Deliberative Virtue and Social Media: Nurturing deliberation through a novel conceptualisation of social media as state-sponsored independent media

Abstract:

We are in a period of increasing domestic and international turmoil marked by declining democratic practice globally. In democracy's place, authoritarianism has been increasing around the world. Digital media technologies, particularly social media, have proven robust vectors for democratic erosion. This phenomenon is actively discussed within the literature and observed again in the 2023 Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House. However, the same social media technologies that have proved problematic may also be potent in promoting deliberative democratic practice. Further, it is asserted in the present work that social media technologies, when applied thoughtfully, may prove a literal democratising force to promote deliberative practices within a society. In pursuit of this aim, the present work theorises how a state may strategically leverage digital media technologies, particularly social media, to cultivate a deliberative virtue within its citizenry through a series of conceptual turns.

In the first turn, this work establishes how 'deliberative virtue' is constructed within virtual space and its value for democratic practice. Drawing upon other notions of civic virtue, such as those posited by Will Kymlicka, the author establishes the nature of 'deliberative virtue' as critical for exercising effective citizenship within the contemporary digital environment. Deliberative virtue, it is posited, is characterised by a reasoned and informed debate, mutual respect, and inclusive discourse. Further, in this section, the author asserts that norming deliberative virtue, subsequently a culture of deliberation, within a participatory model is a precondition for meaningful deliberative reforms within existing democratic institutions within Australia.

The second turn transitions to a discourse on how a culture of deliberation can be normed through a strategic application of social media technologies by states through considering previous technologies. In this turn, the foundation for pairing theoretical perspective with a discussion on how to practically cultivate deliberative virtue by drawing upon Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere in his Structural Transformation and theorising the role social media can play n constructing deliberative discourse, even within the context of mass participation, the second turn provides the foundation for pairing the theoretical perspective with a discussion on cultivating deliberative virtue. A potential path forward for this problem is established by analogy with previous versions of state support for other media platforms. This comparison generates valuable insight into how digital media technologies can be leveraged to enhance deliberative virtue within citizens.

The final turn highlights that this is the first step of the work to be completed and proposes a future research agenda. This proposed research will aim to build upon and translate the theoretical work discussed here into practical, actionable reform within contemporary democratic institutions. It is recognised that futureproofing and safeguarding democracy is a complex process that necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration if meaningful progress is to be made. The complex project of strengthening democracy necessitates a broad research agenda considering the ethical, economic, technical and political challenges of blending state power with cultivating a deliberative culture.

The work presented here goes beyond mere theoretical discourse; it lays the foundation and calls for future endeavours by those dedicated to preserving the democratic tradition for future generations, especially in the face of ascendant and predatory authoritarianism that exploits the vulnerabilities of a disengaged citizenry to erode democratic values persistently.

Keywords: deliberative virtue, social media, civic virtue, deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, public sphere

Introduction

Digital media have permeated most, if not all, aspects of everyday life. Life in the public sphere is no exception. Discourse on social media platforms highlights the role of increased citizen engagement on political issues and shapes public opinion on those issues. A robust body of literature attributes several democratic maladies to the impacts of social media on the political process (Bennett, 2012; Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Loader et al., 2014; Sharoni, 2012; Skoric & Zhu, 2016; Skoric et al., 2016; Tang & Lee, 2013; Yamamoto et al., 2015). However, Margetts (2018) previously observed that these attributions lack empirical evidence to affirm the link between the criticisms levied on social media and their negative impact on democratic institutions. Margetts (2018) highlights some of the maladies often discussed when considering social media – echo chambers, fake news, political advertising, computation propaganda, and proliferating hate speech. Each phenomenon separately represents a legitimate challenge for citizens to engage in computer-mediated democracy effectively. These problems are further magnified when active efforts by foreign nations to manipulate discourse are included.

