological drivers such as pattern recognition, proportionality bias, confirmation bias, and the existential need for control and meaning – particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty.

The fourth section turns to political science to investigate the structural conditions that foster the spread of conspiracy theories. It examines how authoritarian regimes, populist movements, and polarised democracies deploy conspiratorial rhetoric for strategic ends, eroding institutional trust and delegitimising democratic norms. Case studies from Russia, Brazil, Hungary, and the United States illustrate the political utility of conspiracy theories in both democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation.

The fifth section brings in sociological analysis to examine how collective memory, identity, inequality, and institutional fragility shape the environments in which conspiracy theories thrive. It emphasises the role of historical trauma, cultural narratives, and social fragmentation in making certain communities more susceptible to conspiratorial worldviews, especially when they lack access to reliable information and participatory governance.

The final sections focus on the role of media – particularly the algorithmic logic of digital platforms – in amplifying and normalising conspiracy theories. Here, the study critiques the political economy of the attention economy, where sensationalist and polarising content is prioritised for profit. It examines how traditional journalism, social media, entertainment culture, and strategic disinformation campaigns collectively shape the "mediatised life" of conspiracy theories, transforming them into viral commodities with real-world consequences.

By weaving together multiple disciplinary perspectives, this study argues that conspiracy theories are not simply irrational beliefs but complex social phenomena that reflect deeper anxieties about agency, legitimacy, and truth in an era of rapid technological change, political instability, and epistemic fragmentation. Confronting the dangers posed by conspiracy theories requires more than fact-checking or censorship; it demands a critical re-examination of the institutions, discourses, and infrastructures that govern how we know what we know. This work ultimately calls for a renewed commitment to democratic knowledge cultures – rooted in transparency, inclusivity, and critical literacy – as the only sustainable antidote to conspiratorial thinking in the post-truth era.

1. From Caesar to QAnon: The Historical Evolution of Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy, in its most basic form, refers to a covert scheme orchestrated by two or more actors – whether individuals, groups, or institutions – with the aim of executing unlawful, deceptive, or harmful

actions, typically for political, economic, or strategic gain.[1] History is replete with genuine conspiracies: political assassinations, corporate collusion, and intelligence agency operations, Watergate scandal and COINTELPRO are well-documented examples of real covert actions.[2] However, conspiracy theories are not merely accounts of hidden actions; rather, they are explanatory narratives that interpret significant social or political events as the result of secret manipulations by powerful actors, often lacking verifiable evidence and operating outside accepted epistemic standards.[3]

While actual conspiracies are based on demonstrable facts, conspiracy theories tend to rely on speculative reasoning, pattern-seeking cognition, and a presumption of deception. They posit that nothing happens by accident, that everything is connected, and that appearances are misleading – hallmarks of what Hofstadter[4] termed the "paranoid style" in political thought. Such narratives often identify shadowy elites, clandestine organisations, or foreign powers as the orchestrators of major events, imbuing these agents with near-omniscient control.

Historically, conspiracy theories have emerged in moments of crisis, transition, or uncertainty – periods when explanatory clarity is lacking and trust in institutions is fraying. One of the earliest recorded examples followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. The Roman populace widely believed that a secretive senatorial faction – the Liberators – had not only plotted his death but intended to upend

1 Keeley, B. L. (1999), *Of conspiracy theories*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", *96*(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

2 Fenster, M. (2008), *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (2nd edition), University of Minnesota Press, https://www.upress.umn.edu/9780816654949/conspiracy-theories/.

3 Coady, D. (Ed.) (2006), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate Publishing, https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-The-Philosophical-Debate/Coady/p/book/9781138247918?srsltid=AfmBOorTYa15Lwf_4BwhLcAx254burNiWosr-P-2TYA6WLo2KKCn8aIK; Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009), *Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*, in "Journal of Political Philosophy", *17*(2), pp. 202-227, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x.

4 Hofstadter, R. (1964), *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, in "Harper's Magazine", https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

the Republic's trajectory. This narrative fueled political instability and public paranoia, demonstrating how conspiracy theories can shape governance and historical outcomes.[5]

Similarly, during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), Athenians blamed their defeat not solely on military failures but on internal treachery. Conspiratorial accusations against elites suspected of colluding with Sparta exacerbated civic mistrust, leading to purges and further societal division.[6] In the medieval period, conspiracy theories often targeted minority groups, particularly during epidemics. Amid the Black Death, Jews were scapegoated and accused of poisoning wells, leading to violent pogroms across Europe – an early and tragic example of how conspiratorial logic can justify mass violence.[7]

The advent of print culture in the early modern era accelerated the circulation of conspiratorial content. The Protestant Reformation, for instance, was accompanied by polemical tracts alleging Catholic plots to suppress reformers, while Catholic counter-narratives accused Protestants of colluding with foreign powers to subvert Christendom.[8] By the 18th century, fears of secret societies such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati became widespread, especially in Protestant Europe, culminating in works like *Proofs of a Conspiracy* by John Robison, which warned of revolutionary plots against established order.

In the 19th century, conspiracy theories took on increasingly racialised and ideological forms. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated document purporting to reveal a Jewish plan for world domination, emerged in Tsarist Russia and later served as a foundational text for 20th century anti-Semitism. Despite being repeatedly debunked,

5 Pagán, V. E. (2006), *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*, University of Texas Press.

6 Kagan, D. (2004), *The Peloponnesian War*, Penguin.

7 Cohn, S. K. (2007), *The Black Death and the Burning of Jews*, Past & Present, *196*(1), pp. 3-36, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31058464_The_Black_Death_and_the_Burning_of_Jews.

8 Goodman,D. (2005), *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*, Cornell University Press.

it influenced far-right movements and state ideologies, notably Nazi propaganda.[9]

The 20th century marked a turning point in the reach and visibility of conspiracy theories, shaped by the rise of mass media. Events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal eroded public trust in official narratives, fostering fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking.[10] The Cold War significantly amplified conspiratorial thinking, as anxieties over communist infiltration, espionage, and clandestine government operations became widespread. In the decades that followed, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, conspiracy theories concerning UFO cover-ups, mind-control experiments like MK-Ultra, and shadowy global elites permeated popular culture through bestselling books, television series, and blockbuster films.

One of the most enduring and emblematic examples is the theory that the 1969 moon landing was an elaborate hoax staged by the US government to secure victory in the Space Race. Despite overwhelming empirical evidence and decades of scientific corroboration, this theory persists in some circles due to perceived anomalies in NASA footage and skepticism of government transparency.[11] Likewise, the *New World Order* theory – asserting that a hidden global cabal seeks to establish a totalitarian one-world government – has periodically resurfaced across the political spectrum, especially during geopolitical or economic crises.[12]

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, spawned another influential set of conspiracy theories. Claims that the attacks were an "inside job" suggest that the US government either orchestrated or allowed them to happen to justify military intervention in the Middle

9 Taguieff, P.-A. (2001), *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: The Great Lie*, Editions Berg International.

10 Knight, P. (2000), *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*, Routledge.

11 Plait, P. (2002), *Bad Astronomy: Misconceptions and Misuses Revealed, from Astrology to the Moon Landing "Hoax"*, Wiley.

12 Barkun, M. (2003), *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press.

East. These claims often rest on perceived inconsistencies in official reports and the logic of suspicion, despite exhaustive investigations by independent commissions.[13]

The digital era has vastly accelerated the production, circulation, and uptake of conspiracy theories. Social media platforms have enabled fringe beliefs to bypass traditional gatekeepers, reaching mass audiences with unprecedented speed. Algorithms designed to maximise engagement often prioritise sensational content, reinforcing ideological echo chambers and spreading disinformation.[14] The COVID-19 pandemic offered a case in point: theories that the virus was artificially engineered, released intentionally, or exploited for authoritarian purposes flourished online, even as peer-reviewed studies affirmed its natural origin.[15] These narratives exploited political polarisation and mistrust in public institutions, undermining vaccination campaigns and public health responses globally.

In sum, conspiracy theories are not modern aberrations but historically persistent narrative frameworks. They thrive in contexts of uncertainty and mistrust, often drawing from cultural fears, historical grievances, and structural inequalities. While some expose legitimate power abuses, others obscure complex realities with reductionist fantasies, distorting democratic discourse and, at times, inciting real-world harm.

2. The Logic of Suspicion: Philosophical Perspectives on Conspiratorial Thinking

Conspiracy theories raise fundamental questions about knowledge, power, and trust, with philosophy offering insights into their epis-

13 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004), *The 9/11 Commission Report*, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.

14 Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018), *The spread of true and false news online*, in "Science", *359*(6380), pp. 1146-1151, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap9559.

15 van der Linden, S., et al. (2020), *Inoculating Against Fake News About COVID-19*, in "Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review", *1*(1), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344831630_Inoculating_Against_Fake_News_About_COVID-19.

temological, ethical, and psychological dimensions.[16] The key debate lies in distinguishing between legitimate skepticism, which relies on evidence and critical inquiry, and conspiracism, which assumes deception without justification.[17] While some conspiracy theories help hold power accountable, unchecked conspiratorial thinking can distort reality and fuel paranoia. Addressing them requires balancing open inquiry with rigorous skepticism to maintain intellectual and democratic integrity.

Karl Popper's critique of conspiracy theories builds on this distinction, presenting one of the most well-known arguments against their validity. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, he argues that conspiracy theories rely on a flawed understanding of history, attributing major events to deliberate actions rather than complex interactions of social, political, and economic forces.[18] By reducing history to simplistic narratives of manipulation by hidden actors, such thinking disregards the roles of chance and systemic factors. Popper warns that this deterministic worldview fosters political extremism, as it encourages individuals to seek scapegoats for societal problems rather than addressing their structural causes.

While Popper dismisses conspiracy theories as epistemologically flawed, David Coady offers a counterargument, emphasising that skepticism toward official accounts is sometimes justified. He points to historical cases such as Watergate, COINTELPRO, and the NSA surveillance programs, where governments engaged in covert activities and actively misled the public.[19] Dismissing all conspiracy theories outright, Coady argues, risks ignoring legitimate critiques of power

16 Fenster, M. (2008), *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (2nd edition), University of Minnesota Press; Coady, D. (Ed.) (2006), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate Publishing; Keeley, B. L. (1999), *Of conspiracy theories*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", *96*(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

17 Muirhead, R., & Rosenblum, N. L. (2019), *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Princeton University Press.

18 Popper, K. (1945), *The open society and its enemies*, Routledge.

19 Coady, D. (Ed.) (2006), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate Publishing.

and governance. Instead, he suggests that each claim should be evaluated on its own merits rather than being rejected based on its classification as a "conspiracy theory".

Similarly, Brian Keeley introduces the distinction between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories. According to Keeley,[20] warranted conspiracy theories are supported by verifiable evidence, while unwarranted ones rely on speculation, hidden evidence, and circular reasoning. Many conspiracy theories, he argues, fall into the latter category because they are structured in ways that make them resistant to falsification. When every piece of contrary evidence is dismissed as part of the cover-up, the theory becomes an unfalsifiable belief rather than a testable claim. This lack of falsifiability is what separates genuine investigative skepticism from conspiratorial thinking.

Some philosophers contend that conspiracy theories are not merely political or social phenomena but expressions of deeper metaphysical and existential anxieties. As Jean Baudrillard[21] and Michel Foucault[22] have observed, in a world where meaning is increasingly fragmented and power obscured, individuals often gravitate toward narratives that impose order on chaos. Conspiracy theories fulfill this role by transforming uncertainty into deliberate action, attributing randomness to intentional design. Much like religious theodicies, which explain suffering through divine justice, conspiracy theories offer secular meaning-making by casting hidden forces as orchestrators of global events.

This narrative framework frequently relies on moral dualism – an "us vs them" worldview – reducing complexity to a battle between righteous truth-seekers and malevolent elites. Hannah Arendt[23] warned against such binary thinking in her analysis of totalitarian ideology, which thrives on clear enemies and absolute moral clarity. Conspiracy

20 Keeley, B. L. (1999), Of conspiracy theories, in "The Journal of Philosophy", 96(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

21 Baudrillard, J. (1994), *Simulacra and simulation*, University of Michigan Press, (Original work published 1981).

22 Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon.

23 Arendt, H. (1951) *The origins of totalitarianism*, Harcourt.

theories replicate this logic: the believer is heroic, the system corrupt, and ambiguity intolerable. This not only simplifies reality but also provides psychological comfort by absolving believers of responsibility and placing blame squarely on a concealed antagonist.

The existential appeal of such theories is undeniable. As Kierkegaard[24] and Camus[25] noted, humans struggle with the absurdity of life and yearn for coherence. In this vacuum, conspiracy theories provide not only explanation but identity. They promise insight, agency, and moral purpose in an unpredictable world. To adopt a conspiratorial worldview is not just to interpret events differently – it is to situate oneself within a grand cosmic narrative of resistance, clarity, and meaning. This, more than factual accuracy, explains their enduring power.

The philosophical implications of conspiracy theories go far beyond questions of morality, delving into epistemology, ontology, and the politics of perception. Postmodern theorists argue that the appeal of conspiracies lies not simply in misinformation but in a deeper crisis of meaning. Jean Baudrillard's[26] concept of *hyperreality* captures this dynamic: in a world where simulated images and narratives saturate our consciousness, the line between the real and the constructed becomes indistinguishable. In such an environment, conspiracy theories gain traction not because they provide evidence-based accounts, but because they challenge a perceived system of manufactured truths.

Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, described the erosion of grand narratives – science, reason, progress – as producing widespread skepticism about any claim to universal truth.[27] Conspiracy theories exploit this vacuum by offering mini-narratives that, while often implausible, resonate emotionally and ideologically. They create

24 Kierkegaard, S. (1849), *The sickness unto death*, Penguin Books.
25 Camus, A. (1942), *The myth of Sisyphus*, Gallimard.
26 Baudrillard, J. (1994), *Simulacra and simulation*, University of Michigan Press, (Original work published 1981).
27 Lyotard, J.-F. (1984), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press.

meaning amid complexity by simplifying the world into a conflict between victims and hidden oppressors, truth-seekers and corrupt elites.

Slavoj Žižek adds another layer, arguing that conspiracy theories function as ideological fantasies. They provide subjects with a coherent explanation for systemic crises, displacing contradictions in capitalism or governance onto imagined external forces – such as shadowy cabals or global elites.[28] This displacement offers psychological relief: instead of confronting the structural failures of society, individuals can believe that all chaos stems from a single, malevolent plan.

Michel Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge further illuminates this phenomenon. He contended that truth is produced through institutional discourses, and conspiracy theories often act as counter-discourses, challenging the legitimacy of dominant knowledge systems.[29] However, when these counter-narratives devolve into paranoia, they risk replicating the same absolutism they oppose – rejecting all institutional knowledge while embracing unverifiable claims.

Ultimately, the power of conspiracy theories lies not in their factual basis but in their psychological and existential function. Far from misguided beliefs, they are alternative epistemologies that respond to a deeper cultural unease. They transform ambiguity into order, and confusion into purpose. Their resilience lies in their ability to satisfy the existential craving for coherence in a fragmented, post-truth world.

To effectively confront the spread of conspiratorial thinking, societies must address the deeper needs it fulfills. Debunking alone is insufficient; what's required is a reconstruction of public trust, the cultivation of media literacy, and the creation of narratives that offer coherence without collapsing into absolutism.[30]

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28 Žižek, S. (1989), *The sublime object of ideology*, Verso.

29 Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon.

30 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017), *Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era*, in "Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition", *6*(4), pp. 353-369, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Beyond+misinformation%3A+Understanding+and+coping+with+the+%E2%80%9Cpost-truth%E2%80%9D+era&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

3. The Psychology of Conspiracy Beliefs: Cognitive Roots of a Philosophical Problem

As explored earlier through the lens of philosophers such as Popper, Foucault, and Žižek, conspiracy theories are more than flawed historical interpretations or political narratives; they are responses to existential uncertainty and perceived crises of meaning.[31] Philosophy highlights how these theories serve as alternative epistemologies – ways of knowing and making sense of the world in the absence of trust in institutions or coherence in public narratives. But to fully understand why individuals embrace such worldviews, we must turn to psychology.

