Hyperconnectivity, Not Isolation: Why Concerns about 'Echo Chambers' and 'Filter Bubbles' Address the Wrong Problem

Axel Bruns, Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Introduction: Of Social and Other Media

To put it bluntly, the world as we know it is on fire: exploiting public discontent as persistent political, economic, and environmental challenges remain unaddressed, new political actors and movements have emerged to offer alternative solutions that have often trended towards populism and illiberalism, and – once in power – caused severe democratic backsliding. As we confront these profound changes and ask how the established rules-based world order could have crumbled so rapidly, the apparent effects of the growing role of social media in public debate over the past ten years or more have provided a convenient and powerful explanation for many of the developments in politics and political communication. Central to this are the twin concepts of 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles', which purport to explain how, even in erstwhile stable democracies, so many people could have been persuaded so quickly to support anti-democratic demagogues. This chapter reviews these hypotheses, considers the roles and uses of social and other media within the broader media landscape, and shows how general information overload from hyperconnectivity rather than the communicative isolation of hyperpartisan communities must be regarded as a crucial driver of the democratic dysfunctions we now experience. These challenges cannot be addressed by policy and regulatory interventions on social media platforms alone, therefore.

This does not absolve social media platforms from blame, however. Criticism of social media is not limited to any one platform: to name but a few, Twitter (now X) has played a critical role in the rise, fall, and resurgence of Donald Trump's distinct brand of fascism (Enli 2017; 2025); Facebook has proven to be a particularly fertile space for the fermentation of mis- and disinformation and the rise of conspiracy theories (Bruns et al., 2020; 2021), especially during and since the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated infodemic (UN, 2020), and exacerbated by the discontinuation of its third-party fact-checking network (Watt et al., 2025); Instagram was one of a number of platforms that enabled the rise of a para-political class of influencers whose often ill-informed perspectives have severely disrupted conventional political opinion formation (Schmuck et al., 2022); TikTok remains under intense suspicion for its origins in and connections with the Chinese party apparatus and its state surveillance and influence operations (Bernot et al., 2024); and the many more niche platforms – like 4chan, Gab, or Parler – that exist at the edges of this social media ecosystem have served as largely unpoliced staging grounds for disinformation actors and groups, most prominently perhaps QAnon (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022; Schulze et al., 2022), in their efforts to spread their conspiracist claims and recruit new followers.

Although it is tempting to blame all of these social and political ills simply on the growing intrusion, since the early 2000s, of social media into political communication and campaigning, or into public communication, debate, and opinion formation more generally, such a technologically determinist perspective is profoundly ahistorical: mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories, and their embedding into populist and anti-democratic narratives predate the rise of social media by many decades, or indeed centuries; Allport and Postman, for instance, published their "Analysis of Rumor" as early as 1946. Those whom we now commonly describe as 'bad actors' – rumour-mongers, conspiracy theorists, populists, propagandists – have always utilised the most potent

communication technologies of their day to exploit the uncertainties and insecurities of vulnerable and therefore susceptible populations for their own ends, especially in times of crisis; before the rise of social media, such technologies were television, radio, newspapers, pamphlets, books, and even the art of rhetoric itself.

This is not to deny that social media come with a range of affordances that lend themselves well to this exploitation – so too, however, did those earlier media forms and platforms, each in their own way. We would do well to remember that Donald Trump found his fame through reality television and that many of the popular and problematic influencers who critique political decision-making processes address a mass audience through bestselling non-fiction books that purport to explain the world. Indeed, it is now abundantly clear that the impact of populists and propagandists is greatest when their messages in one media form are amplified – deliberately or inadvertently – in others. Mass audience publications with limited editorial quality controls (or in fact with a political or commercial affinity to problematic political actors) are especially implicated here: several studies highlight, for instance, the role of tabloid news outlets in mainstreaming fringe and conspiracist ideas (Bruns et al., 2022; Chadwick et al., 2018); the failure of more reputable news organisations to clearly position themselves against propaganda and disinformation, often out of a misunderstood commitment to journalistic objectivity and a concern about losing privileged access to illiberal political actors, also contributes substantial "oxygen of amplification" (Phillips, 2018) to disinformative and anti-democratic political messaging. Journalistic restraint and bothsidesism even in the face of overt misogyny, racism, homophobia, and fascism from one side of politics has rightly been identified as a fundamental failure of the contemporary news industry (Aikin & Casey, 2022; Dixon & Clarke, 2013). When journalism loses its instinct to defend hard-fought democratic values, principles, processes, and institutions as a matter of course, democracy dies in plain daylight – not in darkness.

