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

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Introduction

Around the world there is growing concern about the backsliding of democratic systems towards illiberalism and authoritarianism (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). 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 (Bennet & Kneuer, 2023). 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 emboldened new populist and propagandistic actors (Judge, 2024), enabled domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns (Starbird et al., 2023), 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' (Sunstein, 2001a; 2017) or 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011; 2015), 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 (cf. Bruns, 2019; 2024), 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 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 (Starbird et al., 2023). 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" (Mudde, 2024) – 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 show many of the symptoms of what Esau et al. (2024) 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 (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024); 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.

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" (2004). Introduced by legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2001a/b), 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 (Bruns, 2019); 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 collective beliefs (Garrett et al., 2013). 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 (O'Hara, 2014). A famous early study of networks amongst partisan Democrat and Republican blogs in the lead-up to the 2004 U.S. 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" (Adamic & Glance, 2005: 41). 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 (Williams et al., 2015: 137).

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. (2015), 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 (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011), while 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 (Maurer et al., 2022: 761). 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 (Garrett, 2009). 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.

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 (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017) 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 (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

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 (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), in some circumstances even against their own will and to the detriment of their personal peace of mind: during the 2016 U.S. election, for instance, many respondents to a Pew Center study (Duggan & Smith, 2016) at the time of the 2016 U.S. 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 (Pariser, 2015). A first iteration of the concept, introduced in 2011 by tech entrepreneur and activist Eli Pariser (2011), focussed 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 (Bruns, 2022; Haim et al., 2018; Krafft et al., 2019; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Nechushtai et al., 2023) – to the point where this very uniformity 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 (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019).

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 (2015). 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 (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018); 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 (2015), but for a wide variety of largely non-political reasons.

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 (*Australian Financial Review*, 2024), both because user discussions about news and politics negatively affect user sentiment on its platforms (de León & Trilling, 2021) 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 shadowbanning of accounts and sources critical of Musk and his associates, and amplification of accounts and sources supporting Musk, has been widely and conclusively documented (Graham & Andrejevic, 2024) – 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 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 (Bruns 2019; 2024): 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 (2024), 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 Türkiye, 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.

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 (Allport & Postman, 1946). In doing so, poor media and information literacy can lead us to place our trust in unverified, misleading, and false information, and 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. (2020) 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 & Papacharissi (2013) 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, downranking, 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 (Bruns et al., 2020). 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’ (Vargo et al., 2017): 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 (Harrington et al., 2024). 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 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. (2023) 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.

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 (Esau et al., 2024), in order to divide and conquer.

Destructive Polarisation and Its Symptoms

Political and societal polarisation can take any number of forms (Bruns et al., 2025): as issue polarisation, it can focus on specific policy issues (Lelkes, 2016); as ideological polarisation, it can describe a contest between ideological viewpoints that incorporate unified stances on a wide variety of issues (Yarchi et al., 2021); as affective polarisation, it can represent a distinction between strongly felt individual and collective identities (Iyengar et al., 2012); and any such divisions can also manifest in how the individuals and groups associated with specific 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 (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020). 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 (Dehghan, 2020); 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 forces and campaigns that believe they will benefit from increased levels of polarisation.

Esau et al. (2024) 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 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: U.S. 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 & McGregor (2023) 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 & McGregor have forcefully reminded us that the "analysis of power and inequality – specifically differences in economic, social, and political status, and especially between different racial and ethnic groups" (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023: 558) – 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.

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