The psychological appeal of conspiracy theories lies in their ability to meet several deep human needs: the need for understanding, control, belonging, and identity. Psychologist Karen M. Douglas, a leading scholar on the subject, outlines three primary motives driving conspiratorial thinking: epistemic motives (the desire for understanding and certainty), existential motives (the desire to feel safe and in control), and social motives (the desire to maintain a positive self-image or group identity).[32] These align closely with the existential anxieties described by philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Camus, who noted the human struggle with absurdity and the yearning for meaning.[33]

Conspiracy theories flourish precisely because they provide structured narratives in response to randomness or trauma. They turn confusion into intentionality. Much like the philosophical frameworks discussed earlier, psychological mechanisms seek to resolve uncer-

31 Popper, K. (1945), *The open society and its enemies*, Routledge; Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon; Žižek, S. (1989), *The sublime object of ideology*, Verso.

32 Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017), *The psychology of conspiracy theories*, in "Current Directions in Psychological Science", *26*(6), pp. 538-542, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261.

33 Kierkegaard, S. (1849), *The sickness unto death*, Penguin Books; Camus, A. (1942), *The myth of Sisyphus*, Gallimard.

tainty and discomfort through pattern recognition and causal attribution – even when such connections are illusory.[34]

One powerful cognitive distortion at play is proportionality bias, the belief that major events must have equally significant causes. This concept, explored in the work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, helps explain why people often reject explanations involving chance, incompetence, or lone actors.[35] The idea that a lone gunman could assassinate a figure as consequential as John F. Kennedy seems inadequate; instead, believers gravitate toward elaborate, hidden plots involving powerful actors. This mirrors Popper's critique of the "conspiracy theory of society" – the tendency to explain all social phenomena through the deliberate actions of hidden agents.[36]

Confirmation bias, as described by psychologist Peter Wason,[37] further entrenches these beliefs. Once individuals adopt a conspiratorial worldview, they selectively seek out evidence that supports it while dismissing any counter-evidence as manipulated, false, or part of the conspiracy. This makes conspiracy theories not only resilient but often self-sealing – a trait philosophers like Brian Keeley have argued renders many of them epistemically unwarranted.[38] The information environment of the digital age, shaped by algorithmic curation and social media echo chambers, amplifies this bias, creating spaces where believers are rarely confronted with dissenting views.[39]

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34 van Prooijen, J.W., & Douglas, K.M. (2017), *Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations*, in "Memory Studies", *10*(3), pp. 323-333, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1750698017701615.

35 Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1972), S*ubjective probability: A judgment of representativeness*, in "Cognitive Psychology", *3*(3), pp. 430-454, https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(72)90016-3.

36 Popper, K. (1945), *The open society and its enemies*, Routledge.

37 Wason, P. C. (1960), *On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task*, in "Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology", *12*(3), pp. 129-140, https://doi.org/10.1080/17470216008416717.

38 Keeley, B. L. (1999), *Of conspiracy theories*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", *96*(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

39 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017), *Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era*, in "Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition", *6*(4), pp. 353-369, https://www.google.com/search?client=-safari&rls=en&q=Beyond+misinformation%3A+Understanding+and+coping+with+the+%E2%80%9Cpost-truth%E2%80%9D+era&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

In addition to cognitive biases, illusory pattern perception – the tendency to detect meaningful patterns in random or unrelated data – plays a critical role. Research by Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky[40] shows that people are more likely to perceive false patterns when they feel a loss of control. This instinct, once adaptive in ancestral environments, now leads individuals to see connections where none exist: between symbols, dates, or individuals, which are then woven into conspiracy narratives involving secret societies or global elites. As previously noted by philosophers like Baudrillard, in a world saturated by simulation and mediated spectacle, these false patterns become plausible alternatives to official narratives, especially when trust in institutions is eroded.[41]

Underlying all of these biases is the psychological need for control and certainty, particularly in times of crisis. As Freud,[42] and later existentialist thinkers, observed, ambiguity and chaos are inherently threatening to the psyche. Conspiracy theories offer a reassuring – if misleading – sense of agency and structure. This is why they surge during periods of societal upheaval such as pandemics, wars, or economic instability. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, sparked a proliferation of conspiracies because the virus posed a dual threat: it was invisible and unpredictable. Believing it was deliberately engineered offered many a form of psychological relief.[43]

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance adds another layer of insight. His study *When Prophecy Fails* showed that when confronted with contradictory evidence, believers often double down rather

40 Whitson, J. A., & Galinsky, A. D. (2008), *Lacking control increases illusory pattern perception*, in "Science", *322*(5898), pp. 115-117, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1159845.

41 Baudrillard, J. (1994), *Simulacra and simulation*, University of Michigan Press, (Original work published 1981).

42 Freud, Sigmund (1919), *The "uncanny"*, in "Imago", *5*(5-6), pp. 297-324, reprinted in Strachey, J. (Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 17*, 1955, https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf.

43 van Prooijen, J.W., & Douglas, K.M. (2017), *Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations*, in "Memory Studies", *10*(3), pp. 323-333, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1750698017701615.

than abandon their views.[44] This behaviour is driven by the need to protect identity and coherence. Similarly, Jan-Willem Van Prooijen argues that conspiracy theories often function as identity-affirming narratives, reinforcing a sense of moral clarity and purpose in opposition to a corrupt system.[45] This echoes Hannah Arendt's[46] warnings about binary, morally absolute thinking, which underpins both totalitarian ideologies and conspiratorial belief systems.

Even when disproven, conspiracy theories tend to persist due to their emotional resonance. As observed earlier, they exploit fear, resentment, and alienation – conditions philosophers and political theorists argue are endemic to late-modern societies. Rather than acknowledging systemic failures or accidental tragedies, conspiracy theories locate blame in intentional malice. This creates a clear enemy, a seductive certainty, and a simplistic moral universe – a dynamic Žižek[47] describes as ideological fantasy, where real contradictions are displaced onto imaginary villains.

Just as Keeley[48] and Popper[49] noted the problem of falsifiability from a philosophical standpoint, psychologists have found that belief in conspiracy theories often resists empirical challenge. This is due to a phenomenon sometimes referred to as motivated reasoning – a process where beliefs are shaped more by emotion and identity than by logic. Research by Stephan Lewandowsky and colleagues shows that attempts to correct misinformation can backfire, reinforcing the very beliefs they aim to disprove.[50]

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44 Festinger, L., Riecken, H. W., & Schachter, S. (1956), *When prophecy fails*, Harper-Torchbooks.

45 van Prooijen, J.-W., & van Vugt, M. (2018), *Conspiracy theories: Evolved functions and psychological mechanisms*, in "Perspectives on Psychological Science", *13*(6), pp. 770-788, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30231213/.

46 Arendt, H. (1951), *The origins of totalitarianism*, Harcourt.

47 Žižek, S. (1989), *The sublime object of ideology*, Verso.

48 Keeley, B. L. (1999), *Of conspiracy theories*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", *96*(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

49 Popper, K. (1945), *The open society and its enemies*, Routledge.

50 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012), *Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing*, in "Psychological Science in the Public Interest", *13*(3), pp. 106-131, https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018.

This resistance is not simply the product of misinformation or ignorance but a reflection of how the mind copes with complexity, loss, and powerlessness. In many ways, conspiracy thinking is an existential coping strategy, not just a cognitive failure. As previously discussed by philosophers like Foucault,[51] these beliefs are not just about events but about power and who gets to define truth. Psychology helps explain why, when traditional epistemologies break down, people turn to alternative ones – ones that feel emotionally coherent, even if they are factually incorrect.

To conclude, the psychological and philosophical dimensions of conspiratorial belief are deeply intertwined. What the psychological perspective reveals is that conspiratorial belief is not irrational in the colloquial sense. Rather, it is predictably human, rooted in evolved cognitive processes and deeply felt emotional needs. While the philosophical critiques of Popper, Baudrillard, and Lyotard help us understand the cultural and epistemological roots of these beliefs, psychology shows us how they persist at the individual level – why they feel true, even when they are not.

Combating conspiratorial thinking, then, requires more than fact-checking. It demands an engagement with the existential anxieties and identity needs that make conspiracy theories so alluring in the first place. Just as philosophers have argued that the problem is not only epistemological but existential, psychology affirms that these beliefs offer coherence, belonging, and purpose in a disorienting world.

Ultimately, understanding the psychological roots of conspiracy theories complements the philosophical insights discussed earlier. Together, they illuminate a shared truth: in the absence of trust, clarity, and meaning, humans will reach for stories – no matter how implausible – that make the chaos bearable.

51 Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon.

4. Governance by Deception: A Political Science Perspective on Conspiracy Theories

As established in the preceding sections, philosophical inquiry has illuminated the existential and epistemological dimensions of conspiracy thinking, while psychological research has revealed the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that make conspiracy theories appealing at the individual level. Yet, understanding the social prevalence and political impact of conspiracy beliefs requires attention to macro-level factors. Political science provides this perspective by exploring how conspiracy theories function in relation to state institutions, regime types, political ideologies, and structural conditions such as corruption and polarisation.

Conspiracy theories do not arise in a vacuum. They flourish under particular political and social conditions – especially where institutional trust is low, public discourse is polarised, and governance is opaque. Scholars have observed that conspiracy theories tend to be more prevalent in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, where the suppression of speech and information limits transparency and fosters alternative epistemologies rooted in suspicion and rumor.[52] In such environments, the lack of credible information and free media creates what Wedeen[53] describes as "as-if" compliance – where citizens must navigate official fictions with private skepticism, often turning to conspiratorial narratives to make sense of their world.

Russia, for example, illustrates how state actors may promote conspiracy theories as instruments of governance and geopolitical strate-

52 Bergmann, J. (2018), *Same Table, Different Menus? A Comparison of UN and EU Mediation Practice in the Kosovo-Serbia Conflict*, in "International Negotiation", https://brill.com/view/journals/iner/23/2/article-p238_5.xml; Uscinski, J, et al. (2020), *Why do people believe COVID-19 conspiracy theories?*, Harvard Kennedy School, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/why-do-people-believe-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/.

53 Wedeen, L. (1999), *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, University of Chicago Press.

gy. As Harding[54] and Pomerantsev[55] have shown, the Kremlin frequently deploys conspiracy theories to delegitimise dissent, frame foreign adversaries, and manage public opinion through the controlled chaos of conflicting narratives. These "strategic conspiracies" serve not only to deflect blame but to reinforce the perception that truth itself is inaccessible – an insight aligned with Foucault's[56] theory of power and discourse, as previously discussed.

Political polarisation is another condition strongly correlated with the rise of conspiracy theories, particularly in democratic societies. In the United States, Uscinski and Parent[57] have demonstrated that conspiracy theories tend to be adopted disproportionately by political outsiders or those perceiving themselves as losing power. Muirhead and Rosenblum[58] argue that contemporary conspiracism departs from traditional skepticism in that it no longer attempts to explain complex events through causal reasoning – it merely asserts nefarious intent without evidence. This form of conspiracism functions as a delegitimising discourse, often weaponised by populist leaders to target democratic norms and institutions.

Populist regimes often rely on conspiracy theories to create binary moral universes – echoing Arendt's[59] analysis of totalitarian ideology – where political opponents are cast as existential threats. Bolsonaro's Brazil, for instance, has witnessed an uptick in conspiratorial narratives surrounding vaccines, electoral fraud, and foreign interference, often amplified by the president himself.[60] These patterns mirror tac-

54 Harding, L. (2020), *Shadow State: Murder, Mayhem and Russia's Remaking of the West*, Guardian Faber, Faber & Faber.

55 Pomerantsev, P. (2014), *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, PublicAffairs.

56 Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon.

57 Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014), *American Conspiracy Theories*, Oxford University Press.

58 Muirhead, R., & Rosenblum, N. L. (2019), *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Princeton University Press.

59 Arendt, H. (1951), *The origins of totalitarianism*, Harcourt.

60 Hunter, W., & Power, T. J. (2019), *Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash*, in "Journal of Democracy", *30*(1), pp. 68-82, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2178939748?-sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals.

tics used by other populist leaders, including Trump in the United States and Orbán in Hungary, where conspiracy theories have been integrated into state rhetoric and policy agendas.

Historical experience also plays a critical role. Societies that have endured genuine conspiracies or systemic deception are often more predisposed to new conspiracy theories, even when empirical evidence is lacking. Fenster[61] and Coady[62] caution against dismissing all conspiracy theories as irrational, particularly in contexts where skepticism toward state narratives is justified by past state actions – such as COINTELPRO in the United States or CIA-backed coups in Latin America. Here, the distinction between *warranted* and *unwarranted* conspiracy theories[63] becomes especially salient.

Moreover, corruption, repression, and economic instability generate fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking. In such environments, what Uscinski and Enders[64] describe as "conspiracy thinking" – a generalised predisposition to view events as the result of conspiracies – becomes not just a cognitive style but a survival strategy. In Iran, Venezuela, and Turkey, state elites often frame political opposition or economic decline as the work of hostile foreign agents, thus reinforcing nationalistic sentiments and deflecting domestic accountability.

Education and civic infrastructure, particularly media literacy and access to credible information, also mediate societal susceptibility to conspiracy theories. As Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook[65] argue, the lack of critical thinking skills and epistemic vigilance allows misin-

61 Fenster, M. (2008), *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (2nd edition), University of Minnesota Press.

62 Coady, D. (Ed.) (2006), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate Publishing.

63 Keeley, B. L. (1999), *Of conspiracy theories*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", *96*(3), pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659.

64 Uscinski, J. E., & Enders, A. M. (2023), *What is a conspiracy theory and why does it matter?*, in "Critical Review", *35*(1-2), 148-169, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08913811.2022.2115668.

65 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017), *Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era*, in "Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition", *6*(4), pp. 353-369, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Beyond+misinformation%3A+Understanding+and+coping+with+the+%E2%80%9Cpost-truth%E2%80%9D+era&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

formation to circulate more freely. In the Global South, where educational and media infrastructures are uneven, conspiracy theories about vaccination, foreign NGOs, or technological developments often spread rapidly through social networks, sometimes with deadly consequences.

In sum, political science complements philosophical and psychological approaches by emphasising the structural and institutional conditions that render societies more susceptible to conspiracy theories. While individual cognition and existential uncertainty provide the psychological fuel, it is the political context – marked by distrust, repression, corruption, and polarisation – that provides the spark.

Understanding these dynamics is essential to any strategy aimed at countering the spread of conspiratorial thinking. Efforts to rebuild institutional trust, ensure transparency, depolarise public discourse, and enhance civic education are all crucial components. Yet, these challenges cannot be addressed solely at the individual level. They demand political and institutional reform.

In the following sections, we will examine two additional dimensions that shape the ecosystem of conspiracy theories: the cultural and historical factors that predispose certain societies to conspiratorial thinking, and the crucial role that media environments – both traditional and digital – play in amplifying or containing these narratives.

5. Collective Beliefs: A Sociological Approach to Conspiracy Theories

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, philosophical inquiry identifies conspiracy theories as alternative epistemologies, psychology explains their individual-level appeal, and political science reveals how they are exploited by power. However, the full picture requires a sociological perspective – one that examines how historical legacies, social inequalities, and cultural repertoires combine to create environments where conspiracy theories thrive. Sociologists emphasise that conspiratorial thinking is not merely the product of individual

irrationality or political ideology; rather, it is shaped by deep social structures, collective memories, and cultural conditions.

While conspiracy theories exist in all societies, they become socially consequential and politically disruptive when certain background conditions align. These include persistent inequality, social fragmentation, ideological rigidity, historical trauma, and cultural frameworks that prioritise narrative closure over empirical scrutiny. Below, we examine several factors that contribute to societal-level susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, with particular emphasis on how shared experience, identity, and structure generate fertile ground for conspiratorial worldviews.

