



Shaping Democracy in the Digital Age:

Interim report of the
'Norms for the New
Public Sphere' project

Introduction 3	
The New Public Sphere..... 3	Why Norms?..... 5
The Public Sphere’s Democratic Function..... 4	Norms for Whom?..... 6
Four Norms for the New Public Sphere 7	
Enable Fair and Equal Access 8	Offer and Engage with Reasons 16
The Problem..... 8	The Problem..... 16
The Proposed Norm..... 8	The Proposed Norm..... 16
Supporting Democracy..... 9	Supporting Democracy..... 17
In the New Public Sphere..... 9	In the New Public Sphere..... 17
Routes Forward 10	Routes Forward 18
Norm in Practice: The People’s Newsroom 11	Norm in Practice: Scottish Citizen’s Land Management Jury 19
Avoid Obvious Falsehoods 12	Support Epistemic Respite 20
The Problem..... 12	The Problem..... 20
The Proposed Norm..... 12	The Proposed Norm..... 20
Supporting Democracy..... 13	Supporting Democracy..... 21
In the New Public Sphere..... 13	In New Public Sphere..... 21
Routes Forward 14	Routes Forward 21
Norm in Practice: Logically.ai..... 15	Norm in Practice: #ActuallyAutistic 22
What’s Next?..... 23	Further Reading 24

Acknowledgements

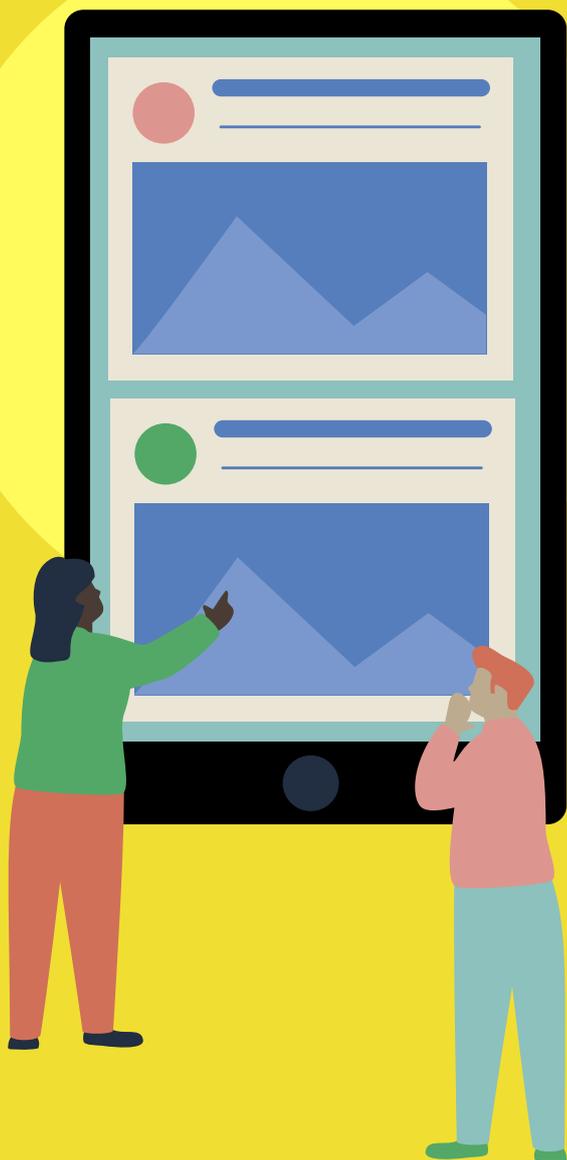
This is an interim report of the *Norms for the Public Sphere* research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council grant AH/S002952/1. The report was primarily authored by Natalie Alana Ashton and Rowan Cruft, with significant contributions from project members Jonathan Heawood and Fabienne Peter. It was edited by Catherine Miller and designed by Sam Osborne.

Special thanks to Al Baker, Oliver Escobar, Natalie Fenton, Rachel Muller-Hynd, Shirish Kulkarni, Moya O’Rourke, Regina Rini and Francesca Sobande for their valuable insights.

Introduction

The New Public Sphere

In less than two decades social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube have fundamentally changed how societies discuss ideas of political and social importance.



These new digital platforms allow people all over the world to share ideas and experiences with one another directly, with unprecedented speed and frequency. Traditional forums of public political discussion - broadcast and print media, as well as parliament, academia, and community spaces - are still central to democracy, but are less dominant than they once were and have been altered as technology has evolved and expanded.

This new public sphere presents a range of opportunities and challenges for the future of democracy. Greater connectivity gives more people the ability to bypass traditional editorial and social gatekeepers, but algorithms now play an important role in mediating access and prominence. The new public sphere enables bullying and harassment on an unprecedented scale, but it also allows for the formation of supportive and meaningful communities.

There's growing consensus that new public policy measures are needed to manage the challenges of the new public sphere and harness its benefits. Government proposals include the [Draft Online Safety Bill](#), the new [Digital Markets Unit](#) within the Competition and Markets Authority, the [Online Media Literacy Strategy](#), plus comparable [initiatives in the EU](#). Think-tank proposals include Demos's [Good Web Project](#), the Forum on Information & Democracy's [New Deal for Journalism](#), and others.

Platforms too have adopted initiatives such as the [Facebook Oversight Board](#) or the [Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism](#), though the recent revelations about Facebook's inaction in the face of its own research on its negative impact on democracy have strengthened the calls for government regulation.