Social media themselves are therefore merely one component of a far more complex, multi-faceted, and intricately interconnected network of multi-platform communication flows (Bruns, 2023a) where information (including mis- and disinformation) may originate from anywhere and be redistributed and amplified by other components of the overall assemblage: through a process of gatewatching (Bruns, 2005; 2018) they observe and redistribute the reporting of *bona fide* news outlets, and that of other sources that merely claim to be news outlets, and thereby crowdsource particular voices to greater prominence, for better or for worse (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). However, the reverse is equally true whenever mainstream news outlets cover every last tweet, press release, and stump speech of populist political candidates without adequate contextualisation or debunking: as Broersma & Graham have noted, such merely stenographic coverage is exploited to great effect by anti-democratic actors like Donald Trump or Geert Wilders who eschew critical, dialogic interviews – "negotiation-through-conversation" (2013: 449) – in favour of one-way pronouncements on Twitter, Truth Social, and other friendly platforms.

The news reporting that results from such communicative strategies can be understood as a form of gatewatching, too: here, in a reversal of more common patterns, journalists intently watch the gates of social media platforms, so that they can quickly pick up on any new pronouncements from notorious political actors, insert them into day-to-day coverage, and thereby provide them with the oxygen of amplification that makes these statements visible to a much greater audience. Indeed, even when such reporting advances beyond mere stenography and offers a critical perspective, this may hardly matter: amongst these actors' followers, criticism from and debunking by 'establishment' media will often be seen as a badge of honour and create a "backfire effect" (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) that only intensifies a partisan sense of belonging to an exclusive in-group that is clearly distinct from its perceived enemies. As Donovan & boyd (2018) have suggested, then, there is a genuine case for "quarantining extremist ideas" altogether, exercising "strategic silence" rather than debating and debunking them in news reporting that may be well-intentioned but nonetheless can only produce ill effects.

Echo Chambers? Filter Bubbles? If Only!

In light of such justified calls for the quarantining and exclusion of problematic and extremist ideas, and of those who give them voice, from public discourse, it is more than ironic that much of the debate about the impact of social media on politics has essentially claimed that extremists, conspiracy theorists, and other problematic

political groups are *already* using these platforms to self-quarantine, or are at the very least computationally quarantined by the connection and communication algorithms embedded in the platform infrastructures. This is the argument put forward by the interrelated 'echo chamber' (e.g. Sunstein, 2017) and 'filter bubble' (Pariser, 2011) concepts, which – in brief – suggest that the actions of the users, the algorithms, or a combination of both lead to the formation of communities of like-minded participants into which users or ideas that challenge these groups' established views, beliefs, and ideologies can no longer intrude. This, these hypotheses suggest, leads such groups to become disconnected from mainstream debate, to entrench their own alternative perceptions of reality, and to enter a self-reinforcing feedback loop where beliefs in and commitment to the cause only grow ever more intense. In this way, these communities also serve as breeding grounds for extremists such as the fascist militias that attempted to violently overthrow democratically elected governments in the United States on 6 January 2021 or Brazil on 8 January 2023.

Despite the wide reach of the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' concepts in public and scholarly debate, however, evidence for their existence is sorely lacking (Bruns, 2019). To begin with, Eli Pariser's original claim that an overzealous personalisation of the results provided by search engines placed each user in a different 'filter bubble' that reflected their personal, professional, and, above all, political interests (2011) has not survived empirical verification: study upon study has shown that two different users entering the same search query at the same time are extremely likely to receive the same results, often even in the same order (Haim et al., 2018; Krafft et al., 2019; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Nechushtai et al., 2023; Meese et al., 2024); this changes only if queries are posed in differing languages or if the search engine recognises that the location of the searcher is relevant to the search results (for instance when searching for COVID-19 vaccination services). The overwhelming uniformity of search results has even led Nechushtai & Lewis (2019) to suggest that – quite contrary to Pariser's claim of personalised 'filter bubbles' – there is a distinct need for search engines to introduce *more* rather than less diversity into their recommendations.