More recent work by Weismueller et al. (2023) highlights emergent literature seeking to improve our understanding of the relationship between social media and the exercise of democracy. In their work, Weismueller et al. observed that the rates of fake news and misinformation coming from elites (primarily politicians) had an adverse effect on participant emotions, which contributed to political polarisation – a concern often cited within the charges against social media Margetts (2019) outlined. These findings align with the broader concerns associated with post-truth politics in the digital age, notwithstanding the ample consideration needed to address the legitimate threat that a mass proliferation of artificial intelligence technologies represents to robust discourse in this space.

A primary concern is promoting active citizen engagement with the political process rather than the contemporary and primarily passive form of civic engagement that citizens are accustomed to in democratic societies. Magnifying these concerns are questions of civic competencies necessary for engaging in the political process in the current and future digital environment (Goldstein, 2021). In this way, the critical skills needed to engage in civic life effectively return us to a discussion on the need to cultivate civic virtue within democratic societies.

Bearing these concerns in mind, it becomes clear that a closer examination of how we can build resilient models for effective participation and healthy discourse on complex issues to enhance democratic institutions is needed. Thus, the central question I pose and attempt to answer is “How might a society cultivate deliberative virtue among its citizens within a contemporary digital context?” In responding to this question, the central argument I put forth is that cultivating a deliberative virtue, which I equate with civic virtue, within citizens through participatory systems is a critical precondition for substantial diffusion of deliberative practices within a liberal, democratic society. Contemporary digital media – particularly, social media – can be powerful tools to achieve these outcomes.

In answering the central question, I first establish my understanding of the civic virtue that appears critical to healthy functioning within a democracy. With this established, I focus on our contemporary digital context by presenting and discussing relevant literature on the relationship between social media and democracy. After this context is established, I discuss the structural limitations of the dominant forms of social media, specifically the problems encountered with a commercial focus at the centre. This perspective guides an understanding of the contemporary use of social media's impact as a medium for cultivating civic virtue. In highlighting these concerns, exploring the alternatives to commercial forms of social media becomes relevant – in effect, current efforts to

promote deliberative virtues. With these disparate threads established, I then propose an answer to my central question by conceptualising a state-funded, independent social media platform. Finally, I consider the implications of this model as an area for potential further research.

Conceptualising civic virtue and the habituation of deliberation

The acquisition of civic virtue is imperative for healthy democracies. Actively engaged citizenries that participate in routine debates on public issues reach deeper into the core of the democratic tradition regardless of the democratic model. However, it has been observed that the trend within established democracies is away from active engagement amongst citizens, albeit for many reasons, toward a more passive form of exercising citizenship (Kymlicka, 2002). This form of engagement is marred by a broader sentiment of declining political trust, faith in democratic institutions and the need for greater civic competency (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Goldstein, 2021). These trends reflect a lack of civic virtue within established democracies and a need to cultivate it.

Consequently, there has been significant work on the space of what comprises civic virtue, as well as what comprises deliberative virtue – of particular importance for the present work is Vallor's (2016) *Technology and the Virtues*, Snow and Vaccarezza's (2021) edited collection *Virtues, Democracy and Online Media*, and Robson and Tsou's (2022) *Technology Ethics*. While these works do not solely engage in civic virtue, they provide a robust understanding of contemporary discourse over virtuous engagement in the digitised public sphere.

William Galston (1991) establishes four broad types of civic virtues necessary for responsible citizenship: general, social, economic, and political. His notion of the political virtue of engaging in public debates on policies is relevant here. Galston's assessment of civic virtues diverges from civic republican accounts of similar virtues, as asserted by Dzur (1998); however, the essence of this virtue is something along the lines of the virtue of public reasonableness that Kymlicka (2002) alludes to in his discussion of civic virtues. This virtue is associated with critical argumentation through public reasoning –advancing the civic discourse without relying on appeals to religion or tradition, which is crucial in pluralistic societies – and reflects a need for informed debate, mutual respect, and inclusive discourse. Ferris (2019) advances this notion while promoting a divergence from the need for a unified set of virtues to be present to enable deliberative consensus to be formed, referencing Habermas' model for communicative action. Ferris then establishes a perspective that distributed systems may create space for cultivating a deliberative, civic virtue.