Collective insecurity and the sociology of risk help explain why, in societies marked by chronic insecurity – whether economic, existential, or geopolitical – conspiratorial thinking often functions as a coping mechanism. Sociologist Ulrich Beck[66] famously described late modernity as a "risk society", characterised by increasing individualisation and declining traditional certainties. In such contexts, conspiracy theories serve as explanatory frameworks that impose structure on diffuse anxieties. When people feel that the rules are shifting, that the future is unpredictable, or that invisible forces control their fate, they become more receptive to narratives that offer intentionality and moral clarity.

For instance, in states experiencing long-term instability – such as Lebanon, Pakistan, or Venezuela – citizens often interpret major events (like assassinations, protests, or financial shocks) not as accidents or policy failures, but as part of deliberate strategies by domestic elites or foreign actors. This reflects what anthropologist Didier Fassin[67] describes as "securitized subjectivities" – worldviews constructed through pervasive experiences of danger and state dysfunction.

66 Beck, U. (1992), *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*, SAGE Publications.

67 Fassin, D. (2007), *Humanitarianism as a politics of life*, in "Public Culture", *19*(3), pp. 499-520, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249878607_Humanitarianism_as_a_Politics_of_Life.

Historical betrayal and social memory also play a powerful role in shaping conspiratorial thinking. Conspiracy theories are also amplified in societies with a legacy of state betrayal, foreign occupation, or institutional duplicity. Sociologists of collective memory, such as Jeffrey Olick and Paul Connerton, emphasise how shared historical experiences shape national identity and inform how people interpret the present. If a society has been repeatedly misled or manipulated – through military coups, colonialism, mass surveillance, or propaganda – it develops a "cultural script" of suspicion that becomes a default interpretive lens.

Consider post-apartheid South Africa, where continued inequality and corruption have been met with widespread conspiratorial explanations, including beliefs that economic institutions are secretly controlled by white elites or foreign investors. These narratives are not detached from reality – they are anchored in a history of structural exclusion. In such settings, conspiracy theories do not feel irrational; they feel like continuity.

Ethnic, religious, and sectarian cleavages frequently contribute to the formation of conspiratorial worldviews. In multi-ethnic or religiously divided societies, conspiracy theories often emerge at the fault lines of identity. As Benedict Anderson[68] argued, nations are "imagined communities", and conspiracy theories can become powerful tools for constructing in-group solidarity against perceived out-group threats. This dynamic is especially pronounced in societies with unresolved ethnic tensions or histories of communal violence.

In Myanmar, for example, the Rohingya Muslim minority has been portrayed in conspiratorial narratives as part of a secret Islamist plot to destabilise the Buddhist majority. In India, conspiracy theories about "Love Jihad" and alleged demographic warfare by Muslims have gained traction among Hindu nationalists. These beliefs are not sim-

68 Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso.

ply delusions; they are symbolic weapons in an ongoing struggle over identity, legitimacy, and sovereignty.

Dislocation, migration, and demographic anxiety also shape the appeal of conspiracy theories. Sociological research also connects the rise of conspiracy theories to demographic change and migration-induced identity anxiety. In societies experiencing rapid urbanisation, influxes of refugees, or shifting ethnic compositions, conspiracy narratives often emerge as responses to perceived cultural erosion. This is especially true in countries where national identity has been closely tied to ethnolinguistic or religious homogeneity.

In Hungary and Poland, anti-migrant conspiracy theories – such as those alleging that George Soros is engineering mass Muslim immigration to undermine Christian Europe – have become central to nationalist politics. These theories draw power from anxieties about demographic transformation, framed not as policy outcomes but as secret plots against the nation. Such interpretations are more readily accepted in societies with ethnonationalist ideologies and exclusionary definitions of belonging.

Social inequality and marginalisation further contribute to the spread of conspiratorial narratives. Societies marked by stark inequalities – whether economic, educational, or geographic – are often more prone to conspiracy thinking, particularly when large segments of the population feel disconnected from decision-making power. Pierre Bourdieu's[69] concept of *symbolic violence* helps explain why conspiracy theories resonate with marginalised groups: they offer an explanation for their disempowerment that does not require technical expertise or access to elite discourse.

For example, in some rural regions of sub-Saharan Africa, conspiracy theories about vaccinations, Western aid organisations, or genetically modified crops are fueled not by ignorance alone, but by long-standing experiences of being ignored, deceived, or experiment-

69 Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Harvard University Press.

ed upon. Similarly, in economically depressed areas of Europe and the United States, conspiracy theories about financial elites, globalists, or "the system" reflect a deep sense of alienation from institutions perceived as distant or corrupt.

Another sociological factor is the strength or weakness of civil society, which acts as a buffer between the state and individuals. When intermediary institutions such as unions, community organisations, local media, or civic associations are weak, atomisation increases. In such environments, people lack trusted spaces to process uncertainty collectively, and conspiracy theories can spread unchecked through informal networks.

This is particularly evident in post-conflict or transitional societies, where civil society has been disrupted or co-opted. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, competing ethnic narratives have fostered mutually exclusive conspiracy theories about wartime atrocities and post-war governance, contributing to political deadlock and social mistrust. The absence of shared forums for deliberation means that narrative fragmentation reinforces cognitive fragmentation.

To conclude, the social infrastructure underpinning conspiratorial thinking reveals that conspiracy theories are not just reflections of flawed reasoning or political manipulation; they are symptoms of broader social and historical conditions. From the sociology of risk and memory to theories of identity, marginalisation, and inequality, it becomes clear that certain societies are structurally more vulnerable to conspiratorial worldviews.

These worldviews serve important social functions: they can reinforce identity, explain suffering, mobilise resistance, or express moral outrage. But they also carry risks – of polarisation, scapegoating, and disengagement from democratic deliberation. Societies where conspiracy theories thrive are often those where social trust is low, historical wounds are unresolved, and collective institutions are weak.

While psychology explains why individuals are drawn to conspiracy theories, sociology shows us why some communities and nations become saturated with them. Recognising this distinction is key to

designing interventions that go beyond fact-checking, and instead address the underlying social fabric that shapes how people construct truth.

In the following section, we turn to one of the most important modern accelerants of conspiratorial thinking: the media ecosystem – particularly the role of digital platforms, algorithmic amplification, and the changing nature of information in the 21st century.

6. Media Narratives and Political Discreditation: The Mediatised Life of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories thrive in environments marked by epistemic uncertainty, political dysfunction, and social fragmentation. However, it is the media – particularly in its digital, commercialised, and algorithmically driven form – that transforms these latent conditions into powerful public narratives. In contemporary information ecosystems, conspiracy theories are not merely fringe beliefs. They are circulated, aestheticised, monetised, and weaponised across interconnected domains of journalism, entertainment, strategic communication, and algorithmic curation.

This section argues that media infrastructures play a constitutive role in legitimising and disseminating conspiracy theories. Far from serving as neutral conveyors of truth, media systems are embedded in the political economy of attention, shaping the discursive conditions under which conspiratorial narratives emerge and gain credibility. Within this economy, spectacle frequently eclipses substance, and disinformation flourishes under the auspices of choice, freedom, and engagement.

From gatekeeping to spectacle, journalism and the crisis of epistemic authority have played a central role in this transformation. Historically, legacy journalism performed a gatekeeping function, guided by professional norms of objectivity, verification, and public accountability. Yet in the digital age, these standards are increasingly undermined by market pressures. As news organisations compete for attention

within a fragmented and platform-dominated media environment, editorial priorities have shifted toward immediacy, virality, and emotional resonance.[70] In this context, conspiratorial content is not an anomaly but a structural byproduct of the attention economy.

Journalistic "both-sidesism", often intended to preserve balance, may legitimise unverified or fringe claims by presenting them as equivalent to empirically grounded perspectives.[71] Moreover, attempts to debunk conspiracy theories can inadvertently reinforce them, especially when the false claims are repeated during the correction process – a phenomenon known as the "familiarity backfire effect".[72]

Thus, even legacy media can become unwitting amplifiers of conspiratorial narratives. Sensationalised headlines, speculative framing, and ambiguous language serve to dramatise events, blurring the distinction between critical journalism and conspiracy endorsement. This erosion of epistemic gatekeeping creates fertile ground for disinformation to flourish.

Partisan media and ideological echo chambers further deepen this dynamic. The ideological segmentation of media has deepened polarisation and facilitated the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories. As Eli Pariser[73] observed in his analysis of "filter bubbles", digital media consumption increasingly reflects and reinforces users' preexisting beliefs. In this context, conspiracy theories serve as instruments of political identity, offering simplified moral binaries that frame one's in-group as virtuous and the out-group as corrupt or malevolent.

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70 Chadwick, A. (2017), *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd edition), Oxford University Press; McChesney, R. W. (2013), *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, The New Press.

71 Boykoff, M. T., & Boykoff, J. M. (2004), *Balance as bias: Global warming and the US prestige press*, in "Global Environmental Change", *14*(2), pp. 125-136. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959378003000669.

72 Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012), *Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing*, in "Psychological Science in the Public Interest", *13*(3), pp. 106-131, https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018.

73 Pariser, E. (2011), *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin Press.

Conservative media outlets such as Fox News, Newsmax, and Breitbart have routinely circulated themes of "deep state" interference, election fraud, and globalist cabals. Conversely, segments of the left-leaning press have promoted counter-establishment narratives centring on corporate collusion and state surveillance. While the epistemological asymmetry of these tendencies varies,[74] the structural outcome is the same: conspiracy theories are deployed as rhetorical weapons in an increasingly antagonistic public sphere.

Donald Trump's strategic use of terms like "fake news", "witch hunt", and "rigged system" exemplifies the weaponisation of conspiracy discourse as a mode of pre-emptive delegitimation.[75] This rhetoric inoculates audiences against criticism by casting institutional actors – media, courts, science – as part of a larger conspiracy. Conspiratorial interpretations are not merely tolerated but validated within these echo chambers, reinforcing distrust and eroding the possibility of consensus.

Sensationalism and the 24-hour news cycle also play a key role. The shift toward 24/7 news production has entrenched sensationalism as a core editorial value. Emotional provocation, narrative intrigue, and speculative framings dominate reporting practices – not necessarily out of ideological intent, but because they capture attention.[76] Conspiracy theories, with their inherent narrative drama and epistemic thrill, are particularly well-suited to this mode of coverage.

Stories are often introduced with rhetorical cues that imply hidden motives or suppressed truths, even when evidence is lacking. This approach does not necessarily endorse conspiracies, but it renders them plausible through repetition and aesthetic familiarity. In doing so, the

74 Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018), *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford University Press.

75 Kreis, R. (2017), *The "Tweet Politics" of President Trump*, in "Journal of Language and Politics", *16*(4), pp. 607-618, https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17032.kre.

76 Chadwick, A. (2017), *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd edition), Oxford University Press; McChesney, R. W. (2013), *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, The New Press.

media becomes a conduit not only for information but for the affective charge that conspiracy theories require to thrive.

Platform capitalism and the algorithmic incentive to mislead have exponentially accelerated these processes. While legacy and partisan media shape the discursive terrain, it is social media platforms – Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube – that exponentially amplify conspiracy content. These platforms are governed by algorithms optimised for engagement rather than accuracy. Research shows that false information spreads more rapidly and widely than truth on these networks, precisely because it tends to be more emotionally engaging.[77]

Algorithms drive users toward increasingly extreme content in a feedback loop of radicalisation, commonly known as the "rabbit hole" effect.[78] Personalised feeds isolate users within ideologically homogenous environments, limiting exposure to countervailing information and deepening belief entrenchment. The platforms' design mimics addictive behaviour patterns, prioritising content that sustains user immersion – regardless of its veracity or social cost.

The *Pizzagate* case exemplifies how these dynamics manifest in the real world. Emerging during the 2016 US election, Pizzagate falsely alleged that Democratic leaders, including Hillary Clinton, were running a child sex trafficking ring from a Washington D.C. pizzeria. The theory – based on misinterpreted emails and fringe message board speculation – was amplified by right-wing blogs and social media. It culminated in December 2016 when a man, influenced by the theory, entered the pizzeria with a rifle to conduct a "rescue". Though no ev-

77 Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018), *The spread of true and false news online*, in "Science", *359*(6380), pp. 1146-1151, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap9559.

78 Ribeiro, M. H., Ottoni, R., West, R., Almeida, V. A., & Meira, W. (2020), *Auditing radicalization pathways on YouTube*, Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, pp. 131-141, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3351095.3372879; Cinelli M., Quattrociocchi, W., Galeazzi, A., et al. (2020), *The COVID-19 social media infodemic*, in "Scientific Reports", *10*(16598), https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.

idence was found, the case illustrates how online disinformation can incite offline violence.[79]

A similar trajectory is evident in the rise of *QAnon*, a conspiracy movement that began in 2017 with cryptic online posts by an anonymous figure known as "Q". Adherents believe that a global cabal of Satan-worshipping elites engages in child trafficking and that Donald Trump was secretly working to dismantle it. Though entirely unfounded, QAnon rapidly spread via Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, with followers engaging in real-world violence, including participation in the January 6 Capitol insurrection.[80]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracies linking 5G networks to the virus gained global traction. These *5G-COVID* theories falsely claimed that electromagnetic radiation from 5G towers either caused or exacerbated the virus. Disseminated through WhatsApp and video platforms, these claims led to arson attacks on telecommunications infrastructure and widespread public confusion, hampering health responses.[81]

The January 6, 2021 Capitol attack marked a culmination of conspiratorial rhetoric. Motivated by baseless claims of election fraud and emboldened by QAnon and pro-Trump narratives, rioters stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election. The attack resulted in deaths, injuries, and widespread damage, underscoring the capacity of digital disinformation to precipitate democratic crisis.

Strategic disinformation and the political economy of narrative control add yet another layer to this complex media ecosystem. Beyond

79 Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017), *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, in "Data & Society", https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinformation-online/.

80 Ribeiro, M. H., Ottoni, R., West, R., Almeida, V. A., & Meira, W. (2020), *Auditing radicalization pathways on YouTube*, Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, pp. 131-141, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3351095.3372879.

81 Cinelli M., Quattrociocchi, W., Galeazzi, A., et al. (2020), *The COVID-19 social media infodemic*, in "Scientific Reports", *10*(16598), https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-73510-5.

organic diffusion, conspiracy theories are also manufactured deliberately through strategic communication. Governments, corporations, and political actors deploy disinformation campaigns to deflect criticism, destabilise adversaries, or fabricate public consent. The Russian state's use of the "firehose of falsehood" tactic floods the media space with contradictory claims to induce cynicism and paralyse verification.[82] Similarly, the fossil fuel and tobacco industries engaged in long-term PR strategies to cast doubt on scientific consensus.[83]

These campaigns exploit journalistic norms – such as balance and open inquiry – by injecting ambiguity into public discourse. The result is a discursive fog where all claims appear equally suspect and conspiratorial interpretations flourish.

Culture, entertainment, and the aestheticisation of conspiracy play a critical role in embedding conspiratorial thinking within everyday media consumption. Popular culture has long served as a vehicle for conspiracy narratives. Films like *JFK*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *The Matrix* dramatise hidden power structures and valorise individual dissent, reinforcing the plausibility of conspiratorial worldviews.[84] These stories reflect and reinforce cultural scripts that prise skepticism and reveal, blurring the boundary between critical inquiry and paranoid suspicion.

Streaming platforms and user-generated content have extended these tropes into new formats. YouTube pseudo-documentaries and TikTok videos often present conspiratorial content as "alternative history" or "investigative truth", combining entertainment with epistemological subversion.[85] In the absence of editorial gatekeeping, such media circulates with affective and aesthetic authority, contributing to the normalisation of conspiratorial thinking.

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82 Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016), *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*, RAND PeterCorporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html.

83 Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010), *Merchants of Doubt*, Bloomsbury.

84 Knight, P. (2000), *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*, Routledge.

85 Davis, J. L. (2018), *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*, Oxford University Press.

To conclude, reclaiming the infrastructure of belief is essential to addressing the crisis posed by conspiracy theories. The proliferation of conspiracy theories is not merely a failure of individual reasoning, but also a crisis of media infrastructure. From legacy journalism to algorithmic platforms, from partisan news to popular culture, the systems designed to inform the public have been repurposed – wittingly or not – to mislead, polarise, and mobilise. In this mediatised landscape, conspiracy theories are not fringe aberrations but systemic outcomes.