The by now more prominent claim that the algorithms' or our own choices about whom to connect with or what content to engage with lead to 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles' on social media platforms has fared no better. As O'Hara and Stevens (2015) have noted, if such information cocoons are to have the deleterious consequences that both Sunstein and Pariser have envisioned, they would need to be nearly absolute: simply seeing a little more attitude-confirming and a little less attitude-confronting content is unlikely to result in the pronounced detachment from everyday reality that these hypotheses predict. To purify their communal and informational environment, social media users would need to sever virtually all of their ties with individuals and information sources whose contributions might contradict their own perspectives; this is what cult members do. But such cultish enforcement of in- and out-group boundaries is very difficult to achieve in practice, as anyone who has ever tried to mute certain unwanted discussions in their social media feeds will attest: a Pew Center study in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election, for instance, found that many Facebook and Twitter users had attempted in vain to disconnect from social media contacts who supported the opposing candidate, yet remained frustrated by their fundamental inability to remove such unwanted political content from their social media spaces (Duggan & Smith, 2016).

Much of this is due to a fact that many of the proponents of the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' concepts appear to miss: unlike media and communication scholars, unlike political activists, and unlike Sunstein and Pariser themselves, most ordinary people simply do not care much about politics in the first place, and therefore also do not construct their social media networks with any particular attention to whether their contacts are "political compadres" (Pariser, 2015) or not. Perhaps this is gradually changing, and especially so in the deeply, destructively polarised political environment of the contemporary United States – but even so there are still many reasons other than politics to connect with others on social media platforms, and it remains true that on the whole such platforms are engines of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) where personal, professional, family, interest, and – yes – political networks overlap and intersect. In the face of such complexity and messiness, users as well as algorithms will find it difficult to effectively sort contacts and content into clearly distinct camps and hermetically seal them off from each other – even if, in light of Donovan & boyd's argument (2018), such mutual quarantining might indeed result in less surfacing of illiberal and extremist ideas into general

discourse. (The same is likely to be true for most other aspects of one's personal identity and interest, from lifestyle choices to moral attitudes: individuals would need to develop a quasi-religious fervour for these attributes in order to motivate such a cultish disconnection from anyone who disagrees with them.)

Indeed, quite apart from the substantial practical difficulties in doing so, for many politically partisan or even hyperpartisan groups this segregation would also inherently work against their core interests. One of the unspoken assumptions in the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' theses is that the hermetically sealed partisan communities they envisage are either unaware of their separation from the rest of the world, perhaps because they did not notice how personal choices or algorithmic interventions shaped their social and informational environments, or have even embraced this separation because they were actively seeking to mute counter-attitudinal information and to disconnect from those who shared it. But at least for partisan communities, this is provably untrue: such communities are not only partisan *for* a particular political agenda, but also partisan *against* those who pursue different goals (Sandvoss, 2019) – and therefore they depend fundamentally on knowing what and how their opponents think. These communities cannot afford to be sequestered into an information cocoon that no counter-attitudinal views can penetrate; instead, they actively *seek out* such views at least to critique, undermine, ridicule, or indeed hate them, though perhaps not to conduct an open-ended debate with them or even seek a mutually acceptable compromise.

Such patterns are well-established: even in 2009, well before the current social media landscape solidified, for instance, visitors to the openly fascist US site *Stormfront* were considerably more likely also to read the *New York Times* than visitors to the generic news site *Yahoo! News* (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). This intense focus on the political enemy has not changed: today, the *New York Times* is also one of the main targets for out-links from the far-right news site *Breitbart*, for instance. But *Breitbart* is not directing traffic to this supposedly liberal mainstay of the United States' establishment media ecosystem because it genuinely wishes to encourage its readers to engage with such content, of course; rather, in framing these links in its own content it prefigures an oppositional hate-reading that inherently rejects liberal views, and promotes far-right orthodoxy (Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

Such deliberately oppositional, counter-attitudinal outlinking is one of several ways in which the far right in the United States and elsewhere has weaponised media literacy principles. General media literacy advice tends to provide advice like "choose your sources wisely", "proceed with caution", "trust expertise", "expand your search", and "understand the context" (*Britannica Education*, 2023), and implicitly or explicitly uses this to warn its audience not to engage with alternative, fringe, untrustworthy media outlets. The far right's weaponised media literacy does precisely the same, but inverts the coordinate system: "choose your sources wisely" now means "don't trust the establishment"; "proceed with caution" sows doubts about established media and democratic institutions; "trust expertise" becomes "trust the populist leader"; "expand your search" is already near-identical to the QAnon catch-cry "do your own research"; and "understand the context" encourages audiences to recognise the hidden agendas that conspiracy theorists see behind every action. Through this inversion of a prosocial media literacy agenda, the far right primes its followers for an encounter with mainstream media and political sources that remains staunchly oppositional, and inoculates them against the temptation of genuine engagement with the mainstream's ideas. The point here is not to encircle partisans in an impermeable 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble' where they cannot encounter such ideas, but to entrench their partisan views to such an extent that they will not falter even when they do encounter them.