Similarly, Kymlicka (2002) described certain traits such as civility, honesty, and open-mindedness as virtues citizens engaged in deliberation should exercise. Many contemporary social media platforms, particularly those that dominate the Australian sphere, are structurally incompatible with fostering the deliberation that is necessary to engage on public issues outside of the contemporary "mini-public" models that have been championed in recent years within deliberative democracy scholarship (Harris, 2019). I will elaborate more on this point in the next section, where I consider the relationship between social media and democracy.

Similarly, a certain interpretation of civic obligation resides as the prevailing paradigm of citizen engagement – that is, citizens primarily acquiesce to laws and engage on issues at elections (Kymlicka, 2002). In Australia, some attempts have been made to promote deliberative and participatory models of democracy. Still, these have been small-scale and ephemeral (Felicetti et al., 2016). However, citizens are generally rusty in exercising deliberative modes of civic engagement – or otherwise uninterested in the political process. As Aristotle asserted in his Nicomachean Ethics,

virtue is acquired through the continual practice of the virtue in question – that is, if the virtues necessary for developing deliberative habit remain unpractised, then deliberation as a civic virtue will not grow (Aristotle, 2006). By extension, the same reasoning can be applied to attaining a civic virtue necessary for deliberation.

Further, in their work, Jennstål et al. (2021) concluded that deliberative virtues and values were critical components of ensuring deliberative processes functioned. At an individual level, holding deliberative values may become more critical in current social media spaces. In deliberative modes, mini-publics have served as powerful vehicles for promoting good civic engagement and cultivating deliberative habit at a manageable scale.

However, the deliberation process takes time and is necessarily exclusive to most people for the sake of deeper debate. Conversely, participative models of democracy aim to increase citizen engagement *en masse* – in a way, resisting political apathy that is toxic to the health of democracies. Cristina Lafont's *Democracy Without Shortcuts* (2019) provides meaningful insight into how a blended model of participatory deliberation may be constructed to promote deliberative virtue *en masse*.

Throughout her work, Lafont (2019) approaches the notion of increasing democratic practice with the idea of rule by the people as her focus. She proceeds to systematically challenge the forms of democracy advocated for by deliberative democrats, which she terms deep pluralists, epistocrats, and lottocrats before outlining her participatory conception of deliberative democracy. Central to her position is the need for mutual justification as a part of the democratic ideal of self-government, Lafont (2019) distils two conditions for citizens to see themselves as equal members engage in self-government:

> 1.Political decisions on coercive laws and policies must be sensitive and responsive to considered public opinion, so that significant changes in the latter must be able to bring about changes in the former.
>
> 2.All citizens must have equal, effective opportunities to participate in the process of shaping public opinion, i.e. in the process of transforming uninformed, raw opinions of different citizens and groups into genuinely considered public opinion. (p. 170)

Lafont later builds upon these ideas when establishing the basis for her institutional approach to mutual justification:

> In my view, the only way out of these difficulties is by adopting an institutional approach to public justification. One of the virtues of adopting this approach is that it does not require that every single person in fact agrees on the reasonableness of each coercive law to which they are subject… But it does require that institutions be in place, which enable any citizen to contest any laws and policies they find unreasonable by requesting that proper reasons be offered in their support (or else the policies be changed), even if those citizens happen to find themselves in the minority. In other words, it is not enough that citizens be able to rely on a moral duty of civility. What they need in addition is effective rights to political and legal contestation that empower them to trigger a process of public justification of the reasonableness of any policies they find unacceptable. (p. 188)

I will forego the legal contestation elements of her conceptualisation, which she convincingly outlines in the last chapters of *Democracy without Shortcuts*. Instead, I will draw attention to the space for political contestation. In considering Lafont's position, it becomes crucial that an institution is present to enable meaningful political contestation and construction of mutual justification through the public sphere. Further, such an institution if, from inception, established with this perspective in mind may prove a vital tool in cultivating deliberative virtue through practicing the virtue among citizens in democracies. Relatedly, the value of cultivating deliberative habit, it is evident that

promoting virtue among individuals in a society helps enhance faith in democratic institutions, a sentiment that has been observed within UK Parliament (Engagement, 2018). With this perspective in mind, it is now relevant to turn toward the relationship between social media and the exercise of democracy.