We welcome this vibrant debate, but the scale of the task is evident: the range of issues in question is huge, and each of them presents dilemmas about how to tackle harms while upholding democratic values and maintaining the benefits that new technologies can bring. Former Head of Civic Engagement at Facebook, Samidh Chakrabarti, has described this as '[a philosophical problem](#)'.

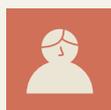
Our report takes a step back from debates about the details of regulation, and focuses on the philosophical foundations that underpin them.

We need to identify how the public sphere can best support democracy and good government.

The report is based on the Norms for the New Public Sphere academic project, which examines the philosophical foundations of a healthy democratic public sphere for the digital age. The report identifies four norms (or ideals) to act as guiding lights for policymakers, regulators, platforms and the public as they navigate towards the goal of a healthy democratic public sphere, and indicates how these norms might work in practice.

We begin by laying some groundwork about what constitutes a healthy democracy, the role the new public sphere should play in it, what opportunities and challenges the new public sphere poses and why the philosophical concept of norms is useful.

We then describe four norms that prescribe who should contribute to the public sphere and what form their contributions should take, as well as how, and when their contributions should be made.



Enable Fair and Equal Access



Avoid Obvious Falsehoods



Offer and Engage with Reasons



Support Epistemic Respite

Our aim isn't to provide a quick policy fix or legal solution. Instead, we use our philosophical expertise to show how these fundamental norms can help individuals, politicians, policymakers and platforms to formulate consistent, coherent responses to the varied challenges and opportunities of the new public sphere.

The Public Sphere's Democratic Function

A democracy is much more than a system of regular elections. It is also a political culture marked by an inclusive public sphere where political issues are debated and policy proposals are scrutinised (prominent theoretical work defending this view of democracy includes [Pateman 1970](#), [Habermas 1989](#), [Sunstein 2003](#)).

A well-functioning democratic public sphere supports good political decision-making by inviting citizens' participation in deciding on new laws and policies and by enabling citizens to hold political leaders to account.

Poorly-functioning public spheres become breeding grounds for pernicious propaganda and conspiracy theories, resulting in the manipulation of citizens' choices and abuse of political power (Stanley 2016, Cassam 2019). Consider those states sometimes called 'flawed democracies', such as Russia: even when the elections themselves are not necessarily rigged, their democratic credentials are questionable because the conditions for free public debate have been eroded.

Philosophers highlight two principles that should underpin a well-functioning public sphere:

- **Epistemic value principle:** the public sphere should support practices that encourage the acquisition, production and sharing of knowledge, that subject false beliefs to criticism, and that foster reasoned engagement with evidence and facts.
- **Liberal self-government principle:** the public sphere should respect the equal liberty of all participants in public debate, and should enable them to participate as equals who can together constitute a 'public' that governs itself.

The epistemic value principle requires that politically relevant knowledge is broadly accessible, and that false or uncertain beliefs are challenged in light of publicly available evidence. This is necessary if political decisions – by citizens

at the ballot box, by politicians, by officials – are to be *well informed*, drawing on the varied experiences and expertise dispersed throughout the public (see [Estlund 2007](#), [Peter 2009](#), [Goodin & Spiekermann 2018](#)). If the epistemic value principle is violated because the public sphere is swamped by disinformation, or fragmented so that some participants don't have access to relevant evidence, then the quality of political debate is undermined.

The liberal self-government principle requires each person to be able to participate as (in some fundamental sense) an *equal* in public debate. This is necessary to avoid political power being captured by some groups to the exclusion of others, and thereby to ensure that political decisions are ultimately the public's decisions – even if they are made by representatives and officials. If the liberal self-government principle is violated because some are systematically silenced or marginalised, then the group excluded from public debate is not part of the self-governing public as required for a well-functioning democracy (see [Christiano 2008](#), [Lafont 2020](#)).

Why Norms?

The norms we propose in this report are philosophical norms, which are prescriptive. They tell us how people should behave ([Bicchieri, Muldoon and Sontuoso 2018](#)). A lot of norms – like the ones used by social scientists – are descriptive. They tell us how people in fact behave – identifying and explaining trends in behaviour. Prescriptive philosophical norms are particularly useful when it comes to dealing with the opportunities and challenges of the new public sphere, for three reasons:

First, philosophical norms are **abstract** and **general**. Regulating the new public sphere means addressing a myriad of issues with a variety of laws, regulations, and other policy measures. These intricate moving parts can only work together if they have a solid theoretical foundation - which is what our norms offer.

Second, philosophical norms **include but also go beyond rights**. The impacts of technology are often considered through the lens of rights such as the right to privacy. Respect for rights is essential to a healthy democracy, but looking *only* at rights can lead to an undue focus on harms to individuals, and result in tricky stalemates. What do we do when one person's right to free expression comes up against another's right to freedom from discrimination? Philosophical norms create room to add concerns about collective goals, such as restoring a healthy democracy, and allow us to explore options beyond legal enforcement, such as education campaigns and public funding.

Finally, philosophical norms let us take a proactive approach to regulating the new public sphere. While reactive approaches, which seek to prevent harm, are important, the pace of technological change means that new harms, and so new regulatory challenges, will constantly arise. Philosophical norms tell us what to aim for, and prepare us to deal with technologies and challenges that haven't been imagined yet.