Addressing this crisis requires systemic reform: algorithmic transparency, public investment in civic media, media literacy education, and the creation of culturally compelling, fact-based narratives. In a post-truth society, where truth competes not on accuracy but on aesthetic and emotional appeal, the challenge is not only to debunk falsehoods – but to restore the cultural and institutional foundations of belief itself.

Conclusions

The proliferation of conspiracy theories in contemporary society represents not simply a communicative problem, but a systemic crisis for democratic governance, epistemic integrity, and social cohesion. No longer confined to the political fringe, conspiracy theories are now woven into the fabric of mainstream discourse, institutional rhetoric, and media ecosystems. As this study has demonstrated, their endurance and influence cannot be attributed to misinformation alone. Rather, they are multidimensional phenomena – rooted in psychological needs, shaped by sociotechnical infrastructures, weaponised by political actors, and reinforced by histories of exclusion, cultural grievance, and institutional failure.

Philosophically, conspiracy theories blur the line between legitimate skepticism and epistemically flawed conspiracism. The tension they pose – between critical inquiry and epistemic closure – raises fundamental questions about how truth is produced, contested, and validated in democratic societies. Thinkers such as Popper, Foucault,

and Baudrillard have helped illuminate the way conspiracy theories exploit the erosion of grand narratives and the fracturing of epistemic authority in a postmodern landscape. They do not merely reject institutional claims to truth but often replace them with self-sealing alternative epistemologies that resist falsification and appeal to moral dualism.

Psychologically, conspiracy theories exploit cognitive biases and emotional needs that become especially pronounced during periods of crisis. The drive to find meaning, assert control, and preserve identity in uncertain conditions predisposes individuals to accept reductive and emotionally resonant explanations. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, saw a surge in conspiratorial thinking that directly undermined public health measures, fueled vaccine resistance, and intensified mistrust in science and governance.

Politically, conspiracy theories function as tools of power. They are instrumentalised to erode institutional legitimacy, polarise public discourse, and consolidate authority – particularly in populist and authoritarian regimes. Political leaders from the United States to Turkey and Russia have strategically deployed conspiratorial narratives to deflect accountability, suppress dissent, and manufacture loyalty. In such contexts, conspiracy theories are not merely symptomatic of discontent; they are integral to the exercise of power and the reproduction of political control.

Sociologically, the appeal of conspiracy theories is grounded in social inequalities, collective traumas, and cultural repertoires of suspicion. Historical experiences of betrayal – whether through colonisation, systemic discrimination, or state surveillance – cultivate environments in which official narratives are met with skepticism, and alternative explanations gain traction. Conspiratorial thinking, in this sense, often reflects deeper critiques of power and alienation, even as it risks devolving into misinformation, scapegoating, or reactionary politics.

These dynamics are further intensified by the structure of contemporary media. Algorithmic curation, platform capitalism, and the po-

litical economy of attention all serve to amplify conspiratorial content, privileging sensationalism and outrage over factual accuracy or democratic deliberation. As seen in the cases of Pizzagate, QAnon, and 5G-COVID conspiracies, digital platforms can rapidly elevate fringe beliefs into movements with real-world consequences. With the rise of deepfakes and synthetic media, the challenge of distinguishing truth from fiction will only grow more urgent.

In responding to conspiracy theories, democratic societies must avoid simplistic solutions such as censorship or reactive debunking. Suppression often reinforces belief, lending credence to persecution narratives and deepening epistemic polarisation. A more effective strategy is long-term and multifaceted: enhancing media literacy, rebuilding institutional trust, supporting investigative journalism, and addressing the structural conditions – such as inequality, alienation, and democratic backsliding – that make conspiracy narratives persuasive.

Ultimately, this study contends that conspiracy theories are not anomalies to be eradicated, but indicators of deeper societal fractures. They reveal a breakdown in the infrastructures of trust, meaning, and shared reality. The task ahead is not to eliminate conspiracy theories altogether – a utopian and potentially illiberal goal – but to contain their most corrosive effects by cultivating a civic culture rooted in intellectual humility, evidence-based reasoning, and informed dissent.

As history shows, conspiracy theories are likely to persist, especially in moments of uncertainty and institutional fragility. Yet their impact can be mitigated. The challenge is to foster a public sphere where disagreement is grounded in facts, dissent is constructive, and truth remains a shared – though contested – horizon. In an era of epistemic fragmentation, this is both a democratic necessity and a cultural imperative. The future of democratic discourse may well depend not on our ability to silence conspiracy theories, but on our capacity to respond to them with clarity, integrity, and collective resilience.

Framing the Coup: Far-Right Populism, Illiberalism and the Brazilian 2022 Election

Raquel Recuero

Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that Bolsonaro and the far-right strategically used disinformation on social media platforms to control the election narrative, framing and playing a crucial role in fueling and legitimising the attempted *coup d'état* that Brazil experienced on January 8, 2023. We use a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, based on Wodak's[1] proposal of an historical and contextual approach. Thus, we examine the social media most replicated narratives about the presidential election and compare them to Bolsonaro and his supporters' statements during the campaign period. Through this approach, we demonstrate that the far-right was able to establish, amplify, and reinforce disinformation narratives, further shaping public perception and deepening political tensions.

1 Wodak, R. (2015), *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, SAGE Publications; Wodak, R. (2017), *Discourse and politics: Dimensions of democratic legitimacy*, in "Discourse & Society", *28*(5), pp. 567-571.

This process reflects a broader strategy of undermining democratic norms and institutions through the systematic spread of disinformation and delegitimisation of electoral processes, which is a characteristic of illiberalism.[2] Bolsonaro's disinformation campaigns align with this pattern, as they were not merely reactive but proactively framing the electoral process as fraudulent, fostering widespread distrust in the election and mobilising supporters to reject legitimate outcomes. This far-right movement, thus, was able to weaponise digital disinformation to create a distrust narrative, which we will further discuss. We then debate illiberalism as a communicative and political strategy, illustrating how disinformation can be an intentional mechanism used to destabilise democracies from within.

1. Far-Right Populism, Illiberalism and Discourse

The concept of illiberal democracy refers to political systems where elections are held, but key liberal democratic principles – such as civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances – are systematically undermined.[3] In these cases, regimes maintain a democratic *façade* but actively work to manipulate and weaken liberal institutions. One of the defining characteristics of illiberal incumbents is how they try to control the narrative on the public sphere.[4] They achieve this through strategies like propaganda, nationalism, and disinformation,[5] which serve to justify their actions, maintain popular support, and secure electoral legitimacy.

2 Wodak, R. (2022), *Entering the "Post-Shame Era": The rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in Europe*, in Foster, R. & Grzymski, J. (Eds.), *The limits of Europe: Identities, spaces, values*, Bristol University Press, pp. 207-227; Zakaria, F. (1997), *The rise of illiberal democracy*, in "Foreign Affairs", *76*(6), pp. 22-43.

3 Zakaria, F. (1997), *The rise of illiberal democracy*, in "Foreign Affairs", *76*(6), pp. 22-43.

4 Zakaria, F. (1997), *The rise of illiberal democracy*, in "Foreign Affairs", *76*(6), pp. 22-43; Siegle, J. (2024), *Controlling the narrative: Disinformation and democratic erosion*, in "Journal of Global Affairs", 12(1), pp. 23-45.

5 Papakyriakopoulos, O., & Goodman, E. (2022), *The impact of Twitter labels on misinformation spread and user engagement: Lessons from Trump's election twe-*

Far-right populism is characterised by a mix of nationalism, anti-elitism, and exclusionary identity politics. Mudde[6] defines it as a thin-centred ideology that divides society into two opposing groups: "the pure people" vs "the corrupt elite". This division fuels populist rhetoric, positioning the leader as the sole and legitimate representative of the people's will. In addition, far-right populist movements often emphasise nativism and anti-immigration policies,[7] or in the South America's case, the left and communism,[8] reinforcing the idea that national identity is under threat. These movements also challenge pluralism and democratic institutions, typically weakening judicial independence and media freedoms to consolidate power.[9] Through these tactics, far-right populists justify authoritarian tendencies while still maintaining electoral legitimacy.

Far-right populism is frequently associated with the rise of illiberal leaders, as many scholars have pointed out. Wodak,[10] for instance, introduced the concept of the "post-shame era" to describe a political climate in which far-right populist figures openly express xenophobic and illiberal views without fear of social or political repercussions. In these cases, leaders often create an image of authenticity and of "outsiders" when subverting traditional political discourse. Thus, far-right populism can provide the context for illiberalism to flourish, although one is not always connected to the other. While not all far-right populists engage in outright authoritarianism, their rhetoric and strategies

ets, Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022, pp. 2541-2551, https://doi.org/10.1145/3485447.3512126.

6 Mudde, C. (2007), *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press.

7 Betz, H.-G. (1994), *Radical right-wing populism in Western Europe*, Macmillan; Gidron, N., & Bonikowski, B. (2013), *Varieties of populism: Literature review and research agenda*, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

8 Guimarães, F. D. S., & Silva, I. D. D. O. E. (2021), *Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro's ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment*, in "International Affairs", *97*(2).

9 Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019), *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*, Cambridge University Press.

10 Wodak, R. (2022), *Entering the "Post-Shame Era": The rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in Europe*, in Foster, R. & Grzymski, J. (Eds.), *The limits of Europe: Identities, spaces, values*, Bristol University Press, pp. 207-227.

frequently erode democratic norms, leading to democratic backsliding and fostering illiberal governance. This has been the case in many countries, such as Brazil.[11]

The role of discourse in far-right populism and illiberal leadership is crucial in their ability to consolidate power and shape public perception. Wodak[12] explains how these leaders use language to normalise exclusionary rhetoric, scapegoat minority groups, and delegitimise political opposition. Their discourse often relies on historical revisionism, victimisation narratives, and moral panics to manufacture a sense of crisis that justifies extreme political measures. Additionally, far-right populists also frequently weaponise emotions – especially fear and resentment – to frame the political elite and marginalised communities as existential threats to national sovereignty and cultural identity.[13] In the cases where both movements are present, these discursive mechanisms are used to control the public discourse, to weaponise polarisation, and to manipulate social media ecosystems to sustain power, even (and often, purposely) at the cost of democratic backsliding.[14]

11 Rossini, P., Mont'Alverne, C., & Kalogeropoulos, A. (2023), *Explaining beliefs in electoral misinformation in the 2022 Brazilian election: The role of ideology, political trust, social media, and messaging apps*, in "Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review", *4*(3).

12 Wodak, R. (2015), *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, SAGE Publications; Wodak, R. (2017), *Discourse and politics: Dimensions of democratic legitimacy*, in "Discourse & Society", *28*(5), pp. 567-571; Wodak, R. (2022), *Entering the "Post-Shame Era": The rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in Europe*, in Foster, R.& Grzymski, J. (Eds.), *The limits of Europe: Identities, spaces, values*, Bristol University Press, pp. 207-227.

13 Moffitt, B. (2016), *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*, Stanford University Press.

14 Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018), *How democracies die*, Crown Publishing Group; Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019), *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*, Cambridge University Press.

2. Social Media Platforms, Political Campaigns and Illiberalism

Social media platforms have become important spaces for the proliferation and legitimisation of illiberal discourses, providing arenas where such narratives can flourish and spread extensively. Through algorithms these tools facilitate the rapid dissemination of problematic content that attacks liberal democratic norms, often amplifying voices that propagate exclusionary and extremist ideologies. Research indicates that far-right communities have strategically utilised social media to share disinformation, effectively influencing public opinion.[15] Moreover, the architecture of social media fosters echo chambers, wherein users predominantly encounter content that reinforces their preexisting beliefs, thereby intensifying political polarisation and entrenching illiberal viewpoints.[16] This environment not only normalises but also legitimises discourses that undermine democracy, as the continuous exposure to similar (and often violent) content diminishes critical engagement and fosters acceptance of radical perspectives. Insufficient moderation and regulation of these platforms are also pointed as part of the problem,[17] allowing these tools to be co-opted by campaigns to escape constraints imposed by electoral law.[18]

Disinformation is a key part of this phenomenon.[19] This type of content serves as a tool in the arsenal of illiberal regimes and leaders, used to manipulate public perception, foster societal polarisation, and

15 Dowling, M.-E. (2023), *Far-right populism in alt-tech: A challenge for democracy?*, in "New Media & Society", https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231205889.

16 Cinelli, M., Morales, G. D. F., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021), *The echo chamber effect on social media*, in "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences", *118*(9), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118.

17 La Gatta, V., Luceri, L., Fabbri, F., & Ferrara, E. (2023), *The interconnected nature of online harm and moderation: Investigating the cross-platform spread of harmful content between YouTube and Twitter*, arXiv preprint, https://arxiv.org/abs/2304.01371.

18 Ituassu, A., Pecoraro, C., Capone, L., Leo, L., & Mannheimer, V. (2022), *Mídias digitais, eleições e democracia no Brasil: Uma abordagem qualitativa para o estudo de percepções de profissionais de campanha*, in "Dados", *66*, https://www.scielo.br/j/dados/a/TwCX5jx4C48ZrNyRB9VSPtn/?lang=pt.

19 Recuero, R. (2024), *A rede da desinformação: Sistemas, estruturas e dinâmicas nas plataformas de mídias sociais*, Editora Sulina.

undermine trust in the media and democratic institutions. Gaughan[20] has pointed out how the mix of disinformation and polarisation can lead to a sharp decline in public confidence in election integrity, even though there is no basis for the claims, which can also create conditions to democratic backsliding. In this case, affective polarisation – a form of political polarisation driven primarily by emotions rather than ideological differences – can erode trust in democratic institutions and demonise political opponents, often seen as risks to democracy.[21] This use of disinformation not only destabilises the informational foundation essential for a functioning democracy but also creates an environment where authoritarian practices can be normalised and accepted.

3. The Case of Brazil

Although much of the literature credits alt-tech systems for the spread and legitimation of illiberalism and extremist discourses,[22] this was not the case in Brazil. In the country, most far-right discourse, as well as the disinformation that often supported it, circulated in plain sight on the most widely used social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Bolsonaro, for example, used Twitter to discredit the media (labeling all articles he disagreed with as "fake news"), as well as a platform to spread aggressive discourse.[23] WhatsApp was a key channel for illiberalism to flourish through disinformation during the 2018 election, particularly by far-right sup-

20 Gaughan, A. J. (2017), *Illiberal democracy: The toxic mix of fake news, hyperpolarization, and partisan election administration*, in "Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy", *12*, pp. 57-139, https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djclpp/vol12/iss3/3/.

21 Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012), *Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", *76*(3), pp. 405-431, https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=10.1093%2Fpoq%2Fnfs038&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

22 Dowling, M.-E. (2023), *Far-right populism in alt-tech: A challenge for democracy?*, in "New Media & Society", https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231205889.

23 Lobo, D. A. C., & Conceição, D. L. L. (2019), *Ódio e fake news como estratégia política no discurso de Bolsonaro nas redes sociais digitais*, in "Anais do Encontro Anual da ANPOCS", *43*, Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais, pp. 1-23.

porters' groups,[24] as were YouTube and Facebook.[25] This pattern persisted in 2023.[26]

In the 2018 presidential election, Jair Bolsonaro, then a minor candidate with less airtime on traditional media than his opponents, successfully expanded his candidacy through social media platforms, heavily relying on disinformation and the use of bots.[27] He also used his supporters to extensively spread disinformation about the electronic ballot system and the electoral process.[28] Bolsonaro positioned himself as a "man of the people", a nationalist, and a political outsider,[29] often using rhetoric that played on emotions – particularly hate and dissatisfaction – while directing these sentiments against his leftist opponent, his supporters, and marginalised groups.[30] His rhetoric was heavily influenced by that of Donald Trump, who had won the US election two years earlier.

At the time, Bolsonaro was running against Fernando Haddad from the Workers' Party, who had entered the electoral race after Lula da Silva, the original candidate, was forced to withdraw following his

24 Evangelista, R., & Bruno, F. (2019), *WhatsApp and political instability in Brazil: Targeted messages and political radicalisation*, in "Internet Policy Review", *8*(4), https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1434.

