NORMS FOR THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

Report 1: Facts, Fake News, and Social Media

In this series of reports from our project workshops, we explore how philosophy can help us think clearly about social media in political debate. In this first report we discuss the themes that emerged at a workshop which invited philosophers working on epistemology - the study of knowledge - to apply their work to political issues in social media.

Background

Until the turn of the century, political debate in the UK and similar countries primarily took place in an open, public forum via newspapers, broadcasters and book publishing. The owners of mass media companies had a lot of power to control who had access to this shared conversation.

The rise of social media has transformed this. In the new public sphere, anyone with an internet connection can share information and political ideas with the world. Ordinary people can challenge powerful groups and individuals and shake up received wisdom.

However, the rise of social media has also led to widespread concerns about fake news, junk science, and other forms of false or misleading information. Some critics have noted that social media users are at risk of living in 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles', where they are only exposed to information that confirms their prejudices, regardless of whether this information is true or false.

Governments around the world are considering how to address these concerns. Some have introduced laws that would regulate or limit people and companies responsible for spreading false information. Critics have argued that these laws might be used to stop ordinary people debating important ideas. How can we understand these challenges?

The Workshop

In September 2019 we invited five philosophers to a workshop called "Epistemic Norms in the new Public Sphere". You can read a full academic summary of the workshop here. In this report we highlight two themes we think are especially of interest to media professionals, government officials, and others thinking about the regulation of the internet.

Diagnosing the Problem: Structure and Content

The first theme concerned the dangers of mis-describing, and therefore trivialising, problematic phenomena in the new public sphere.

Quassim Cassam argued that 'bullshit' is a deeply inappropriate term to describe mistruths on social media. He pointed out that a bullshitter is someone who is ignorant and bluffing to conceal their ignorance (an under-prepared student, for example), whereas some of the most harmful content on social media is driven by campaigns of organised lying.

Similarly, Jennifer Lackey raised worries about the current focus on echo chambers as crucial to the problem of fake news. Echo chambers are typically thought to be problematic because of their structure. They are closed networks which allow viewpoints to be repeated and amplified, whilst dissenting opinions are ignored or suppressed - just think of Trump and his supporters' reliance on Fox news, and apparent refusal to engage with other sources of information.

But Lackey argued that the problem with echo chambers isn't their structure. If Trump and his supporters exercised critical judgement before repeating information they came across, and if their suppression of dissenting opinion represented an appropriate filtering out of falsehoods, then their echo chamber might not be problematic. By focussing all of our attention on the structure of epistemic environments, we miss much simpler and more serious problems about their content - in this case, that the claims bouncing around in problematic echo chambers are convenient falsehoods or lies.

Learning from Others: Anger and Expertise

Another prominent theme of the workshop was who should be heard in political debate. Thanks to social media, the average person is more connected than ever. If they want, most people can read the passing thoughts of their friends, family, and colleagues - not to mention acquaintances, strangers, politicians and celebrities - on every topic imaginable. We have the potential to learn and understand more than ever before, but only if we can properly navigate this dense and overwhelming minefield.

Alex Worsnip criticised what he sees as a tendency towards full opinionation - each of us striving to have our own opinion on every pressing political or social issue. He suggested that a useful alternative to this tendency might be a norm of abdication - willingness to defer to experts when there is a consensus available, and to hold off on forming an opinion when there isn't.

Michael Hannon was more pessimistic about the future of expert-led political debate. He suggested that the tendency to ignore facts and to voice strongly polarised opinions in the new public sphere has parallels to rooting for sports teams and should be analysed in this way.

Alessandra Tanesini took an intermediate view. She cautioned against blanket calls for civility in online debate. She distinguished between arrogant anger - which is epistemically unhelpful - and liberatory anger - which can be incredibly epistemically (as well as psychologically and morally) valuable. She warned that mistaking liberatory anger for mere incivility, and so dismissing someone's point of view when they are actually conveying something of great importance, means missing out on important opportunities to learn from one another.

So, should we listen more to recognised experts and put less stock in what everyone else thinks? Or should we embrace the sometimes-messy political debates on social media because they offer opportunities to learn from people with different experiences, especially people who are traditionally not granted the authority of 'expertise'? Perhaps the main challenge is to reconsider who counts as an 'expert', especially when it comes to understanding oppression or the effects of economic and social policies on everyday citizens. If we do this, and are willing to listen to anger, then we can learn about topics outside of our own experience.

Summary

This report focused on some ways that philosophers working on epistemology can help us to think about knowledge and social media. We talked about the risk of misdiagnosing the problems in the new public sphere by focusing too much on current buzzwords, like "echo chamber" and "bullshit". We also considered who should be heard in online political debate, and suggested we redefine who counts as an 'expert' to accommodate the possibility that experts might include angry citizens.

We will publish future reports, on events focusing on democracy, privacy, and social media, soon. To find out more please visit our website, or subscribe to our mailing list to be notified when our next report is published.