This defensive approach emerges as especially valuable to hyperpartisan and extremist communities when we consider that their overall ambition is not merely to hang on to the supporters they already have, but to attract further partisans to the fold. To do so – to spread their illiberal propaganda and proselytise amongst the as yet unconvinced – partisans must move amongst the general public; to be enclosed within a separate information cocoon would be entirely counterproductive. Consequently, the very aim of those groups that are most often supposed to be locked into 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' is actually to intrude into the communicative spaces populated by others, to spread their own messages and attract new recruits, or at least "flood the zone with shit", as fascist organiser Steve Bannon has put it (Illing, 2020), and thereby render mainstream community spaces unusable for pro-democratic, anti-extremist purposes (as they did with the

transformation of Twitter to X). Far from worrying about nebulous hyperpartisan activities in supposed 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles', what we should be concerned about is therefore that established democracies have *not* been able to contain political extremists in isolated communication spaces where their actions can be readily observed and pose little threat to the general public, and that such anti-democratic groups are now operating in broad daylight, have formed international networks, and have even amassed considerable political power.

Hyperconnectivity, Not Isolation

Consider again the problematic phenomena listed at the start of this chapter: the global spread of mis- and disinformation narratives. The rise of popular influencers promoting their claims. The gathering and growth of conspiracy theorist communities that maintain and develop these alternative interpretations of reality. The deliberate exploitation of such narratives and communities by state and non-state influence operations. Common to all of these – and many other related pathologies that have emerged as democracies around the world are backsliding into illiberalism – is that they rely and thrive on easy interpersonal connectivity and information dissemination. Indeed, this critical importance of hyperconnectivity is encapsulated in the exhortation to "do your own research" that is a catch-cry especially of QAnon, anti-vaccination, and other conspiracist groups: such groups explicitly call on users to move beyond the limited range of largely mainstream, quality, and evidence-based news and information sources that search engines have been shown to recommend, and to instead explore the readily available, but less immediately visible partisan fringes of the global information ecosystem where 'alternative facts' and populist propaganda flourish. It is the very absence of the friction that 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' would produce which enables this easy transition from the safety of the mainstream to the hazards of the fringes: the very lack of barriers to the flow of attention on the World Wide Web means that even deeply problematic information is only ever a few clicks away.

It should be stressed that this is not, despite such pathologies, an argument *against* hyperconnectivity and easy information access: compared to the scarcity of available information in pre-Internet days, the present state remains vastly preferable. "Doing your own research" can be valuable and rewarding, especially where – as indeed is the case for the widely circulated but empirically unsound 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' hypotheses – apparently commonsensical understandings of how the world works are demonstrably wrong. But doing research also requires an understanding of and adherence to scientific principles, and the critical literacies needed to check the reliability of available information and sources. Many of the hyperpartisans engaged in doing their own research lack the former, and fail to do the latter, and indeed the "polluted media landscape" (Phillips & Milner, 2020) within which they, and we, operate already tips the scales against such an endeavour.

Alternatively, those users who are not heavily invested hyperpartisans with sufficient motivation to do their own research may simply rely on others to do that research for them. As Lee et al. (2024) have shown, such users – who feel profoundly overwhelmed by the wealth of more or less trustworthy information that is available to them online – are likely to stop actively seeking out information for themselves, and will instead adopt what has become known as a 'news finds me' (NFM) mindset; in other words, they believe that any sufficiently important story will be amplified well enough by other, better informed contacts in their social network that it will eventually reach them through one channel or another, too. This is a distinct pattern for this group of users: "social media news consumption only breeds NFM perception for those who perceived higher information overload on social media" (Lee et al., 2024: 444). It should be noted here that, in itself, this perception that the social media activities of others will eventually channel news and related information to those who do not actively seek it out is not in itself incorrect: Fletcher & Nielsen (2017: 2461), for instance, also show that such "incidental exposure does indeed occur on social media, and that the incidentally exposed use more sources of news than non-users" – in other words, news does indeed find people on social media, and it finds especially those who are not actively looking for it themselves; and when it does, those users experience a more diverse information diet than those who do not use social media for news.