25 Piaia, V., & Alves, M. (2020), *Abrindo a caixa preta: Análise exploratória da rede bolsonarista no WhatsApp*, in "Intercom - Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação", *43*(3), https://revistas.intercom.org.br/index.php/revistaintercom/article/view/3461.

26 Alves, M., Grohmann, R., Recuero, R., & Tavares, C. (2023), *Desinformação e eleições de 2022 no Brasil: Lições em um contexto do sul global*, INCT em Disputas e Soberanias Informacionais.

27 Ituassu, A., Pecoraro, C., Capone, L., Leo, L., & Mannheimer, V. (2022), *Mídias digitais, eleições e democracia no Brasil: Uma abordagem qualitativa para o estudo de percepções de profissionais de campanha*, in "Dados", *66*, https://www.scielo.br/j/dados/a/TwCX5jx4C48ZrNyRB9VSPtn/?lang=pt.

28 Recuero, R. (2020), *#FraudenasUrnas: Estratégias discursivas de desinformação no Twitter nas eleições 2018*, in "Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada", *20*(3), pp. 383-406; Santos, G. F. (2021), *Social media, disinformation, and regulation of the electoral process: A study based on 2018 Brazilian election experience*, in "Revista de Investigações Constitucionais", *7*, pp. 429-449.

29 Setzler, M. (2020), *Did Brazilians Vote for Jair Bolsonaro Because They Share his Most Controversial Views?*, in "Brazilian Political Science Review", *15*(1), https://www.scielo.br/j/bpsr/a/YWW55BRxPQTZKqfcyhw3f6L/abstract/?lang=en.

30 Layton, M. L., Smith, A. E., Moseley, M. W., & Cohen, M. J. (2021), *Demographic polarization and the rise of the far right: Brazil's 2018 presidential election*, in "Research & Politics", *8*(1), https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168021990204.

arrest and conviction on multiple charges. Lula was later exonerated and released, allowing him to run in the 2022 election after the prosecutor and judge responsible for his case were accused and convicted of partiality. Albuquerque[31] identifies this event as a key factor in Brazil's illiberal turn, arguing that Lula's imprisonment through a corrupt judicial system exemplified the manipulation of democratic institutions for political gain. After taking office, Bolsonaro continued to attack the election process, the judiciary, and other democratic institutions.

During 2022, Brazil had one of the most polarising and consequential presidential election in the country's recent history. On one side, there was the then president, Jair Bolsonaro, from the Liberal Party and one of the country's far-right leaders and on the other, the ex-president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, from the Worker's Party, representing the left. Bolsonaro had a controversial time as president, promoting scientific denialism during the COVID-19 pandemic, criticising minorities and human rights and frequently attacking democratic institutions in the country.

In this context, the 2022 election happened amidst fears of attacks to the democracy in the country. Bolsonaro frequently questioned the country's electronic voting system without evidence, raising concerns that he might not accept a loss. A few days before the campaign started, for example, on July 18, the then president called the ambassadors of several countries for a meeting where he claimed the electronic ballot boxes used for the election in Brazil were vulnerable to fraud and the election would be rigged without any evidence. This discourse was repeated by several of his supporters, and particularly, by chamber members during the entire period before the election.[32] Bolsonaro also criticised the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), as well as the Supreme Federal Court (STF), both of whom were overseeing electoral matters

31 Albuquerque, A. de. (2021), *The two sources of the illiberal turn in Brazil*, in "The Brown Journal of World Affairs", *27*(2).

32 Bastos, M., & Recuero, R. (2023), *The insurrectionist playbook: Jair Bolsonaro and the National Congress of Brazil*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(4), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231211881.

and, at the same time, praised the Military Forces and referred to them as a safeguard of democracy, erasing the role they had in the country's 30 years of dictatorship.

Social media platforms were key in these moments, not only as one of the main channels for the political campaign, but also as places rife with disinformation and spread of fraud claims, fueling polarisation and discredit of the electoral process, mostly among Bolsonaro's supporters.[33] While Bolsonaro himself avoided directly calling for a military coup, his rhetoric, actions, and the behaviour of his supporters were interpreted by many as signaling support for anti-democratic measures. His supporters frequently used social media to claim for a "military intervention" to "save democracy", and some even spent many months camped outside the country's barracks to ask for the army to take control and avoid a "communist threat".[34] This context was further complicated by the spread of disinformation about the election, and Lula da Silva on these platforms and the Supreme Court taking action to force platforms to take out the disinformation, which also fueled the ideas of conspiracy for the left and the democratic institutions that circulated among the far-right supporters.

Bolsonaro lost the election to Lula da Silva in the second round, on October 30, by a small margin. He delayed acknowledging the results and remained largely silent as his supporters blocked roads and gathered in front of military barracks demanding intervention. Many viewed this as his way of indirectly supporting these calls. These protests culminated with a tentative coup, on January 8, 2023, just a few days after Lula da Silva took office. On this day, Bolsonaro supporters stormed key government buildings in Brasília, including the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidential palace, demanding a military

33 Bastos, M. T., Vinhas, O., Recuero, R., & Soares, F. (2024), *Reverse influence: The social production of disinformation in the 2022 Brazilian general election*, SSRN, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2025.2514194.

34 Bastos, M., & Recuero, R. (2023), *The insurrectionist playbook: Jair Bolsonaro and the National Congress of Brazil*, in "Social Media + Society", *9*(4), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231211881; Alves, M., Grohmann, R., Recuero, R., & Tavares, C. (2023), *Desinformação e eleições de 2022 no Brasil: Lições em um contexto do sul global*, INCT em Disputas e Soberanias Informacionais.

coup to overturn Lula's election. The coup, however, didn't receive support from the Armed Forces and the politicians in general, as Bolsonaro's supporters expected, and it was unsuccessful. Bolsonaro has been further accused of supporting and even planning the coup and is under investigation by the Brazilian Federal Police and the Supreme Court.

4. Data and Methods

During the second round of the 2022 Brazilian presidential campaign, Bolsonaro's disinformative claims played a central role in shaping the political narrative, particularly regarding the electoral process and the legitimacy of the election results. In this chapter, we want to focus on these narratives. To do so, we will base our discussion on Wodak's research[35] on the role of discourse in normalising illiberalism and authoritarianism discourse. Wodak's work explores how illiberal and populist movements use language to normalise their ideologies, making extreme positions seem acceptable and how social media enables this process. Her work is grounded on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspectives. In this framework, narratives are understood as structured forms of discourse that construct and convey versions of reality, thereby influencing social perceptions and power dynamics. They don't just reflect reality, but actively construct perceptions on this reality, to serve specific ideological purposes, shaping how individuals interpret social phenomena.[36] Souto-Manning[37] further emphasises that narratives function as vehicles for both expressing and perpetuating power relations, as they embed and normalise certain

35 Wodak, R. (2015), *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, SAGE Publications; Wodak, R. (2017), *Discourse and politics: Dimensions of democratic legitimacy*, in "Discourse & Society", *28*(5), pp. 567-571.

36 Fairclough, N. (1992), *Discourse and text: Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis*, in "Discourse & Society", *3*(2), pp. 193-217, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926592003002004.

37 Souto-Manning, M. (2014), *Critical narrative analysis: The interplay of critical discourse and narrative analyses*, in "International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education", *27*(2), pp. 159-180, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.737046.

ideologies within everyday discourse. By critically analysing narratives, CDA aims to uncover the underlying power structures and ideological assumptions that inform and sustain social inequalities.

We will analyse how these narratives contributed to political polarisation, eroded trust in democratic institutions, and fueled radicalisation among Bolsonaro's supporters. We will explore how disinformation campaigns – questioning electoral integrity and portraying political opponents as existential threats – helped create the conditions that led to the January 8, 2023, attack on government buildings in Brasília. To analyse these narratives, we will work with a dataset from Twitter and Facebook.

We collected this data using a crawler for Twitter API and CrowdTangle for Facebook (public pages and group's posts), with the keywords "election", "elections", "democracy", "Bolsonaro" and "Lula" (Table 1). We collected data during the entire Electoral Campaign period, from August 15 to October 31 of 2022.

Table 1. Datasets.

Data	**Lula**	**Bolsonaro**	**Election**	**Total**
Twitter	19.537.196	17.719.213	13.480.930	50.737.339
Facebook	870.825	814.989	138.145	1.823.959

Further, we plotted these data on a temporal table, extracted and qualitatively examined the 20 single most shared tweets and posts per day. We coded these posts into types of what we call micro-narratives, meaning pieces of stories that would connect to a larger narrative (i.e Bolsonaro's narratives). Further, we also investigated if and how these narratives were connected, or supported, in any way, Bolsonaro's statements. Further on, we classified this content as disinformation or not through fact-checking by news agencies. Then, we discuss how these stories add to larger stories which connect to illiberalism.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Wodak[38] explains that discourse must be discussed focusing on a historical and contextual context. She emphasises the importance of historical and contextual factors in understanding discourse. In her Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), based on Critical Discourse Analysis, linguistic analysis is integrated with historical, sociological, and political perspectives to examine how discourses are embedded within specific contexts and how they evolve over time. In this case, narratives are central to the way discourse functions, particularly as strategies used in the construction, legitimation, and reproduction of power relations. Based on these perspectives, we designed an approach to identify what we will call micro-narratives (small stories, more material) that connect to macro-narratives (broader stories), in a similar approach to Coterill.[39] However, based on a discursive approach, we see these micro-narratives as elements that contribute to larger ones, legitimising discourses.

For the discussion we intend to do in this chapter, we will focus on the micro-narratives that were more prevalent in our dataset (the ones that caused more debate online), namely the peaks in our dataset (Figures 1 and 2). We identified these micro-narratives through the examination of the stories that circulated more on social media platforms each day. As we explained, we will focus on two major platforms: Facebook and Twitter. We will present the data first and then discuss the events.

Figure 1 displays the number of tweets per day during the campaign period. We followed the most frequent stores and found three moments where three major micro-narratives emerged from the data (the last was disregarded as it was the day after the election). The first one was the questioning of the "Letter for Democracy", the second one

38 Wodak, R. (2015), *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, SAGE Publications.

39 Cotterill, J. (2003), *Macro-, micro- and multiple narratives: Storytelling in court*, in *Language and power in court*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35-53, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230006010_3.

was connected to how polls were being manipulated and lied and how the electronic ballot box was rigged and the last one, to Bolsonaro's accusation of how his propaganda inserts were fraudulently taken out from radio and television.

Figure 1. Most prevalent micro-narratives on Twitter. Source: Author.

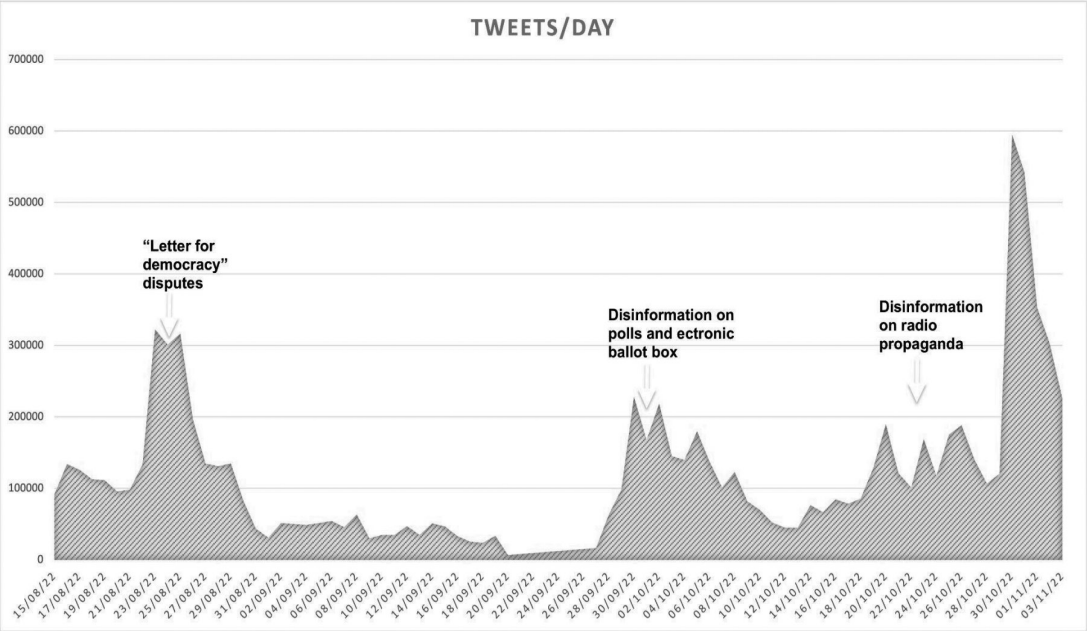
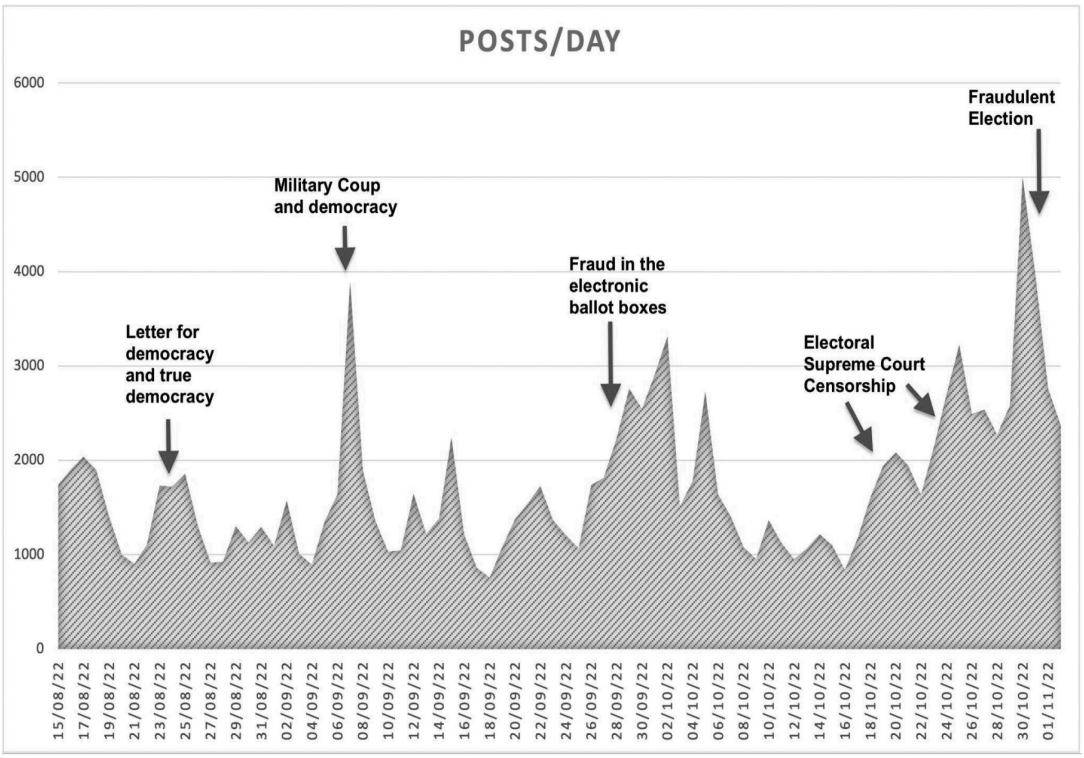


Figure 2 displays the peaks from Facebook's posts. The peaks are slightly different. We see 5 micro-narratives. The first one, the discussion about the "Letter for Democracy", the second one, the military intervention as a way to guarantee democracy, the third one, the fraud on the electronic ballot boxes, then the accusations of the Electoral Supreme Court promoting "censorship" as judges ordered social media platforms to restrict and take down disinformation content regarding the elections and finally, how the election was rigged.

Figure 2. Most prevalent micro-narratives on Facebook. Source: Author.



We followed these peaks of discussion and found these micro-narratives, which we will further contextualise and present.