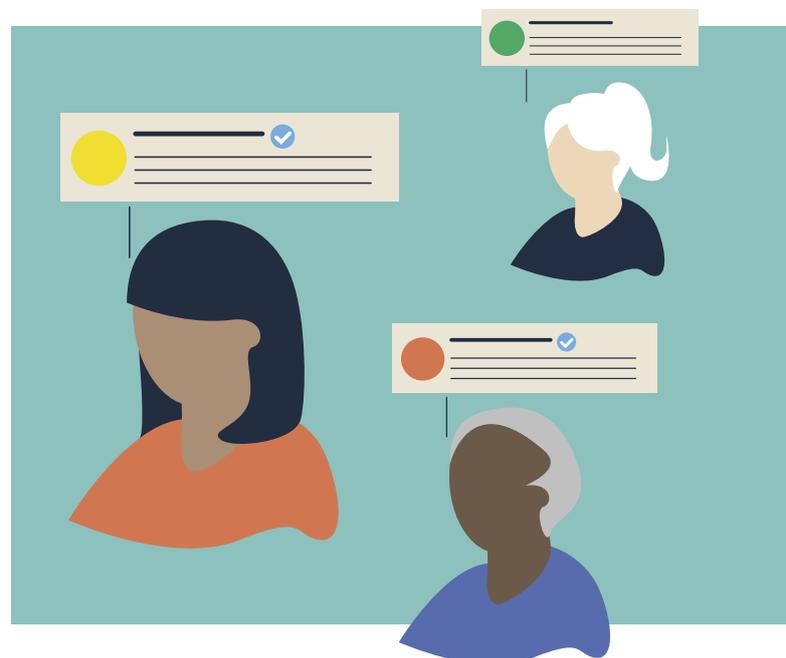
Norms For Whom?

The norms we propose apply to everyone, but in different ways. In the book *Political Liberalism*, the philosopher John Rawls proposed

a concentric circles model of the public sphere, in which more demanding standards should apply to a person's public statements the closer they are to political power. We endorse Rawls's claim that the more political power someone has, the more important it is that their public statements meet high-quality standards.

In this report, we go beyond Rawls by distinguishing different specific roles which, we propose, reflect distinctive relationships to political power in contemporary democratic debate: the role of **politicians and government**; the role of **members of the public**; the role of **traditional media professionals**; and the role of **social media platforms**.

Each of our norms has specific implications for people and institutions occupying these roles. We draw on [Jürgen Habermas's work](#) on how different roles work together to enable healthy democratic deliberation, as well as [Nancy Fraser's](#) and [Catherine Squires's](#) developments of these points. One of our central contributions is to outline the differing implications of our proposed norms for these different roles.



Four Norms for the New Public Sphere

On the following pages, we describe four norms that govern a well-functioning democratic public sphere. They clarify who should be able to contribute to the public sphere (our answer is, broadly, everyone) and what form their contributions should take, as well as how, and when their contributions should be made.

The four norms are as follows:



Enable Fair and Equal Access: strive to make it possible for everyone to contribute to the new public sphere.



Avoid Obvious Falsehoods: take steps to prevent the circulation of claims that are known to be untrue.



Offer and Engage with Reasons: facilitate the sharing and consideration of reasons, and the adjustment of beliefs in light of these.



Support Epistemic Respite: make time away from new and difficult viewpoints to allow for critical reflection, and to make engagement sustainable.

In each case we explain how the norm supports the principles of **epistemic value** and **liberal self-government** that we've identified as central to a healthy democracy. We'll then point to some regulatory and other routes that the norm illuminates, paying particular attention to the different social roles identified earlier.



Enable Fair and Equal Access

THE PROBLEM

The first norm provides guidance on *who* should be able to contribute to the public sphere. This might seem unnecessary; surely in democratic societies everyone should be able to make their voice heard and to contribute to political deliberation? We think so too. But in reality different people face different hurdles to participation.

THE PROPOSED NORM

Our first norm states the need to **Enable Fair and Equal Access** to the public sphere. This means giving everyone equal legal rights of participation in public debate, including access to traditional and digital media as a reader and as a potential speaker/communicator, equal rights to stand for public office, and equal voting rights.

But equal legal rights to participate do not mean equal genuine capacity. People differ in how much time and money they can devote to political participation, in confidence, charisma and motivation, and how much credibility they are seen to have. In practice, allowing everyone to participate will often require special efforts to elevate and foreground the contributions of

those who are economically, socially or in other ways disadvantaged in public discussion.

The same special efforts don't need to be made for *views* which have been marginalised for good reasons. Racist science and flat earth theory, for example, are views which have been widely acknowledged (indeed were at one point dominant views) and should now be dismissed as provably false. Instead, **Fair and Equal Access** demands that we enable the contributions of *people or groups* whose views have been overlooked due to oppression, marginalisation and other reasons which are incidental to the quality of the contributions themselves.



SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

Fair and equal access to public discussion is essential for our two principles of healthy democracy. It allows the full range of politically relevant knowledge, expertise, and experience to be shared to inform political decision-making, in line with the **epistemic value principle**. It also allows the liberty of all participants to be respected, and thereby to give people collective control over their government, in line with the **liberal self-government principle**.



IN THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

On the face of it, the new public sphere does a good job of enabling **fair and equal access**. It's possible to sign petitions and participate in campaigns from the comfort of home, and watch parliamentary debates on our commutes. Who gets public attention is no longer solely determined by traditional media figures, and anyone with an internet connection has the chance to establish an online following.

However, the 5% of UK citizens who can't, or don't, access the internet are excluded from this ([ONS Internet Access Report 2020](#)), and still more are deterred from participation by abuse ([Amnesty International 2017](#)). Algorithms and AI that select for existing preferences and interests will repeat and reinforce the (implicit and explicit) biases of users, coders, and platform owners ([Noble 2018](#), [Nikolov et. al 2018](#)), whilst those able to fund bot farms or create [CGI influencers](#) can disproportionately shape narratives and discourse, and in harmful ways.