Social media and its relationship with democracy

It has been observed that democratic freedoms have declined for the past 17 years, which roughly coincides with the ascent of social media – technologies that promise freedom of expression for those who engage with them and, subsequently, a more democratic existence. However, social media are often attributed as a major cause of democratic erosion. Conversely, plenty of evidence for the positive use of social media to enhance democracy and democratic movements exists to contradict this assessment of social media. In short, like almost any other communication technology before them, it is the application of social media technologies that is of critical importance to safeguard and enhance democratic practice in nations.

The rise and use of social media technologies have led to profound changes within democratic processes worldwide. Related but different changes have been observed in autocratic states as well. The easy examples to highlight the processes that I refer to are, of course, the Arab Spring movements, Russian usage of bots and trolls, and Chinese censorship (Badawy et al., 2018; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Fedor & Fredheim, 2017; Ferrara, 2017; King et al., 2013; Kuang, 2018; Tudoroiu, 2014; Wang et al., 2018). Each instance has been treated significantly in the literature. However, briefly recalling them helps frame the implications of the technologies. As asserted by Tucker et al. (2017, p. 48), "…social media constitute a space in which political interests battle for influence, and not all these interests are liberal or democratic". Positioning an understanding of social media as non-monolithic technologies that are, in some ways, neutral in nature enables consideration of their more optimistic uses. However, it becomes critical to caution against assuming that social media are wholly neutral entities. Whilst the platforms they provide may be generally neutral in democratic societies concerning free discourse, the platforms are governed by commercial entities and interests. This undermines the neutral nature of the platforms and potentially impedes the efficacy of relying on current forms of social media to promote democratic practices.

An often-cited concern around social media is the proliferation of bots on networks (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Shao et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). These bots have been observed to infiltrate and subvert social networks among users, with some attribution to political consequences – such as using bots to augment digital astroturfing, that is, to give the illusion of a widespread public consensus on an issue or topic (Keller et al., 2020). The use of bots has been observed to promote human engagement with social media, with some consequences in the context of proliferating "fake news" as a side effect of bot-aided bandwagoning (Molina et al., 2023). The bandwagon effect as a force promoting engagement with social media content is deeply problematic as it has implications for reinforcing democratic practice within a society. Further, restricting bots, which promote engagement, erodes user engagement with the platforms. It is on this point that the potentially non-democratic nature of social media manifests again – sustained user engagement is vital to the success of contemporary social media, given that they are commercial entities trading in the attention economy. Thus, it is worth highlighting the need to consider alternatives to the current social media model.

Returning to Tucker et al. (2017), they supposed that autocracies learn how to approach social media from democratic nations. There is space, it seems, if a state is motivated to reinforce its democratic institutions to learn from autocratic regimes. In establishing a deeper understanding of how

autocracies seek to influence foreign democracies, those democratic societies can develop resilience without proposing censorship of discourse as is common in autocratic regimes. Chiefly, control over access to platforms and de-commercialising social media through public ownership seem to be powerful steps in promoting social media as a tool to enhance democratic institutions in a society. This line of reasoning guides how I conceptualise a novel social media-centred solution to strengthening the resilience of the public sphere later.

To distil the understanding that I have sought to establish to its essential components: first, it is crucially important to cultivate deliberative virtue, which I have equated with the civic virtue of public reasonableness, in citizens within democratic societies. Second, this virtue may be cultivated in distributed systems of deliberation – chiefly through social media. In this framing, a hybridised system of participatory deliberation akin to Lafont's (2019) conceptualisation becomes a preferable ideal. However, as noted, social media in their contemporary form present myriad challenges to the meaningful cultivation of deliberative virtue for democratic citizens. It now becomes relevant to consider contemporary efforts at distributed deliberation and greater civic participation to understand what has been done to cultivate deliberative virtue.