5.1 Micro-narratives

Letter for Democracy - the "little letter" and doubts about democracy

This first micro-narrative referred to the discussions about the event of the "Letter for Democracy". On August 11, 2023, just days in the beginning of the presidential campaign, several players from civil society, including four Brazilian ex-presidents, more than 100 institutions and public personalities such as political authorities, lawyers, jurists, bankers, entrepreneurs, artists, athletes and others, led by the School of Law from the Sao Paolo University (USP) launched the "Letter for Democracy", a public statement manifesting support to Brazilian democratic

rule of law and elections. The letter was motivated by Bolsonaro and his supporters' frequent attacks on the electoral process and threats of a coup. The letter reached a million signature supporters in less than 24 hours. While the letter did not name Bolsonaro explicitly, he publicly discredited the manifesto, calling it a "little letter" and asking "what are they afraid of". During a public live on YouTube[40] and holding the Brazilian constitution in his hand, Bolsonaro criticised the letter's supporters, claiming they wanted money or advantages from his government. He also said that the constitution was "attacked" by the manifesto, and insinuated it supported the electoral fraud he was often speaking of. Finally, he also claimed that the "only Letter for Democracy" was the country's constitution, framing the civil society movement for democracy as a "leftist" movement designed to attack democracy (Figure 3).

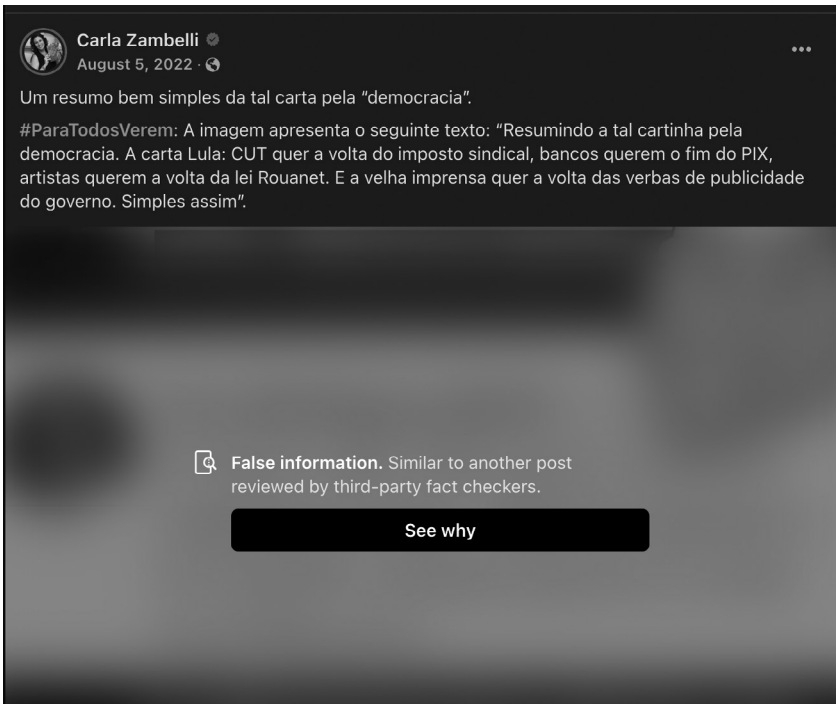
Figure 3. Bolsonaro's live video talking about the "Letter for Democracy" (print from YouTube video). Source: Author's data.

This was the story that reverberated more on Facebook and Twitter (Figure 4). Instead of talking about the letter and democracy, all the tweets and posts that were shared in this period talked about Bolsonaro's dispute of the letter. Either criticising or supporting the president,

40 Poder360, *Melhor carta da democracia, diz Bolsonaro com Constituição na mão*, https://youtu.be/ywk9friMMaE.

the debate on social media platforms gave visibility to his claims and his framing of the letter as something unconstitutional, that was an attack to democracy. In this case, the narrative that the letter was an attack on Bolsonaro and Brazil's democracy was the key frame of the narrative, with pro Bolsonaro groups supporting this frame and the opposition trying to discredit it. The criticism to the letter was also frequently associated with different pieces of disinformation[41] to credit how Bolsonaro was the victim.

Figure 4. Facebook post from a Brazilian politician criticising the "Letter for Democracy". It reads: "Summarising the so-called Letter for Democracy. Lula's letter: CUT wants the return of the union tax, banks want to end PIX, artists want the return of the Rouanet Law, and the mainstream media wants the return of government advertising funds. Simple as that". (The post was further flagged as false by Facebook). Source: Author's data.



41 Macário, C. & Araújo, M. (2022), *Nas redes sociais, bolsonaristas associam carta pela democracia a conteúdos desinformativos*, in "Lupa", https://www.agencialupa.org/jornalismo/2022/08/11/redes-sociais-bolsonaristas-carta-pela-democracia-conteudos-desinformativos/.

Democracy at Risk and Claims for Military Intervention

During his political career, Bolsonaro often praised the regime and the military responsible for the 30-year military dictatorship in Brazil. He also threatened a military takeover[42] several times. Since the beginning of his mandate as president, Bolsonaro often claimed that Brazil never had a dictatorship and that what Brazilians experienced was a "military government".[43] He celebrated the day of the coup,[44] and often appeared on anti-democratic rallies.[45] This discourse, which was also repeated by his supporters, claimed that Brazilian democratic institutions "weren't working",[46] and corruption was widespread. Bolsonaro and his supporters also resuscitated the discourse about the threat of communism,[47] globalism and other conspiracies.[48] Among the international and national institutions frequently criticised by Bolsonaro, there was the UN, the WHO,[49] as well as Brazilian institutions such as

42 McCoy, T. & Sá Pessoa, G. (2021), *Bolsonaro once said he'd stage a military takeover. Now Brazilians fear he could be laying the foundation for one*, in "The Washington Post", https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/23/brazil-bolsonaro/.

43 Braga, C. (2021), *Bolsonaro and the Brazilian Military Dictatorship: A History of Anti-Democratic Attacks*, in "Columbia Political Review", https://www.cpreview.org/articles/2021/3/bolsonaro-and-the-brazilian-military-dictatorship-a-history-of-anti-democratic-attacks.

44 Human Rights Watch (2019), *Brazil: Bolsonaro Celebrates Brutal Dictatorship*, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/27/brazil-bolsonaro-celebrates-brutal-dictatorship.

45 Marcelino, U. & Slattery, G. (2020), *Brazil's Bolsonaro headlines anti-democratic rally amid alarm over handling of coronavirus*, in " Reuters", https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bolsonaro-idUSKBN22F0TQ.

46 Opperman, D. (2023), *The attack against the Brazilian institutions and its impact on the political discourse in the country*, in "The London School of Economics and Political Science", https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2023/01/25/the-attack-against-brazilian-institutions-impact-political-discourse/.

47 Alexandra, Z. (2022), *Fear and misinformation dominate discourses of Brazilian right*, in "peoples dispatch", https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/09/13/fear-and-misinformation-dominate-discourses-of-brazilian-right/.

48 France 24 (2022), *Bolsonaro's Brazil: four "dystopian" years*, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220905-bolsonaro-s-brazil-four-dystopian-years.

49 BBC Brasil, *"Local de reunião de comunistas": o que Bolsonaro e aliados já disseram sobre a ONU*, https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49796517.

the Supreme Court, the Electoral Court,[50] the National Congress,[51] the media and others.

On July 18, 2022, barely a month before the official presidential campaign started, Bolsonaro publicly attacked Brazilian democracy and the electoral system before dozens of diplomats.[52] He argued the system was vulnerable and prone to frauds. He claimed the military should audit the elections and pushed for the electoral authorities to accept a parallel vote count by them. In fact, Bolsonaro often claimed the military were the "only hope" of a "fair" election and threatened to defy the voting results if he lost. This narrative was strongly used as a justification for claims for "military intervention" by Bolsonaro's supporters.

These claims were the frame of the narratives about the election around September 7, the Brazilian Independence Day. The holiday was often a central point of nationalism during the military dictatorship, and it is still a tradition to have military parades and displays all over the country on the date. Bolsonaro's campaign used the holiday to call for protests the "fraudulent elections" that would happen in the country and several rallies from him and his supporters also happened during this week, always using the green, yellow and blue, the colors of the Brazilian flag. We found evidence of this narrative on several posts/tweets reproducing Bolsonaro's many claims of what he argued as a military government and asking the military to supervise the election in Brazil, as they were the only trustful institution to guarantee democracy to Bolsonaro and his supporters. Hashtags such as "#SOSMilitary" or "#SOSArmedForces" were frequent both on Twitter

50 Garcia, R. T. (2021), *Bolsonaro's war on Brazilian democracy is not over*, in "Al Jazeera", https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/9/22/bolsonaros-war-on-brazilian-democracy-is-not-over.

51 Yahoo News post on Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/yahoonews/posts/brazilian-president-jair-bolsonaro-attacked-congress-and-the-courts-in-a-speech-/10159383367861037/.

52 Boadle, A. (2022), *Bolsonaro attacks Brazil's election system in briefing for diplomats*, in "Reuters", https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolsonaro-share-concerns-about-brazil-election-with-diplomats-2022-07-18/.

and Facebook, as well as other imagetic connections to the far-right discourse about the "freedom" being threatened by election fraud.

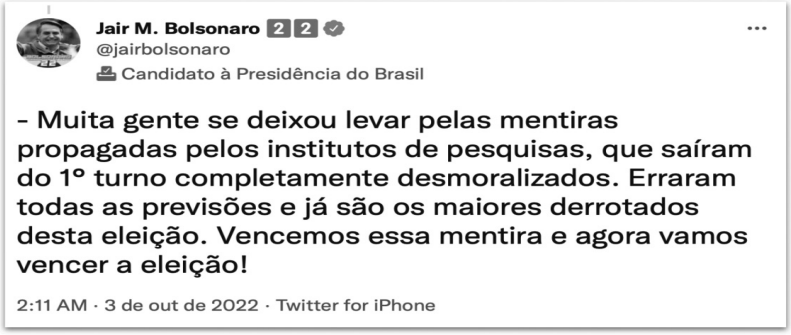
In this case, the tweets connected the protests that happened in the country (usually by the far-right and Bolsonaro's supporters) to "freedom". As these conspiracies about the fraud and disinformation circulated more and more on social media platforms, people started camping in front of the army barracks all over the country, to "protest" for the intervention of these forces to "guarantee" the country's freedom (Figure 5). These protesters were also explicitly supported by Bolsonaro and his coalition. It is important to notice that this narrative was associated with disinformation about the military period, as well as provided a new framing for the Brazilian coup that initiated the military dictatorship.

Figure 5. Example of image shared on Facebook posts about this narrative. It says: "September 7 – for a new independence! Brazil needs you! Let's go together on Paulista Avenue [fight] for our freedom!". Source: Author's dataset.

Discredit of polls

Bolsonaro and his supporters also frequently discredit the polls and research institutes that put him in second place. He often claimed the polls were mistaken[53] or implied they were fraudulent and thus, untrustful.[54] His approach to discredit polls was not new, but this time the criticism was connected to a supposed failure of institutions in protecting the democracy allowing the fraud. These allegations became stronger after the first round, when the vote difference between the two candidates was less than polls forecasted. Bolsonaro also used this as evidence of how the institutions were trying to create an environment for fraudulent elections and often false polls with him ahead of Lula circulated online. After the first round, Bolsonaro's supporters in the National Congress threatened to vote for a law forbidding polls,[55] based on the claims that polls were false and used to manipulate the election (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Bolsonaro's tweet about the polls. He says: "Many people believed in the lies and propaganda of the polls institutes, which were demoralised by the results of the first round. They were wrong in all their projections and are the biggest losers of this election. We won this lie and will win the election!". Source: Author's dataset.



53 Uol (2022), *Bolsonaro, após Ipec: "Se acredita em pesquisas, não vou falar contigo"*, https://noticias.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2022/09/20/bolsonaro-pesquisas-eleitorais.htm.

54 Costa, R. (2022), *Bolsonaro critica pesquisas e diz ter "confiança total" da vitória no 2º turno*, in "Gazeta do Povo", https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/eleicoes/2022/bolsonaro-critica-pesquisas-e-diz-ter-confianca-total-da-vitoria-no-segundo-turno/.

55 InfoMoney (2022), *Aliados de Bolsonaro preparam ofensiva contra institutos de pesquisa no Congresso e no TSE*, https://www.infomoney.com.br/politica/aliados-de-bolsonaro-preparam-ofensiva-contra-institutos-de-pesquisa-no-congresso-e-no-tse/.

False polls were rampant among these conversations. Again, even the ones who didn't support Bolsonaro, were busy debunking of discussing his claims and the disinformation that circulated by his supporters.

Discredit of the electronic ballot box

Since 2018, Jair Bolsonaro has continuously attacked the Brazilian electoral system, specifically targeting the reliability of electronic voting machines. He and his supporters have actively pushed for the adoption of a "printed ballot"[56] system, arguing that it would prevent electoral fraud. This narrative was strategically used to undermine public trust in the electoral process, despite the lack of any concrete evidence supporting claims of irregularities.

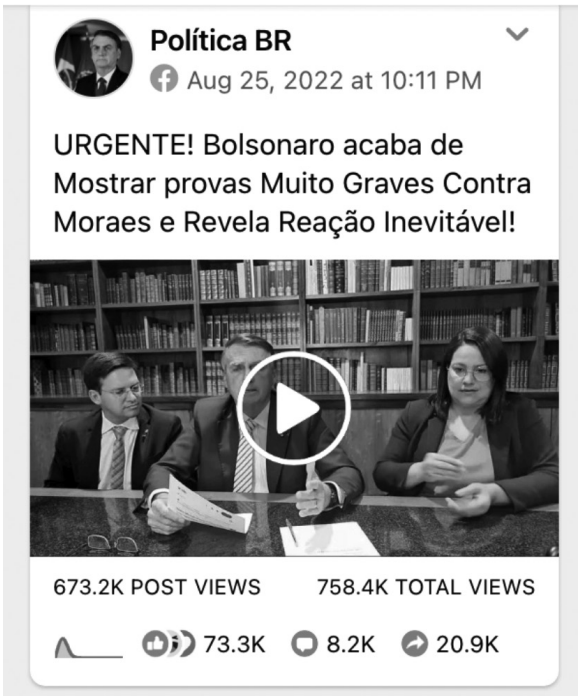
It is important to note that Brazil's electronic voting system has been in use since 1988, playing a crucial role in ensuring secure and transparent elections. The system has been consistently audited by the Supreme Federal Court (STF), the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), political parties, independent experts, and other oversight bodies. Despite multiple reviews and verifications, no credible evidence of fraud has ever been found.

Bolsonaro's persistent attacks on electronic voting were not just a critique of the system but a deliberate political strategy aimed at pre-emptively delegitimising election results. By casting doubt on the integrity of the voting process, he mobilised his base, fueling mistrust in democratic institutions and laying the groundwork for post-election contestations. This discourse intensified in 2022, as Bolsonaro and his allies escalated their rhetoric, spreading disinformation about election security through social media, political speeches, and official government channels.

This narrative was present many times in social media conversation during the election period (Figures 7 and 8).

56 BBC (2021), *Brazil's Bolsonaro defeated over printed ballot proposal*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-58171369.

Figures 7 and 8. Facebook posts reproducing Bolsonaro's videos claiming a conspiracy was happening to allow for a coup by the Supreme Court and the left. Source: Author's dataset.



Discredit of the Electoral Supreme Court

Throughout the 2022 presidential campaign, Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters consistently attacked the Supreme Federal Court (STF), the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), and its president, Minister Alexandre de Moraes. This targeted rhetoric was a key strategy in discrediting the electoral process itself, as Bolsonaro and his allies argued that the courts were complicit in electoral fraud and working to censor the right-wing movement by ordering social media platforms to remove disinformation.

Bolsonaro and his supporters framed Minister Alexandre de Moraes as a central figure in a supposed conspiracy to favour the left, portraying him as an authoritarian censor who was suppressing their voic-

es. They repeatedly claimed that the judiciary was politically biased, working to allow the "left" to take over the country. This narrative gained traction within Bolsonaro's base, fueling distrust in democratic institutions and reinforcing the idea that the election was being manipulated from within.