ROUTES FORWARD

Members of the public can support the **Fair and Equal Access** norm both by participating in the public sphere themselves, and supporting others in doing so. For instance by making efforts to be inclusive, avoiding pile-ons, silencing or bullying, and seeking out and ‘following’, ‘sharing’ or retweeting people with different lives, backgrounds, and perspectives. However, there is a limit to how much individuals can do on their own without a well-designed information environment.

Social media platforms manage much of the infrastructure of the public sphere and need to bear some of the responsibility for enabling fair and equal access. Features that reduce barriers to participation – e.g. by allowing users to add closed-captions and picture descriptions – are important accessibility improvements, but changes to basics like algorithms and codes of conduct will also be necessary to ensure that existing biases aren’t uncritically replicated. And changes like these will need to be made in transparent consultation with a diverse range of experts, users and potential users, to avoid them being counterproductive. For example, recent calls to reduce online abuse by banning anonymous accounts have been met with scepticism and concern. The majority of abuse is posted under users’ real names (Rost, Stahel & Frey 2016, Twitter UK 2021), and anonymity (or pseudonymity) can protect those who are most vulnerable to such harms.

Traditional media is lagging behind social media in terms of Fair and Equal Access. Fewer and less diverse voices are accommodated by news publishers and broadcasters than by social media platforms – despite BBC diversity initiatives and moves away from London. One option is for traditional media professionals to forge meaningful, stable connections with the communities at the heart of their stories, instead of relying on personal contacts, vox pops, and interviews with experts who observe communities from the outside.

Government action to secure **Fair and Equal Access** could include regulation to prevent intimidation or silencing of particular groups (going beyond the Draft Online Safety Bill – see also the Center for Countering Digital Hate); regulation to ensure media diversity (see proposals from the Media Reform Coalition); to regulate online political campaign funding and regulate digital electoral campaigning; to prevent political ‘shills’ or bot farms that artificially inflate some views; to improve connectivity through rollout of genuinely affordable broadband; plus wider use of public funds, for example through education and paid leave provision to free up citizens’ time to participate (e.g. Ackerman and Fishkin’s Deliberation Day proposal); and through support for publicly accountable public service broadcasting and its use of social media. All these measures and more (e.g. concerning fair and equal representation in Parliament) are necessary for **Fair and Equal Access**.



NORM IN PRACTICE

The People's Newsroom

One example of the **Enable Fair and Equal Access** norm in practice is [The People's Newsroom](#). The People's Newsroom was launched earlier this year, by [The Bureau for Investigative Journalism](#), to create and sustain community journalism projects. The goal is to facilitate marginalised people to tell their own stories, so they don't need to rely on an unrepresentative media industry or the whims of social platforms.

The initiative will work with community groups (starting with a pilot in Swansea) to set up local journalism projects, or 'newsrooms'. They share resources and offer mentoring and skills workshops, but the newsrooms are owned and run by the community. This enables them to focus on the issues which serve their interests and needs, without having to satisfy the usual public sphere gatekeepers.

The work of The People's Newsroom helps **Enable Fair and Equal Access** because it empowers those with limited resources to contribute to the public sphere in impactful ways. Telling someone's story for them gives them some access to the public sphere, but truly **fair and equal access** means everyone being able to speak for themselves.

This supports the **epistemic value principle**, by empowering marginalised groups to share knowledge and experience that would otherwise be overlooked. And because the power is in the hands of the communities themselves, it also supports the **liberal self government principle**.





Avoid Obvious Falsehoods

THE PROBLEM

The second norm concerns the nature of contributions to the public sphere – what can and should be said. The difficulty here – particularly for governments and platforms – is how to respond to the urgent issue of increasing dis- and misinformation (see the work of the [Pew Research Centre](#), and also [Rini 2021](#)) without prejudging or dictating the bounds of truth and falsity, or endorsing unwarranted censorship (the so-called ‘ministry of truth’ worry).

THE PROPOSED NORM

We suggest that participants in, and caretakers of, the public sphere aim to **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods**. A claim or idea is ‘obviously false’ when facts that falsify it are widely known. The kind of obvious falsehoods at stake include denial of firmly established empirical facts (‘the earth is flat’, ‘Covid is caused by 5G’, holocaust denial) and denial of fundamental moral principles (e.g. denial of humans’ equal moral status independently of race or gender; celebration of brute power through military supremacy).

Such obvious falsehoods might be shared by well-intentioned participants – people too disconnected from the broader public debate to realise that they are obviously false. But they are often spread to create doubt and confusion by polluting the epistemic environment: what Steve Bannon called ‘[flooding the zone with shit](#)’. Both kinds should be avoided by participants in the public sphere, and those who have a role in managing it.

There is room for interpretation here. Non-obvious falsehoods – those which aren’t yet disproven, or are not yet widely known to be disproven – aren’t covered by this norm, but specifying what counts as obvious or non-obvious is difficult. And the application of this norm needs to be context-sensitive: satire and other forms of humour can appear to make claims which are false (and indeed, often obviously so) but which aren’t really endorsed or intended to be believed, but which nevertheless [make valuable points](#).



“

Obvious falsehoods might be shared by well-intentioned participants - people too disconnected from the broader public debate to realise that they are obviously false. But they are often spread to create doubt and confusion.