Such news diversity, however, may itself do nothing to alleviate the information overload that users with a 'news finds me' attitude were already experiencing; indeed, the range and unfamiliarity of the sources that this process leads them to encounter might only further cement their sense of the overwhelming complexity of contemporary life. Further, of course, the more engaged news users upon whom they rely for their information – whose shared news it is that eventually finds them – are themselves not guaranteed to be any more adept at navigating the vast amount of information that a state of hyperconnectivity confronts them with; the news that is crowdsourced to prominence is only as good as the news literacies of those who are doing the gatewatching and newssharing, and those literacies are questionable at best when those sharers are hyperpartisans doing their own research.

Indeed, this problem is especially pronounced during times of crisis, when even seasoned news-watchers with otherwise solid media literacies may be uncertain about the reliability of available information because our very understanding of the crisis situation, and its causes and consequences, still remains unsettled. As the COVID-19 pandemic and the various subsequent crises it caused have demonstrated yet again, especially in the early stages of a crisis, the information vacuum that necessarily exists while governments, experts, and news organisations still gather and process the information available to them is easily filled by rumour and speculation (Allport & Postman, 1946; Huang et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2020). Such unverified information may be spread with the best of intentions (as individuals seek to comfort themselves and others by seeking explanations for the as yet inexplicable), or in order to exploit the crisis for political or commercial gain (in aid of populist actors who challenge the sensible but unpopular measures taken by governments to control the situation), but this question of intentionality is ultimately irrelevant when the material being shared to fill the information void has the potential to cause genuine harm to individuals and groups by leading them to make ill-advised decisions and adopt risky behavioural strategies. Although important in some other contexts, the distinction between inadvertent misinformation and deliberate disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) does not matter here, therefore: the state of hyperconnectivity in the present media environment, the sense of information overload this causes in many individuals, the lack of media literacies sufficient to navigate this overwhelming information landscape, and the resulting potential to fall prey to problematic information sources and those who promote them, all combine into a considerable threat to contemporary societies which is caused by the very absence of the neatly delineated information cocoons that the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' theses describe.

What Now?

This may sound almost like an argument in favour of establishing such information cocoons – and indeed arguably the world was a better place when political extremists were still restricted to small, separate, and explicitly fascist sites like *Stormfront*, where they could be contained and observed, rather than owning social media platforms, running alternative news sites, and sitting in the Oval Office. The fate of erstwhile far-right spokespeople like Milo Yiannopoulos and Alex Jones demonstrates that deplatforming and related interventions are effective tools which may not entirely remove extremist rhetoric from circulation in social and other media altogether, but nonetheless make it considerably harder for such hateful views to escape from their hyperpartisan enclosures and infect the broader population. If it was actually possible to genuinely enclose extremists of all colours in their own hermetically sealed echo chambers, this would contribute substantially to protecting societal harmony and cohesion for the rest of us.

As not all informational and communicative dysfunction is driven by such explicitly extremist actors, but in significant part also results from the well-intentioned but ill-informed collective actions of broader social media communities, especially during times of crisis, does this targeting of hyperpartisan influencers go far enough, though – if social media play such an apparently central role as drivers of dysfunction, should we also consider reducing our use of social media altogether, or at least our use of social media for engaging with the news? The latter change in user behaviours, in fact, is being promoted – though not for inherently pro-social and altruistic reasons – by recent changes implemented by Meta on its platforms Facebook and Instagram: responding to new legislation in Australia and Canada that sought to cross-subsidise domestic news media from the vast digital

advertising revenues generated by major digital platforms, it has removed identified news content from its platforms altogether (temporarily for a brief period in 2021 in Australia, and permanently since August 2023 in Canada; cf. Bruns, 2023b; Bruns et al., 2024; Leaver, 2021; Pion, 2024), while globally it has announced that news content may not be banned altogether but will be algorithmically demoted on those platforms to make it far less visible to their users.