One example of this disinformation campaign is a post by Deputy Carla Zambelli, a very engaged Bolsonaro's supporter, in which she falsely claimed that a judge had called for Alexandre de Moraes to be removed from the court. Similar narratives circulated widely among Bolsonaro's supporters, reinforcing the belief that the judiciary was actively working against Bolsonaro and, by extension, his voters (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The image shows a post from Carla Zambelli, a Brazilian politician, asking for the president of the Electoral Supreme Court to be removed from office, based on accusations of corruption. Source: Author's dataset.

Electoral radio propaganda fraud

By the end of the second round, Bolsonaro's campaign presented to the Electoral Supreme Court a report with allegations of fraud in the electoral propaganda.[57] According to this report, some radios were prioritising the propaganda campaign of Lula da Silva and not showing the Bolsonaro one (which is illegal). These allegations were unproved and remained so even though they served as base to Bolsonaro threat to defy Lula's victory.[58] However, they fuelled the allegations of electoral fraud in the final week of the campaign and was a strong motivation for Bolsonarists to not accept the results of the election.

The following image (Figure 10) shows a false content that circulated on Facebook and Twitter from an outlet claiming the radio stations all over the country had confirmed the fraud, explaining they didn't receive Bolsonaro's material from the Electoral Supreme Court.

Figure 10. A false story that circulated on Facebook. The post says "Bomb! Radios confirm they didn't receive Bolsonaro's campaign materials from the Electoral Supreme Court". The story was used to reinforce the idea of a conspiracy against the far-right.

57 Bloomberg (2022), *Brazil Court Fines Bolsonaro's Party Over Unproven Fraud Claim*, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-23/bolsonaro-s-party-insists-on-challenging-lula-s-runoff-victory.

58 *Ibidem.*

This particular narrative contributed very strongly to the idea that the results of the election couldn't be accepted by Bolsonaro and his supporters. Immediately after the election result was public, several claims for a military "intervention" (a coup) took over social media platforms. Bolsonaro also went silent and refused to make a statement accepting Lula's victory.[59] As a direct result, the country went through turmoil, as in the following week, several main railroads were blocked by Bolsonaro's supporters[60] (mostly truck drivers) as a protest and threatened to deplete cities stocks of food and goods. This situation lasted for many days during the entire November,[61] even after orders from the Supreme Court. Many Bolsonaro's supporters also camped in front of the Army Barracks[62] in several cities to protest Lula's election and electoral fraud, claiming for a military coup.

5.2 Macro-narratives: How They Framed the Key Ideas that Supported the Coup

Based on the previous analysis and discussion of the micro-narratives, we identify two main narratives that they contributed to – both of which supported the idea of a military coup. In this context, social media platforms played a crucial role in amplifying these narratives, enabling them to flourish through disinformation and political activism.

Framing the Election as Fraudulent

The narrative that the election was rigged due to the alleged unreliability of electronic ballots was central to Bolsonaro and his support-

59 Bloomberg (2022), *Brazil Protesters Block Roads, Airport as Bolsonaro Stays Silent*, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-01/brazil-protests-grow-with-bolsonaro-silent-after-election-loss.

60 PBS (2022), *Brazilian truckers protest Bolsonaro loss, block hundreds of roads*, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/brazilian-truckers-protest-bolsonaro-loss-block-hundreds-of-roads.

61 Downie, A. (2022), *Pro-Bolsonaro truck drivers threaten new road blockades in Brazil*, in "The Guardian", https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/18/brazil-bolsonaro-truck-drivers-threaten-road-blockades.

62 The Gleaner (2022), *Bolsonaro supporters call on military to keep him in power*, https://past.jamaica-gleaner.com/article/world-news/20221103/bolsonaro-supporters-call-military-keep-him-power.

ers' discourse. Several micro-narratives reinforced this idea, including claims that Bolsonaro was a victim (as seen during the "Letter for Democracy" event), the discrediting of polls that consistently placed Lula da Silva ahead, attacks on the electronic ballot system, and accusations of propaganda fraud. These stories worked collectively to convince Bolsonaro's base that the electoral process was compromised.

Despite the lack of evidence, Bolsonaro and his allies persistently revived and reinforced these claims, frequently relying on disinformation.[63] Between 2019 and 2022, Bolsonaro attacked electronic ballots 183 times in his speeches,[64] fueling widespread mistrust in the electoral system. These claims often included references to secrecy and whistleblowing, suggesting that political elites were covering up fraud – a theme widely replicated by his supporters and even by politicians within his coalition. By continuously framing the electoral system as fraudulent, Bolsonaro not only delegitimised the election process in advance but also laid the foundation for post-election contestation and mobilisation of his base.

Framing a Coup as a "Military Intervention" for Democracy

Another key narrative that justified authoritarian measures was the claim that a "democratic" military intervention was necessary to ensure the security of the voting process. Here, the phrase "military intervention" functioned as a euphemism for a coup, implying that the armed forces should assume state power to "regulate" a supposedly rigged system. This narrative aligned with Bolsonaro's broader historical revisionism, which denied that Brazil had ever experienced a military coup or dictatorship. Instead, he and his allies portrayed the

63 Dourado, T., Almeida, S., & Piaia, V. (2024), *Fraude nas urnas e contestação eleitoral no Brasil: Análise multiplataforma de atores políticos, viés conspiratório e moderação de conteúdo*, in "Opinião Pública", *30*.

64 Bastos, M.T., Vinhas, O., Recuero, R., & Soares, F. (2024), *Reverse influence: The social production of disinformation in the 2022 Brazilian general election*, SSRN, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2025.2514194.

1964-1985 regime as a "military government" that had protected the country from terrorists and communists.[65]

The underlying claim was that Brazil was on the verge of electoral fraud, orchestrated by leftist forces with the backing of the Judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court and the Electoral Court. This discourse not only framed the courts as enemies of democracy but also positioned the military as the ultimate guardian of national sovereignty. By reinterpreting authoritarianism as a necessary defense mechanism, Bolsonaro and his supporters sought to legitimise undemocratic actions, claiming they were essential to protect the country from an alleged socialist takeover.

In this context, disinformation and rhetorical reframing were very important. The military and armed forces were reframed as institutions that defended democracy, whereas the judiciary and its ministers were depicted as corrupt actors undermining national stability. These micro-narratives helped construct a new ideological frame, where a military dictatorship could be rebranded as a "democratic government". Through strategically blurring the lines between authoritarian rule and democratic governance, Bolsonaro's discourse enabled the normalisation of illiberal narratives. It is also important to understand how the far-right stories played to the emotions, and mostly to fear and the fear of a revolution from the left, which would destabilise society create a dictatorship (similar to what Wodak[66] and Moffit[67] explain as a discursive tactic of the far-right populists).

The resulting interplay between micro- and macro-narratives, thus, operated through using two key strategies: (1) disinformation and (2) reframing. By employing these tactics – focused on manipulating historical memory, institutional credibility, and democratic principles

65 Alves, M., Grohmann, R., Recuero, R., & Tavares, C. (2023), *Desinformação e eleições de 2022 no Brasil: Lições em um contexto do sul global*, INCT em Disputas e Soberanias Informacionais.

66 Wodak, R. (2015), *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, SAGE Publications.

67 Moffitt, B. (2016), *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*, Stanford University Press.

– the far-right successfully dominated the narrative on social media platforms, setting the agenda[68] to reinforce an illiberal discourse. They also sowed distrust and doubt among their supporters, fostering the perception that authoritarian solutions could be justified in electoral disputes. These narratives, for example, motivated Bolsonaro's supporters – ordinary citizens – to camp in front of military barracks, demanding a "military intervention".[69] The disinformation disseminated on social media platforms further legitimised these beliefs, compelling individuals to act.[70] Thus, social media platforms played a key role in circulating and legitimising these narratives, which ultimately dominated the public debate.

This analysis suggests that the far-right was able to control the narrative ecosystem, ensuring that their claims – despite being disinformation – became the central topics of discussion. Even those who opposed Bolsonaro's discourse were frequently forced to engage with these micro-narratives, attempting to debunk them but, in doing so, reinforcing their visibility. This dynamic aligns with what Benkler, Faris, and Roberts[71] describe as a "propaganda pipeline", where disinformation gains legitimacy through constant repetition and engagement – regardless of the intent behind that engagement. Thus, by setting the agenda on digital platforms, Bolsonaro's supporters effectively crowded out alternative political narratives, ensuring that discussions remained centred on fraud, judicial corruption, and military intervention rather than on policy debates or democratic commitments. This process mirrors broader trends in illiberal movements globally, where

68 Zakaria, F. (1997), *The rise of illiberal democracy*, in "Foreign Affairs", *76*(6), pp. 22-43; Siegle, J. (2024), *Controlling the narrative: Disinformation and democratic erosion*, in "Journal of Global Affairs", *12*(1), pp. 23-45.

69 Alves, M., Grohmann, R., Recuero, R., & Tavares, C. (2023), *Desinformação e eleições de 2022 no Brasil: Lições em um contexto do sul global*, INCT em Disputas e Soberanias Informacionais.

70 Rossini, P., Mont'Alverne, C., & Kalogeropoulos, A. (2023), *Explaining beliefs in electoral misinformation in the 2022 Brazilian election: The role of ideology, political trust, social media, and messaging apps*, in "Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review", *4*(3).

71 Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018), *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*, Oxford University Press.

political actors weaponise social media ecosystems to manufacture legitimacy.[72] The viral nature of these claims created a feedback loop, where traditional media outlets were compelled to report on them, further validating the discourse, even if only to fact-check it.

Ultimately, this persistent digital amplification of illiberal discourse contributed to the erosion of democratic norms, the radicalisation of Bolsonaro's base, and the mobilisation that culminated in the January 8, 2023, attacks. By leveraging social media activism, algorithmic amplification, and the strategic use of disinformation, Bolsonaro and his allies effectively reshaped political discourse in Brazil, reinforcing a culture of skepticism toward democracy and its institutions. This also connects to a performative act that supported these discourses, where Bolsonaro posed himself as the victim of these "fraudulent elections",[73] using populist's strategies to support illiberal views.

Conclusions

This chapter focused on the analysis of how disinformation and strategic reframing played a crucial role in shaping political discourse in Brazil during the 2022 presidential election, ultimately contributing to the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of illiberal narratives. By focusing on the interaction between micro-narratives and macro-narratives, this study explored how the far-right, particularly Bolsonaro and his allies, utilised digital platforms to delegitimise electoral institutions, spread distrust in democratic processes, and mobilise supporters toward authoritarian solutions.

The discussion was structured around key strategies employed by Bolsonaro's far-right movement, primarily (1) disinformation and (2) rhetorical reframing to manipulate the narrative. Initially, the analysis examined how Bolsonaro's discourse strategically positioned the

72 Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019), *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*, Cambridge University Press.

73 Moffitt, B. (2016), *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*, Stanford University Press.

military as defenders of democracy while portraying the judiciary as corrupt and politically motivated. This manipulation of institutional credibility played a central role in shaping public perceptions of democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, the study examined how disinformation – amplified through social media – helped sustain the idea that the election was fraudulent, creating a justification for calls for military intervention.

The findings of this study underscore the central role that digital disinformation played in reshaping public perceptions of democracy during Brazil's 2022 presidential election and how persistently reframing events – from dismissing the "Letter for Democracy" to questioning the integrity of electronic voting systems and judicial institutions – Bolsonaro's far-right movement systematically eroded trust in the nation's democratic framework. The strategic amplification of these narratives on social media platforms not only obscured objective debate but also cultivated an environment ripe for authoritarian intervention. Ultimately, this analysis reinforces the view that the deliberate weaponisation of disinformation is a potent strategy for undermining democratic legitimacy. As digital media continue to evolve, understanding these dynamics is imperative for developing robust defences against the erosion of democratic institutions and for safeguarding the future of open, participatory governance.

The Fringe Turn of Art. Platforms, Artivism, Community[1]

Laura Gemini

1. In the Margin

It is significant that one of the most important theatre festivals in the world includes in its very name the word *fringe*, that is, "margin". The Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in fact, has made its marginal origin not only a point of departure, but a genuine cornerstone of its identity. Founded in 1947 by eight theatre companies excluded from the official programme of the Edinburgh International Festival – established in the immediate post-war period with the aim of promoting cultural reconciliation through the arts – the Fringe Festival has, from the outset, configured itself as an independent and non-conventional alternative.

These companies found an alternative way to present their performances by using self-managed spaces located at the margins of the official event, turning an exclusion into a rather interesting opportu-

1 I would like to thank Chiara Spaggiari and Alex Della Pasqua of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo for their support and assistance in finding useful materials for the preparation of this contribution.

nity for change. This founding gesture, indeed, is emblematic of one of those internal turns within the art system that, as we will see more clearly later, has contributed to redefining some of its fundamental structural dynamics. In essence, it demonstrated art's capacity to generate internal diversity and to change and renew itself according to what it considers, from time to time, suitable or unsuitable for its own reproduction.[2]

The fact remains that today the Fringe Festival is one of the most important artistic events on the international scene, while it has managed to keep its original vocation alive. Its functioning is still based on the guiding principle encapsulated in the motto: *to give anyone a stage and everyone a seat.* In the absence of a central curatorial committee, the festival takes shape as a horizontal and participatory platform, grounded in the direct and dynamic relationship between performers and audiences. It is perhaps no coincidence that this fluid and inclusive structure, by now consolidated, has attracted the attention of many cultural theorists, including Mark Fisher,[3] who wrote the unmissable guide *The Edinburgh Fringe Survival Guide: How to Make Your Show a Success* – introduced by the British playwright Mark Ravenhill, who recounts having begun his career there and where: "Now that I'm a working playwright, the Fringe is still a great place to premiere a new piece".[4]

This example shows how the concept of "fringe" makes it possible to observe the dynamics of art as a social system that functions as a structured set of practices and codes establishing what can be considered art and what, instead, remains excluded from it. It is, in other words, a self-reflexive mechanism that constantly defines its own boundaries, including within itself even forms of negation or subversion of the very notion of art.[5] When the italian philosopher Mario Perniola, in

2 Luhmann, N. (2000), *Art as a Social System*, Stanford University Press.
3 Fisher, M. (2011), *The Edinburgh Fringe Survival Guide: How to Make Your Show a Success*, Methuen Drama.
4 *Ibidem*, p. 4.
5 Luhmann, N. (2000), *Art as a Social System*, Stanford University Press.

his essay *L'arte espansa* (*Expanded art*),[6] introduces the notion of the "fringe turn", he describes a genuine epistemological shift within the artistic system. This transformation concerns both theoretical conceptions and the practices and communicative modes that characterise contemporary art. Perniola identifies the origin of this process in the rupture already effected at the beginning of the twentieth century by Marcel Duchamp, then continued with Pop Art and further developed by numerous avant-garde movements up to the present day. At the centre of this trajectory lies a contradiction that is as fascinating as it is fundamental: the tension between the idea of art as an elitist domain and the growing openness towards the possibility that anyone can make art. This perspective implies a downsizing of the authorial figure and a redefinition of the productive modes of artistic making. According to Perniola, contemporary artistic practice is characterised by a series of minimal gestures, potentially accessible even to amateur figures or those who are not professionals. Emblematic examples include the removal of an object from its utilitarian context in order to introduce it into an aesthetic regime (as in the paradigmatic case of the ready-made); the dissolution of the work within the communicative flow, where the physical aspect gives way to the concept; the delegation of material execution to artisans or to different external collaborators; the dematerialisation of the work, reduced to a sentence, an idea, or a conceptual intuition. Taken together, these practices outline a new conception of art as process rather than product, accentuating the centrality of the performative and relational dimension. In this sense, the performing arts and the avant-gardes have carried out an important task in consolidating a condition of diffuse creativity, recognising even amateur figures as an active part of artistic production. Ultimately, the "fringe turn" represents a democratisation of the criteria of access and recognition within the art system, as well as a redefinition of the boundaries between artist, work, and spectatorial ensemble.