”



SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

Avoiding Obvious Falsehoods helps ensure that democratic decision-making is well-informed, as required by the **epistemic value** principle. It also prevents the fragmentation of our shared empirical foundations, and is necessary if important democratic decisions (such as who to vote for) are to be made freely, which is important for the **liberal self-government** principle. As with cases of uninformed medical ‘consent’, a political decision made on the basis of false information is not really free.

IN THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

Social media, blogging and other online communications allow for democratised fact-checking and the public correction of obviously false claims. In this sense, the new public sphere is well suited to upholding the norm of **Avoiding Obvious Falsehoods**. But the sheer increase in content makes it more likely that falsehoods will proliferate. This has resulted in a revived circulation of obviously false ideas (e.g. flat earthism), as well new ones which have taken hold despite being quickly disproven (e.g. 5G causing Covid, pizzagate). At the same time, content algorithms are known to reward surprising and affecting claims over true ones, and of course old media also faces incentives to prioritise what is surprising or affecting independently of its truth.



ROUTES FORWARD

Politicians have an especially pressing responsibility to **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods**, because of their roles as representatives and lawmakers. Things they say are broadcast more widely than things said by the average person, and can directly feed through into law and policy. As made vivid by Trump's role in the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, politicians' contributions have the potential to create significantly more harm than the contributions of less influential social media users. Current UK structures designed to maintain political office-holders' standards of truthfulness (and other virtues), such as the [Seven Principles of Public Life](#), have had limited impact ([Bew 2015](#); [Oliver 2021](#)).

Social media platforms also bear significant responsibility here, as the forum in which many falsehoods now spread. Most are already experimenting with strategies for avoiding, or at least mitigating against, obvious falsehoods, including deleting or labelling posts making misleading claims. But allowing independent researchers and regulators access to evaluate these strategies is crucial, as is applying them to prominent figures (contra [Facebook's XCheck programme](#)), and consulting with a wide range of platform users. Successful strategies could then be enforced by policy initiatives, for example under a systemic 'duty of care' approach similar to that proposed in the UK Online Safety bill. (See the [revised bill](#) proposed by Carnegie)

Traditional media already has professional standards for **avoiding obvious falsehoods** – [IPSO](#), [IMPRESS](#), and [the BBC](#) all highlight the importance of accuracy in their guidelines. But these may need to be expanded or strengthened, both to ensure that journalists and broadcasters can resist the pressures of the digital age, and to reflect the variable reach of online media which means there's even less guarantee that corrections will reach as many people as initial inaccuracies do.

Individual **members of the public** can also play a role in supporting the norm of **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods**. There have been numerous digital literacy initiatives by government, platforms and civil society which encourage people to spot and not share mis- and disinformation, though [there's been little evaluation of their effectiveness](#). However, as contributions from this group sit in Rawls' outer circles of the public sphere, members of the public should not be given primary responsibility for upholding this norm, especially as their ability to do so is limited by their platform environment.





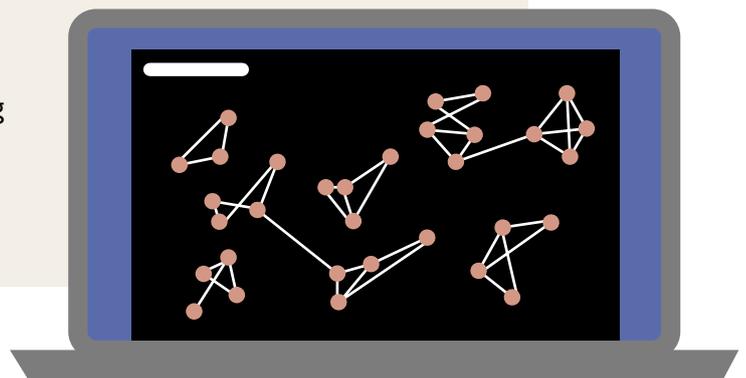
NORM IN PRACTICE

Logically.ai

An organisation whose work helps to illustrate the **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods** norm is [Logically.ai](#). Logically is a fact-checking service, established in 2017. They offer a browser extension and app which allow citizens to check claims made in news articles or in social media posts. The service uses AI technology to check statements against their database of existing fact checks, and to direct users to relevant contextual information. If the claim in question can't be found in this database then users can request that Logically's human fact check team launch a new investigation. When this investigation concludes, the team's final report is added to Logically's database in case of future queries. It's also sent directly to the user who requested it, along with an easy-read summary they can forward to those who shared the misinformation.

Logically's work strives to **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods**, rather than just labelling them as such after the fact. Since misinformation only needs to reach one logically.ai user - who could be close to the original source - before being fact checked, misinformation doesn't need to spread widely before being debunked. The correct information can be circulated relatively quickly within the communities in which it originates, and might even prevent falsehoods from spreading before they start.

In doing this, Logically prevents social and evidential fragmentation and so supports the **self-government principle**. They help citizens to access shared information and sources, and empower them to discuss misinformation amongst themselves, rather than relying on partisan news sources. This also supports the **epistemic value principle**, by improving the evidential environment that citizens operate within.





Offer and Engage with Reasons

THE PROBLEM

The third norm concerns *how* contributions are made in the new public sphere. Increased polarisation involves political groups reinforcing their own views by confining discussion to supporters (within an ‘echo chamber’ of like-minded people), rather than reasoning with others including opponents (Nguyen 2018, Aikin & Talisse 2020, Dommett & Verovsek 2021). This polarisation excludes outvoted views from being represented or having influence within a winning majority. And polarised echo chambers mean that whichever group is outvoted will thereby be forced to respect policies or laws that have not been explained to them, nor considered on their merits in wide public debate.