Such interventions are primarily designed to benefit these platforms and their owner, Meta, as they reduce the legal and social obligations that would otherwise result from serving as a key source of news to the various societies they operate in; however, they do act as natural experiments that offer valuable insights into what social media platforms with less news circulation might look like. Early evidence suggests that a Facebook without the news might well be a happier place: at least in Australia in 2021, the vast majority of 'angry' reactions to links shared on the platform was directed at links from domestic news outlets, and this anger dissipated notably during the brief period when all news content was banned from the platform (Bruns et al., 2024). Conversely, however, Facebook users themselves may be unaware of such effects, or even of the absence of news on the platform as such: in Canada, one year on from the start of Meta's news ban, "only 22 percent of people are aware of the news block on Meta's platforms. … A majority of people claimed they were still getting informed through social media platforms" (Pion, 2024).

This lack of awareness has several possible explanations: users with an already limited interest in the news and a 'news finds me' attitude might genuinely not have noticed that the news no longer finds them on Facebook; or if it still does, it may do so now in the form of less direct gatewatching and news curation and more indirect and informal summaries and discussions of the news and current events by those more engaged online opinion leaders upon whom the 'news finds me' approach depends. This also opens the door to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, however: rather than simply sharing interesting links directly with their followers, those opinion leaders may now only share their own 'hot takes' on those news updates, disconnected from the source information. If genuine news content can no longer be shared on platforms like Facebook, in other words, what is left to circulate is only news commentary, rumour, and hearsay. This also depends on what Facebook classifies as 'news', however: it is also possible that some fringe and hyperpartisan sites that are (rightly) not regarded as providing actual news managed to escape the news ban in Canada (or any more general global downranking of news content by Meta's algorithms) as a result, and are therefore now reaping the benefits from remaining visible and accessible when all of their more reputable competitors have been made to disappear. This possibility represents the most perverse consequence of a news ban or news downranking: when all quality news has been removed or at least hidden from social media platforms and their users, all that remains to circulate is the worst and most dangerous content.

Indeed, this also applies to any more comprehensive bans that might target social media platforms as such. These are difficult to implement in the first place, as the continued use of banned platforms even in autocratic countries like Iran and Russia has shown, and may only lead committed social media users to move to niche platforms that have as yet escaped outright bans; here, however, the smaller userbases and lack of participation by mainstream news organisations and other reputable information sources that are common on such platforms are likely to mean that it will be considerably more difficult to maintain a balanced and reliable information diet. Further, users who have already adopted 'news finds me' attitudes on current mainstream social media platforms, and therefore rely on serendipitous news exposure through their social media networks for their daily news diets, are unlikely to begin to actively seek out news content if even those social media networks are taken from them – as the Canadian experience already shows, it is these least engaged users who will suffer the most whenever it becomes even more difficult for them to at least accidentally encounter updates about current events.

Further, it is also critical to stress that the litany of political and societal dysfunctions with which this chapter opened cannot be blamed solely or even principally on social media platforms and users: even if social media use (for news as well as for other purposes) were to decline precipitously in the near future, the many other components of the hyperpartisan media network that now exists – from popular cable news channels through the podcasts, YouTube channels, and other platforms of self-styled political influencers to the many Websites of

the alternative news and commentary ecosystem – would continue to exert their often explicitly illiberal and anti-democratic influence. Indeed, a decline of social media would also mean a decline of the prosocial, corrective gatewatching and news commentary functions that such platforms *also* enable: while there may be less promotion of problematic content, there would also be less sharing of the material that critiques and debunks such content. As Fletcher & Nielsen (2018) have shown, after all, those users who are able to cope with the elevated volume of information on social media platforms do benefit notably from the greater diversity of sources which such platforms provide to them.

We cannot simply ban our way out of the problem, therefore – or at least not by removing access to social media altogether, or by removing access to news *on* social media; any interventions in the social media landscape that are intended to remove problematic content and thereby protect the general population from the consequences of its circulation must be a great deal more targeted. This requires more political will and is more labour-intensive than blanket measures against social media platforms and their operators, while the latter type of measures will be more popular (and populist) at least in the short term; however, such blunt actions will inevitably generate more collateral damage amongst those users most vulnerable to a deepening information vacuum than they do good.

At any rate, in fact, such punitive interventions (such as content and account takedowns targeting the sources of mis- and disinformation, extremism, and hate) merely address the symptoms of societal dysfunction and destructive polarisation (Esau et al., 2024); they do nothing to alleviate its causes. As this chapter has shown, far from the widely popularised but chronically under-evidenced claims about the ill effects of 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles', the much more pressing concern that future policy interventions will need to address is our contemporary state of hyperconnectivity, and its consequences: the severe information overload and the lack of media literacies capable of managing it that many citizens are now experiencing, and the twin coping strategies of avoiding news exposure and seeking easy and comforting explanations from alternative and populist sources that they are adopting in response. These challenges, however, are far from new, and we do not need novel terms like 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles' to describe them; rather, we urgently need to dedicate considerable, sustained effort to addressing them. The solutions to these challenges must necessarily be social rather than technological.