6 Perniola, M. (2015), *L'arte espansa*, Einaudi.

2. Mediatisation

Taken as a whole, this dynamic has undergone a significant acceleration within the scenario defined by *mediatisation*,[7] a concept to be understood as the penetration of media and digital technologies into different social, collective, and individual contexts. Mediatisation, in fact, considers media as the processes produced by the interaction between the materiality of media and practices of use. Within this framework, the concept of agency – central to gender and queer theory and resonating with the fringe trajectories examined here – places action, practice, affordance, process, and transformative dynamics at the centre, linking different domains of social performativity. Including, of course, creative and artistic performativity.

Precisely in art, technological development and the diffusion of the internet have contributed to bringing the amateur dimension and the constitution of creative networking to the centre of processes; that is, the practice of exchange and sharing of competences and expertise, not only professional but expert in different ways.

In the field of the performing, visual, musical, and photographic arts, the debate on the role of the artist and on the expansion of creative and performative possibilities by users is still, and always, an open question, further amplified by the diffusion of artificial intelligence, often considered a controversial practice.

From an institutional perspective, the art system has incorporated technological experimentation and the creative opportunities offered by digital environments – continuing a long-standing tendency to open up new contexts for public participation.

These spaces are often interpreted as metaphors of an open and democratic access to art, while substantially maintaining its function of mediation, which has allowed the system to adapt to new technological dynamics without relinquishing its role as an intermediary between the artistic work and the public. An emblematic example in

7 Gemini, L., Brilli, S. (2023), *Gradienti di liveness. La comunicazione dal vivo nei contesti mediatizzati*, Franco Angeli.

this direction is represented by the initiative of the Saatchi Gallery in London – one of the most influential institutions in the contemporary art landscape – which in 2006 launched Saatchi Online (or *Your Gallery*). This open-access digital platform allowed any artist, without any prior selection, to create their own online space, including a CV and a limited selection of works. This initiative represented a media event of great relevance that involved more than sixty thousand artists; at the same time, however, it excluded critics, curators, and art historians from the evaluation of the aesthetic and artistic value of the works. A first partial step, given the role of the gallery, towards that idea of disintermediation and, above all, towards the constitution of a "closed group" (*locked*), the main characteristic of the logics of the contemporary web.

This case, moreover, can also be assimilated to the launch, in 2000, of the deviantART space, an online community for artists and aspiring artists – acquired in 2017 by the Israeli platform Wix.com – which collects artworks of different kinds directly uploaded by users.

Also interesting is the example of the 2024 project "subwhatsapps" by the artist Nacho Vargara. His initial idea – to launch a fundraising campaign to finance the catalogue of one of his exhibitions – failed; instead, it evolved into a new auction format, first for Vargara's own work and later for that of other emerging artists. To date, the subwatsapp channel functions as a community of practice thanks to the trust of collectors (*Subwhatseños*) in the mediator-artist, as an alternative and low-cost mode with respect to the official world of art auctions.

Yet, if in these cases the "marginal" dimension still concerns a more or less antagonistic positioning of art and the artist in relation to the mainstream (of the market, criticism, communication), passing through technological convergence, the more political aspect of fringe art must be traced elsewhere.

3. Artivism

This process, in fact, becomes particularly interesting, yet very difficult to track down, especially if we consider artistic access to so-called fringe platforms and the redefinition of art in light of deep mediatisation, that is, the pervasive level reached by the internet across all social contexts, including the social system of art. Here, fringe art does not merely challenge the mainstream; it positions itself in a marginal space where digital dynamics and diffuse participation reveal new forms of resistance, creativity, and politicisation to be brought into the public sphere. This dynamic seems inexorably to underscore the continued relevance of the now-classic distinction between tactics and strategies formulated by Michel de Certeau in 1980. From this perspective, fringe artistic practices have always acted tactically within the digital and social environments implicated in the art system – circumventing the institution's strategies – while attempting to reinvent and subvert them.

In the meantime, it is worth recalling how, already in the 1990s, technological art played an important role within the digital public sphere. First, because artivism – namely, concrete political activism within the artistic field – actively participated in that moment of global collection, organisation, and sharing of information via the internet that characterised the No Global movements and the whole series of worldwide demonstrations that transformed the formats of protest. Even more importantly, digital artivism promoted an alternative and antagonistic use of technology in general and, more specifically, of web platforms. Media activism, which refers to practices originating in the 1960s and 1970s, developed in the 1980s and became fully visible in 1999 precisely with the Seattle protests, through digital platforms such as Indymedia.org and the creation of Independent Media Centers (IMC) for discussion and sharing – via mailing lists – of guidelines on the alternative use of media. In this context, technological artivism also spread thanks to projects such as AHA: Activism-Hacking-Artiv-

ism[8] by Tatiana Bazzichelli, curator and researcher, now artistic director of the non-profit organization Disruption Network Lab in Berlin – whose concept, which can be summarised in the formula "making art, doing multimedia", was devised in 2001 and gave rise, from approximately 2002 to 2009, to exhibitions, events, and festivals in Italy, Germany, and Denmark involving various Italian and international artists and activists. AHA's event-exhibitions – such as the one held in 2002 at the Museo Laboratorio di Arte Contemporanea of Sapienza University of Rome – were organised together with independent curators who changed from time to time, with the collaboration of all those involved via the mailing list aha@ecn.org. These initiatives highlighted a collective trajectory, the outcome of a movement that, already from the 1980s onward, fought for an independent and self-managed use of media (video, computers, radio, and written texts), positioning itself as a strong alternative to official information. It should also be noted that AHA was conceived as a reflection in the wake of the G8 demonstrations in Genoa, underscoring the crucial role that bottom-up information – produced through amateur cameras, movement websites, and independent radio circuits – played in making that tragic event knowable. The AHA project, moreover, was characterised as a reflection on artistic experimentation that makes use of the digital and that, in the most significant cases and through prominent figures such as Giacomo Verde, promoted a critical and self-managed use of media. Once again, in the name of that processual and collectively oriented project-based approach that resist to the idea of the "original", which, as noted above, lies at the basis of the fringe transformation of art.

Artists and collectives that until a decade ago could be grouped under the artistic category of "tactical media" – such as the US collective Critical Art Ensamble or the Italians Tactical Media Crew (TMC), Strano Network, and Autistici/Inventati (A/I) – were driven by the desire to use the network as a social medium for exchange, and they regarded the internet as a still-empty physical space to be defended against the

8 AHA - Activism, Hacking, Artivism, http://www.ecn.org/aha/.

mainstream. A temporary autonomous zone (T.A.Z.) which, according to the anarchist writer Hakim Bey,[9] was an alternative space in and of itself that could be occupied for the purposes of counter-information.

And the alternative proposed by the internet could also concern the positioning of artists *vis-à-vis* the artistic mainstream. One example that certainly still holds is The Wrong Digital Art Biennale,[10] a platform created in 2013 by curator David Quiles Guilló to challenge artistic institutions and to provide opportunities to exhibit digital art and Net Art. Now in its seventh edition, the exhibition scheduled between November 2025 and March 2026 is devoted to the artistic exploration of the transformative potential of art, video, text, and sound influenced by artificial intelligence.

4. Critiquing the Centre of Art from the Margins

If the experimental nature of art leads it to seek alternative communicative paths and, in some cases, marginal ones, the political dimension of this search must be located in the critique of the artistic establishment, in its overly tight coupling with the market, and – where technology-oriented art is concerned – in practices of hacking, in the use of low-tech technologies, and in migration toward secondary territories of the internet. These practices not only challenge the traditional hierarchies of the art system but also open spaces of resistance and creativity that call commercial logics into question and position themselves at the boundaries of the network, in its "limits", where art becomes an additional instrument of critique and social transformation.

An interesting reflection in this direction emerges from a conversation around these themes conducted in February 2025 with the performer Mara Oscar Cassiani.[11] MOC is an artist naturalised within the online environment, recognised both in Italy and abroad, whose

9 Bey, H. (1991), *The temporary autonomous zone, ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism: Anarchy and conspiracy*, Autonomedia.
10 The Wrong, https://thewrong.org/.
11 Mara Oscar Cassiani, https://www.tumblr.com/maracassiani.

research incorporates digital logics to construct performances online and offline. Through her work, MOC reveals the dark side of the most widely used platforms and of artificial intelligence, showing, on the one hand, the distorted communicative use that technological affordances make possible – and that is therefore part of what can be done with them – and, on the other hand, the political potentials of being online artistically. MOC explains that there exist various online creative communities that are not visible because they operate within closed and private networks to exchange information and build their relationships. Already around 2010, in this still-submerged and niche territory, an imaginary strongly influenced by the technological and musical aesthetics of the 1980s, such as vaporwave, took hold and conveyed online a precise political message, even if not always so explicit, about society: a specific way of "doing politics through aesthetics" that targeted, for example, consumer society by drawing on representations of its hidden side through depictions of abandoned spaces, showing the "backstage" of commercial spaces and malls and treating them as powerful, viral images. This aesthetic is the product of the emo subcultures of those years and of indie productions that began on platforms such as MySpace and then migrated elsewhere. We know, in fact, that creativity – whether amateur or professional – can today rely on mainstream visual platforms to render artworks visible. Just think of Instagram or Pinterest, which nevertheless do not guarantee the independence that, in certain creative domains, is an indispensable prerequisite. For MOC as well, the migration of some creatives from Instagram to Tumblr constitutes, in this sense, an emblematic case. Tumblr is described by Cassiani as a platform that, in addition to hosting visual content and artworks of various kinds, facilitates sharing through transparent reblogging, with visible nicknames and the visible construction of communities. These communities can be treated, or simply observed, as small signs of that fringe democracy that also passes through the very free and "honest" sharing of aesthetic content, while still respecting the platform's policies and moderation. In this sense, Tumblr becomes a space where aesthetics and

politics intertwine, offering a form of alternative and decentralised participation. “Newer” platforms such as Telegram and Discord reveal the same kind of communicative potential and practices for creative communities.

5. Fringe Platforms and Arti(vi)stic Practices

A fascinating example of creativity that develops in the online fringe is represented by live coding: a performative practice in which the artist writes and modifies code in real time to generate sounds, music, images, or videos during a performance. It is a natively web-based practice, since it originates and develops within the cultural ecology of the web. This practice is strongly peer-based – given that technical and aesthetic knowledge circulates horizontally through dedicated servers – and it uses open-source languages and tools, such as TidalCycles, SuperCollider, or Hydra, often developed by the community itself. Live coding communities, both globally and locally, inhabit marginal spaces of the web. At the international level, one of the most active hubs of exchange is the subreddit r/livecoding,[12] while in Italy there is a dedicated Telegram group, called Toplap Italia. Telegram channels offer a communicative structure that facilitates the emergence of self-organised micro-communities characterised by horizontal content management: each member can share materials, links, files, and technical suggestions without a pre-established hierarchy. The platform thus fosters direct and informal communication, supporting rapid exchange and a sense of continuity and co-belonging typical of digital subcultures. Also, in the case of Toplap Italia, access is not public on the web; rather, one arrives through invitations and reciprocal acquaintances. This Telegram channel is therefore used by the Italian live coding community to exchange technical knowledge (codes, tools, languages), share artistic experiences (compositions, live

12 r/livecoding on Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/livecoding/.

sets, remixes), and build networks and opportunities (concert dates, workshops, conferences).

Regarding the sharing of artworks and images, one may refer to Art Commissions, a Discord channel dedicated to the commissioning, production, and dissemination of digital works, which represents a paradigmatic example of a fringe space of online creativity. Here too, one can observe the construction of a peer-to-peer environment in which each user can simultaneously be an artist, a commissioner, or simply a spectator.

Discord was born as a platform for gamers, but it has become an adaptable space for creative and experimental communities. At present, Discord functions as a closed and modular space, where servers are invitation-based or semi-open and the structure is organised into thematic channels (announcements, commissions, projects, feedback, etc.). It is a platform of high relational density: communication is continuous, asynchronous or live, and it facilitates fluid and horizontal forms of exchange.

The Art Commissions server is organised into thematic channels, each with a specific function that helps structure the community's creative ecosystem. Some key spaces include multiple possibilities for presenting and sharing one's artworks. For instance, #commissions is the space where artists publish genuine "synthetic portfolios", with examples of their digital works accompanied by a grid of indicative prices for commissions. In practice, it is a space that functions as a showcase and an informal market, where contacts among users occur directly and immediately; #art-gallery is a virtual gallery where finished works, sketches, and in-progress projects are shared; #art-streaming functions as a channel in which users post their creative live streams, showing the process of creating a work in real time and strengthening the performative and relational dimension of production.

Within Art Commissions, creativity is therefore not only an individual act, but a distributed practice in which users inspire one another, remix styles, comment, and ask for technical or aesthetic advice. The

artists themselves can also commission works from others, generating a cycle of reciprocal production.

Although the server promotes economic transactions, these are governed by informal and community-based logics. The system is not supported by algorithms or advertising, but by internal visibility, by a mechanism of trust among users, and by collective self-regulation. There is no "curator" or "manager" selecting deserving artists: anyone can participate, exhibit, sell, or purchase.

This dynamic makes the channel a self-organised platform of cultural production that aligns with the fringification mechanism we are observing, based on the configuration of an alternative space with respect to the official circuits of digital art (fairs, galleries, NFT marketplaces).

Returning, finally, to the more movement-oriented dimension of artivism and online protest that draws on the potentials opened by the variety of platforms, messaging apps such as Telegram are beginning to be used quite consistently by groups and movements to organise public actions and to share information and materials. A particularly relevant Italian case in this regard is the Telegram channel "Vogliamo Tutt'Altro" (We Want Something Completely Different) – 306 subscriptions –, which describes itself as the "Constituent Assembly of live-performance workers". It is a channel created to share communications, press releases, appointments, photos, and useful links for the organisation of mobilisation and protest actions. The movement materially took shape on 20 January 2024 when the appointment of Luca de Fusco as General Director of Teatro di Roma - Teatro Nazionale, seen as the result of a political strategy that illegitimately bypassed the board of directors. Yet its scope goes beyond this specific episode: the movement fights to denounce the state of crisis of cultural policy in Italy, the inadequate condition of intermittent labor, internal disparities in the organisation of the theatre system, the predominance of men in artistic leadership, the devaluation of research, and so forth. At the level of communicative organisation, the channel functions vertically, whereas, on the side of coordinating actions, the movement's national

reach is made more evident with Telegram groups (chats): in particular, the National Vogliamo Tutt'Altro group (176 subscribers), in which the organisations most actively involved also in managing the main channel participate. This national chat has also absorbed the "Annusa i Fiori" (inspired by the poem *Smell the Flowers While You Can* by David Wojnarowicz) chat, which, even before the events linked to Teatro di Roma, had brought together some important artistic organisations mobilising across Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Marche. Subsequently, the group renamed itself "Vogliamo Tutt'Altro | Annusa i Fiori" and currently counts 82 members. Initially open to welcome the largest number of interested organisations, the group later became closed and numerically smaller following unwanted intrusions during the organisation of a coordinated action between Bologna and Rome in October 2024. What emerges from this numerically limited yet politically significant example is the potential suitability of platforms such as Telegram for sustaining that "affective polarisation" that the live-performance system needs to assert its political demands. These digital tools prove to be vital spaces for building solidarity, coordinating actions, and keeping mobilisation alive, showing how technology can become a strategic ally in the struggle for cultural change.

More generally, this kind of platform – which makes it possible to articulate the private nature of communication for restricted groups, sometimes closed and, in some cases, characterised by "secrecy" – can be calibrated with the public outputs that the digital and media environment enables. On Telegram, for example, this dynamic is represented by the coexistence of public channels and groups alongside private chats. In such a complex scenario, difficult to delineate with clarity, interesting potentials nonetheless emerge.

It will be the task of artists, as well as of various categories of networked amateurs and publics, to explore and define the paths of a new fringe artivism capable of leveraging these digital spaces to create forms of expression and mobilisation that combine the confidentiality of organisation with public visibility, redefining the boundaries between private action and collective impact.

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