THE PROPOSED NORM

To avoid this, it is necessary for participants to explain the reasons for their proposals in accessible ways. Our third norm, **Offer and Engage with Reasons**, requires participants in the public sphere to explain why they take the positions they do. It also says that participants should consider the reasons offered by others and, when appropriate, adjust their own views in light of them. This ensures that democracy is based on shared deliberation, and not just the opinions of whoever is loudest.

Both parts of this norm are more difficult than they may initially sound. Offering reasons means first knowing what your reasons are, and then explaining them in terms that are accessible to others. Engaging

with the reasons others offer often means learning to understand different modes of expression and points of view, as well as simply learning new facts.

The above clarifications are important because versions of **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norms have been misused. Sometimes through explicitly (and falsely) claiming that certain groups are unable to engage in reasoning (see [Mills’s 2017 critique of Hume and Kant](#), and his discussion of [Rawls](#)). And at other times less directly, by [refusing to engage](#) with ‘unreasonable’ emotional contributions, which are in fact appropriate and even valuable elements of reasoned responses to injustice or disaster.



SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

The **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm means that the decisions of citizens, officials and politicians can be based on understanding of relevant viewpoints, as is needed for the **epistemic value principle**. This ensures democratic decisions are based on ‘living truth’ rather than ‘dead dogma’. **Offering and Engaging with Reasons** also makes it possible for all participants in a democracy to consider each other’s proposals on their merits, and base their decisions on each other’s public reasoning about each other’s proposals, which is an important component of the **liberal self-government** principle.

IN THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

The new public sphere has made familiarity with social and political issues a part of everyday life, but the way we **Offer and Engage with Reasons** (or fail to) is shaped by social media metrics and ad revenue. Traditional media was already under pressure to produce attention-grabbing headlines, but this has intensified and new pressures have arisen, as profitability is increasingly determined by the ‘shareability’ of clips and soundbites ([Al Baker 2020](#)). At the same time, individual citizens (as well as politicians and brands) are incentivised to package their thoughts and opinions in ways that make ‘the numbers’ (of likes and shares a post receives) ‘go up’, often at the expense of **Offering and Engaging with Reasons** ([Nguyen 2019 & 2020](#)).



“

Offer and Engage with Reasons, requires participants in the public sphere to explain why they take the positions they do. It also says that participants should consider the reasons offered by others and, when appropriate, adjust their own views in light of them.

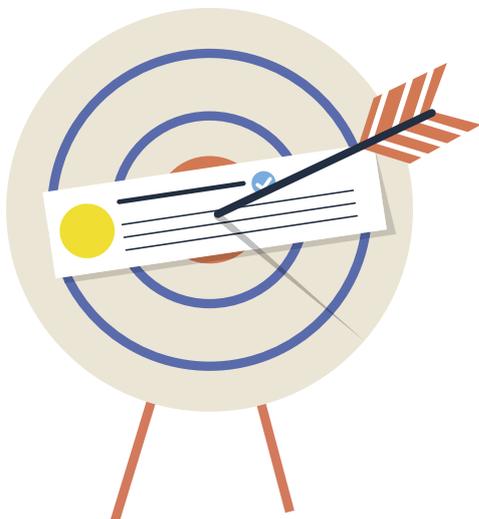
”



ROUTES FORWARD

There are some things **members of the public** can do to meet the **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm. They can listen to alternative views carefully, and do their best to articulate their own points without resorting to sloganeering. But their ability to do this is restricted by their information environment and communicative resources.

Politicians and governments can enhance our communicative resources with publicly funded initiatives aimed at critical thinking, fact checking and digital literacy. **Politicians** can also make sure their own messages offer reasons to all: this is compatible with micro-targeting aimed at making messages comprehensible to particular groups, but it is incompatible with offering inconsistent policies to different groups. The **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm is also inconsistent with 'pork barrel politics' that incentivises a narrow group of beneficiaries without offering reasons that others might endorse.



Social media platforms now host much public political debate, and so have significant responsibility for upholding the **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm. Some platforms were designed for conversation and make it relatively easy for participants and third parties (such as fact-checkers) to hold each other accountable to reasoning norms. For example, Twitter allows complex threads of public, back-and-forth discussion, and as they are searchable these can easily be referenced later. The comment sections of platforms never intended for high-stakes political discussion – such as Instagram and TikTok (formerly musical.ly) – are nevertheless now home to much political discussion, and could be improved to prevent this taking place hidden from public view.

The new public sphere presents unique obstacles for **traditional media professionals**, but it presents new opportunities too. While social media makes it easy for citizens to share their reasons with one another, it rarely provides them with the context and other tools they need to properly understand and engage with them. **Traditional media professionals** can offer critical interpretative work that makes political positions intelligible to a wide range of people. Both impartial and partisan journalism are compatible with **Offer and Engage with Reasons**, so long as the reasons in questions can be taken up by all members of the public.



NORM IN PRACTICE

Scottish Citizens' Land Management Jury

The Scottish Parliament's Citizens' Jury on Land Management and the Natural Environment shows one way the **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm can be embodied. It invited 21 diverse and randomly selected Scottish citizens to hear expert testimony on land management, debate the evidence, and make informed recommendations to parliament.

An introduction to critical thinking skills was a key element of the Citizens' Jury. An academic facilitator explained to the participants what evidence is, what counts as good evidence, and how competing evidence is weighted. Jurors referred back to this repeatedly in their deliberation over the following days, even going so far as to critique the range of evidence that the organisers had arranged for them to discuss.