Unfortunately, there are no easy fixes here. An even-handed regulation of social media platforms, designed to encourage more effective, proactive, and transparent action against problematic content and actors remains critical, but is made considerably more difficult by the major platforms' growing alignment with powerful illiberal forces; Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Elon Musk (X), Sundar Pichai (Google), and other major platform CEOs explicitly courted the second Trump administration to seek its support against regulatory initiatives in the European Union, for instance. However, while such regulatory interventions may seek to reduce the *effects* of hyperconnectivity by reducing the transmission of problematic content and the influence of problematic actors, they are unable to address the *causes* of the information overload that so many people now experience. This, instead, requires the development of far greater individual and community resilience by enhancing citizens' media, civic, and democratic literacy.

However, this is an educational task of generational scope, especially for communities which have been drawn deeply into hyperpartisan, populist, and illiberal ideological beliefs, and where the challenge is therefore one of community deradicalisation. But even where it addresses less hyperpartisan attitudes, it still requires a concerted educational, communicative, and societal effort that must enrol teaching institutions, civil society organisations, commercial and public service media, and pro-democratic political organisations working in collaboration. Where – as in the contemporary United States, Brazil, India, Turkey, Hungary, and elsewhere – such a broad alliance of forces from across society can no longer be assembled because illiberal actors have already captured much of the political, media, and institutional landscape, the task of protecting and indeed rebuilding the democratic system becomes all the more difficult, though not entirely hopeless.

References

Aikin, S.F., & Casey, J.P. (2022). Bothsiderism. *Argumentation*, *36*(2), 249–268. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-021-09563-1

Allport, G.W., & Postman, L. (1946). An Analysis of Rumor. *Public Opinion Quarterly 10*(4): 501–517.

Bernot, A., Cooney-O'Donoghue, D., & Mann, M. (2024). Governing Chinese Technologies: TikTok, Foreign Interference, and Technological Sovereignty. *Internet Policy Review*, *13*(1). https://doi.org/10.14763/2024.1.1741

Britannica Education. (2023). Fight the Fake: 5 Fact-Checking Tips from Britannica. https://elearn.eb.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/5-Fact-checking-Tips-Poster.pdf

Broersma, M., & Graham, T. (2013). Twitter as a News Source: How Dutch and British Newspapers Used Tweets in Their News Coverage, 2007-2011. *Journalism Practice*, *7*(4), 446–464. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.802481

Bruns, A. (2005). *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Bruns, A. (2018). *Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere*. New York: Peter Lang.

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

Bruns, A. (2023a). From "the" Public Sphere to a Network of Publics: Towards an Empirically Founded Model of Contemporary Public Communication Spaces. *Communication Theory*, *33*(203), 70–81. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad007

Bruns, A. (2023b). Foreword: Digital Intermediation, for Better or Worse. In J. Hutchinson, *Digital Intermediation: Unseen Infrastructure for Cultural Production* (pp. xv–xxiii). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003177388

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

Bruns, A., Harrington, S., & Hurcombe, E. (2021). Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories: Tracing Misinformation Trajectories from the Fringes to the Mainstream. In M. Lewis, E. Govender, & K. Holland (Eds.), *Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 229–249). Cham: Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_12

Bruns, A., Hurcombe, E., & Harrington, S. (2022). Covering Conspiracy: Approaches to Reporting the COVID/5G Conspiracy Theory. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(6), 930–951. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1968921

Bruns, A., Angus, D., Vodden, L., Nagappa, A., & Gröbner, K. (2024). Facebook without the News: Link-Sharing Patterns during Meta's Australian and Canadian News Bans. Paper presented at the ECREA 2024 conference, Ljubljana, 27 Sep. 2024. https://snurb.info/node/3159

Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C., & O'Loughlin, B. (2018). Do Tabloids Poison the Well of Social Media? Explaining Democratically Dysfunctional News Sharing. *New Media & Society*, *20*(11), 4255–4274. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769689

Dehghan, E., & Nagappa, A. (2022). Politicization and Radicalization of Discourses in the Alt-Tech Ecosystem: A Case Study on Gab Social. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(3). http://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221113075

Dixon, G.N., & Clarke, C.E. (2013). Heightening Uncertainty around Certain Science: Media Coverage, False Balance, and the Autism-Vaccine Controversy. *Science Communication*, *35*(3), 358–382.