This public engagement method illustrates the **Offer and Engage with Reasons** norm because it gives participants the skills and the opportunity to discuss why they hold the beliefs that they do, in a way not possible in many areas of the new public sphere. They were able to exchange arguments and reach a considered decision which was then fed directly back to policy makers.

Citizens' Juries like these support the **epistemic value principle**, as they increase understanding of relevant viewpoints. The direct engagement they allow - which supplements, rather than bypasses traditional representation - supports the **liberal self-government** principle too.





Support Epistemic Respite

THE PROBLEM

The final norm concerns *when* engagement with the public sphere should take place. Participating in the public sphere means being exposed to ‘epistemic friction’: a jarring phenomenon that occurs when encountering ideas different from one’s own ([Medina 2013](#)). Finding the right balance is important, as friction can foster new knowledge and understanding. But it’s tricky: too much exposure (think of social media pile-ons) or too little (as in filter bubbles and echo chambers) can lead people to double down on beliefs that aren’t supported by the evidence, or to withdraw from public discussion.

THE PROPOSED NORM

The norm we propose is to **Support Epistemic Respite**. Epistemic respite means time away from new and unfamiliar viewpoints – time to reflect, and to decide whether and how they should influence our existing views. It’s important that epistemic respite is temporary, and flexible. The goal is to take time to process new information so that we’re better able to re-engage again afterwards. And how much time, and how often it’s needed, will vary between different people and at different times.

Those who are exposed to unusually high levels of epistemic friction in the public sphere – for example those who experience racist abuse – will need more time and space away from it. People whose experiences and views are more ‘mainstream’, and who therefore encounter much lower levels of epistemic friction, would benefit from increased exposure to friction, as well as from spending their respite time reflecting critically on what this friction can teach them.





SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY

Support Epistemic Respite helps with the **epistemic value principle** because it creates space to reflect on new and difficult ideas, and to decide – alone or with others who share similar views – whether and how they should affect our position. It is also important to the **self-government principle**, as it can prevent citizens from getting overwhelmed by friction and disengaging with the public sphere, and increases the chances that their views will be democratically represented and deliberated on.

IN NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

The new public sphere doesn't leave much time for **Epistemic Respite**. Citizens who might once have read a newspaper over breakfast then watched the 6 o'clock news, with plenty of respite in between, may now be both observers of, and participants in, a 24-7 news and analysis cycle. Common responses include taking 'digital/media detoxes', which mean disengaging from the public sphere for weeks at a time, or even to leave particular platforms altogether. Such strategies, whilst understandable, amount to avoiding, rather than managing, epistemic friction, and risk leaving users uninformed and their views unrepresented. And minorities are disproportionately vulnerable to this ([Amnesty International 2018](#), [Sobande 2020](#)).

ROUTES FORWARD

Significant responsibility for **Supporting Epistemic Respite** lies with **social media platforms**, whose design choices are hugely influential. They should avoid dark design patterns aimed at prolonged and intensive engagement, and instead offer users the tools to take temporary respite, e.g. screen time reminders, prompts to read an article before sharing, and the option to 'mute' particular words and phrases.

However, as recent revelations have shown, platforms are founded on business models that are served by intensifying interaction, and particularly by polarising, high-friction content. If so, **government** regulation – such as a duty of care ([Perrin & Woods 2019](#)) – will be essential, perhaps alongside other measures such as taxation of platforms and the public funding of digital literacy initiatives.

Members of the public also have a crucial role to play in managing the epistemic friction that their own contributions constitute. As individuals we have – and need to learn to identify and work with – different capacities for engaging with friction at different times. Digital literacy could be extended to include understanding of epistemic friction and how to manage it – and should focus on respecting and supporting other people's need for time away from epistemic friction as well as one's own. However this will only be successful in tandem with efforts from the government and platforms.



NORM IN PRACTICE

#ActuallyAutistic

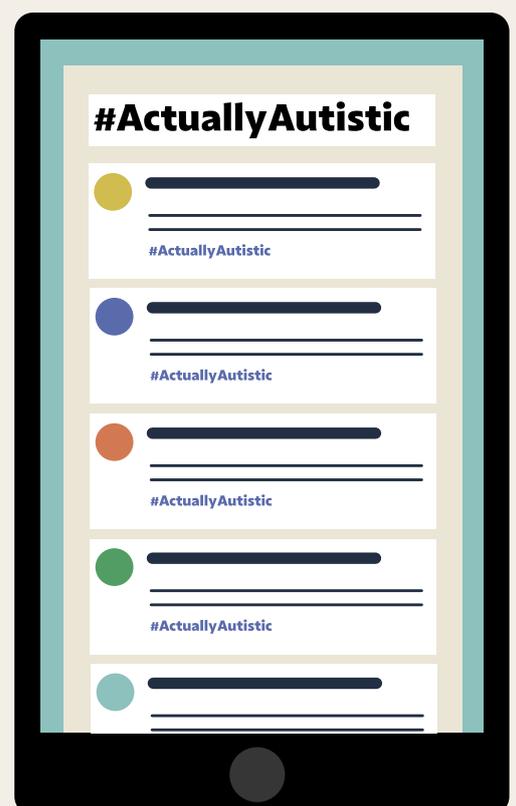
A good illustration of the **Support Epistemic Respite** norm in action is the [#ActuallyAutistic](#) hashtag. The hashtag was created by autistic users of the social media platform Tumblr in the early 2010s, as a way for them to easily find each other and to communicate about their first-person experiences of autism.