Donovan, J., & boyd, d. (2018, June 2). The Case for Quarantining Extremist Ideas. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/01/extremist-ideas-media-coverage-kkk

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

Enli, G. (2017). Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election. *European Journal of Communication*, *32*(1), 50–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682802

Enli, G. (2025). Populism as "Truth": How Mediated Authenticity Strengthens the Populist Message. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *30*(1), 83–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231221802

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, Communication & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2413127

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

Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J.M. (2011). Ideological Segregation Online and Offline. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *126*, 1799–1839. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr044

Haim, M., Graefe, A., & Brosius, H.-B. (2018). Burst of the Filter Bubble? Effects of Personalization on the Diversity of Google News. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(3), 330–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1338145

Hart, P.S., Chinn, S., & Soroka, S. (2020). Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage. *Science Communication*, *42*(5), 679–697. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547020950735

Huang, Y.L., Starbird, K., Orand, M., Stanek, S.A., & Pedersen, H.T. (2015). Connected through Crisis: Emotional Proximity and the Spread of Misinformation Online. *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 969–980. https://doi.org/10.1145/2675133.2675202

Illing, S. (2020, Jan. 16). 'Flood the Zone with Shit': How Misinformation Overwhelmed Our Democracy. *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation

Krafft, T.D., Gamer, M., & Zweig, K.A. (2019). What Did You See? A Study to Measure Personalization in Google's Search Engine. *EPJ Data Science*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-019-0217-5

Leaver, T. (2021). Going Dark: How Google and Facebook Fought the Australian News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code. *M/C Journal*, *24*(2). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2774

Lee, S., Tandoc Jr., E.C., & Diehl, T. (2024). Uninformed and Misinformed: Advancing a Theoretical Model for Social Media News Use and Political Knowledge. *Digital Journalism*, *12*(4), 431–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2180404

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

Meese, J., Obeid, A.K., Angus, D., Bruns, A., & Srinivas, A. (2024). Examining Exposure Diversity on Google News in Australia. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2024.019

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

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. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *90*, 298–307. http://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. *Mass Communication and Society*. http://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2023.2173609

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, *32*(2), 303–330.

O'Hara, K., & Stevens, D. (2015). Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet's Complicity in Violent Extremism. *Policy & Internet*, *7*(4), 401–422. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.88

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

Pariser, E. (2015, May 7). Did Facebook's Big Study Kill My Filter Bubble Thesis? *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/2015/05/did-facebooks-big-study-kill-my-filter-bubble-thesis/

Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute.

Phillips, W, & Milner, R.M. (2020). *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Pion, C. (2024, August 14). One Year On from Meta's Canadian News Ban: What's the Outcome? *Public Media Alliance*. https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/one-year-after-metas-news-ban-whats-the-outcome/

Roberts, J., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). Breitbart's Attacks on Mainstream Media: Victories, Victimhood, and Vilification. In *Affective Politics of Digital Media*. Routledge.

Sandvoss, C. (2019). The Politics of Against: Political Participation, Anti-Fandom, and Populism. In M.A. Click (Ed.), *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* (pp. 125–146). NYU Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvwrm46p.9

Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (2022). Politics – Simply Explained? How Influencers Affect Youth's Perceived Simplification of Politics, Political Cynicism, and Political Interest. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *27*(3), 738-762. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221088987

Schulze, H., Hohner, J., Greipl, S., Girgnhuber, M., Desta, I., & Rieger, D. (2022). Far-Right Conspiracy Groups on Fringe Platforms: A Longitudinal Analysis of Radicalization Dynamics on Telegram. *Convergence*, *28*(4), 1103–1126. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221104977

Sunstein, C.R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

United Nations. (2020, March 31). The UN Tackles 'Infodemic' of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis. https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*. Report no. DGI(2017)09. Council of Europe. https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Information-Disorder-Toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework.pdf

Watt, N., Montaña-Niño, S., & Riedlinger, M. (2025). The Art of the (Platform) Deal: Tech Platforms, Fact Checkers, and the Politics of Truth. *Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society*, *5*(2). https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.wjds/5.2.1