Autistic users can add the hashtag to their own posts to make them easier for other autistic people to find, and can browse the hashtag to see posts by other autistic users. Anyone is able to read these posts, but non-autistic people are broadly discouraged from posting using the hashtag.

Other hashtags (such as #Autism) were dominated by non-autistic parents, carers, and researchers. As their perspectives on autism are often very different to those of autistic people, #ActuallyAutistic was created as a 'space' where autistic people can talk and reflect without the friction of non-autistic viewpoints. Users of #ActuallyAutistic still engage with non-autistic people, both on and offline, and (as with other counterpublic spaces), discussions that happen on the hashtag often support these interactions.

Hashtags like these **Support Epistemic Respite** because they give people temporary relief from the friction of viewpoints they disagree with. At the same time, they create space for like-minded individuals to reflect, and refine their views, without immediately needing to explain or justify them to people with very different life experiences.

The #ActuallyAutistic hashtag supports the **epistemic value principle**, because taking time away from external input creates space to reflect on and properly engage with new and difficult ideas, and allows people to develop their own views more clearly. It also supports the **self-government principle**, because managing friction – rather than avoiding or becoming overwhelmed by it – allows for wider, more inclusive and sustainable participation in the public sphere.



What's Next?

In this report we have offered four philosophical norms that could act as a solid theoretical foundation for regulating the new public sphere. These norms are designed to support democracy in the current digital age, and beyond. We also pointed to some possible ways that each norm could be implemented, and some illustrations of them in existing practice.

We know that, realistically, none of these norms will be perfectly embodied – even with appropriate regulation. This makes it even more important that all four are given sufficient attention. For example, while it may not be possible to completely **Avoid Obvious Falsehoods** in the public sphere, it's possible to aim for this whilst also making efforts to **Offer and Engage with Reasons**. Doing so will mean falsehoods that slip through will at least be critically evaluated. By regulating with all four norms in mind, we have the best chance of making the public sphere more democratic.

Similarly, it's crucial that action is taken by all four of the roles we've identified: government, social media platforms, traditional media, and members of the public. No one role can solve all the problems of the new public sphere by themselves, so they need to work in unison. And they all need to keep each other accountable. All four roles are crucial to building a democratic public sphere.

With all this said, some complicated questions remain. Sometimes the four norms may conflict, or at least appear to. For example **enabling epistemic respite** may mean fewer opportunities to **offer and engage with reasons** – although we think it allows for more sustainable, and higher quality, reasoned engagement overall. And while we've emphasised that it's particularly important to hold those with political power to these norms, we've said less about possible exceptions, or cases where these norms might be of limited use. For example, we don't think people who have been politically disenfranchised, or otherwise excluded from debate, should be expected to **offer reasons** for their inclusion, **or engage with reasons** about their exclusion. The different responsibilities of those harmed or benefited by norm violations is a complex philosophical issue, intersecting with the differential responsibilities of those in different roles.

The next stage in our research will be to tackle some of these more complicated problems and expand our list of norms.

Further Reading

Some of these texts are behind paywalls. If there's anything you can't access, you can contact Research Associate [Dr Natalie Ashton](#) or Principal Investigator [Prof. Rowan Cruft](#) for further information.

DEMOCRACY, NORMS AND ROLES

- [Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework](#) - book by David Estlund
- [Social Norms](#) - encyclopedia entry by Cristina Bicchieri et al., Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- [Twitter is right to have special rules for Donald Trump](#) - article by Fabienne Peter, The Conversation

FAIR AND EQUAL ACCESS

- [190,000 UK properties can't access broadband speeds to meet modern needs](#) - article by Mark Sweney, The Guardian
- [The Digital Lives of Black Women](#) - book by Francesca Sobande, Palgrave
- [Black and Asian Women MPs abused more online](#) - report by Amnesty UK
- [What Is The People's Newsroom](#) - explainer by Shirish Kulkarni, TBIJ

OBVIOUS FALSEHOODS

- [The Spread of True and False News Online](#) - article by Soroush Vosoughi et al., Science
- [Domestic Disinformation Is a Greater Menace Than Foreign Disinformation](#) - article by Richard Stengel, Time
- [WhatsApp has made it harder to forward texts. But why not remove misinformation entirely?](#) - article by Sarah Manavis, New Statesman
- [Weaponized Skepticism: An Analysis of Social Media Deception as Applied Political Epistemology](#) - chapter by Regina Rini, OUP

REASONS

- [Finland's secret weapon in the fight against fake news: its kindergarten children](#) - article by Harriet Barber, The Telegraph
- [Gamification and Value Capture](#) - chapter by C Thi Nguyen, OUP
- [The Politics of Impatience Will Doom Us All](#) - article by Al Baker, Logically
- [Evaluation of the Scottish Parliament's Citizens' Jury on Land Management and the Natural Environment](#) - report by Stephen Elstub, Jayne Carrick and Zohreh Khoban

EPISTEMIC RESPITE

- [Women abused on Twitter every 30 seconds](#) - report by Amnesty UK
- [Active Ignorance, Epistemic Others, and Epistemic Friction](#) - chapter by José Medina, OUP
- [Why Twitter is \(Epistemically\) Better than Facebook](#) - article by Natalie Alana Ashton, Logically

CONTACT US

Our final report is scheduled for next year. In the meantime we welcome your input. Feedback from different sectors will enrich our academic work. To offer feedback, or otherwise discuss the report further, you can contact Research Associate [Dr Natalie Ashton](#) or Principal Investigator [Prof. Rowan Cruft](#).