Contemporary exemplars that cultivate deliberative virtue

- Wikipedia;
- vTaiwan;
- CitizenLab.
- Decide Madrid & Consul Democracy;

Conceptualising a state-funded, independent social media platform

- Dahl's minipopulus;
- McLuhan's medium is the message and platform design;
- A cursory look at the ABC Act as a legal locus;
- Benefits of a state-funded model;
    - Digital citizenship for users,
    - Diminished bot and outside influence,
    - De-commercialised platform, mitigating commercial influence,
- Mitigating polarisation through a local focus to cultivate deliberative habit;
- Incentivisation through inclusion within local council governance (akin to the above-described exemplars).

Concluding remarks on future research

- Chief point – in privileging the local, cultivating deliberative virtue through localised platforms may prove a functional first step that could be adapted to broader contexts in the future; further, it provides a meaningful mechanism for states to guarantee a truly public sphere in the context of fractured spheres (the difference between the town square as opposed to the pub).
- Reiterate main analytical takeaways;
- Consider future areas for research.

Aristotle. (2006). *Nicomachean ethics*. ReadHowYouWant.com.

Badawy, A., Ferrara, E., & Lerman, K. (2018). Analyzing the digital traces of political manipulation: The 2016 Russian interference Twitter campaign. 2018 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM),

Bennett, W. L. (2012). The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 644*(1), 20-39.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European journal of communication, 33*(2), 122-139.

Bessi, A., & Ferrara, E. (2016). Social bots distort the 2016 US Presidential election online discussion. *First Monday, 21*(11-7).

Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society, 18*(5), 524-538.

Dzur, A. W. (1998). Function, Convention, and Policy: William Galston and the Redefinition of Liberal Purposes. *Public Affairs Quarterly, 12*(1), 101-117. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40436008

Engagement, S. C. o. C. a. C. (2018). *The ties that bind: Citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st century*. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldcitizen/118/11809.htm

Fedor, J., & Fredheim, R. (2017). "We need more clips about Putin, and lots of them:" Russia's state-commissioned online visual culture. *Nationalities Papers, 45*(2), 161-181.

Felicetti, A., Niemeyer, S., & Curato, N. (2016). Improving deliberative participation: Connecting mini-publics to deliberative systems. *European Political Science Review, 8*(3), 427-448.

Ferrara, E. (2017). Disinformation and social bot operations in the run up to the 2017 French presidential election. *arXiv Preprint*. https://arxiv.org/pdf/1707.00086&gt

Ferris, D. H. (2019). Civic Virtue in the Deliberative System. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy, 15*(1).

Galston, W. A. (1991). *Liberal purposes: Goods, virtues, and diversity in the liberal state*. Cambridge University Press.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 17*(3), 319-336.

Goldstein, R. B. (2021). Reconceiving Civic Competence for the Digital Age. In *Virtues, Democracy, and Online Media* (pp. 149-169). Routledge.

Harris, C. (2019). Mini-publics: Design choices and legitimacy. *Handbook of democratic innovation and governance*, 45-59.

Jennstål, J., Uba, K., & Öberg, P. (2021). Deliberative civic culture: Assessing the prevalence of deliberative conversational norms. *Political Studies, 69*(2), 366-389.

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

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review, 107*(2), 326-343. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055413000014

Kuang, X. (2018). Central state vs. local levels of government: Understanding news media censorship in China. *Chinese Political Science Review, 3*(2), 154-171.

Kymlicka, W. (2002). Citizenship Theory. In *Contemporary political philosophy: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lafont, C. (2019). *Democracy without shortcuts: A participatory conception of deliberative democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. A. (2014). The networked young citizen: Social media, political participation and civic engagement. *Information, Communication & Society, 17*(2), 143-150.

Margetts, H. (2018). Rethinking democracy with social media. *Political Quarterly, 90*(S1).

Molina, M. D., Wang, J., Sundar, S. S., Le, T., & DiRusso, C. (2023). Reading, commenting and sharing of fake news: How online bandwagons and bots dictate user engagement. *Communication Research, 50*(6), 667-694.

Robson, G. J., & Tsou, J. Y. (2022). *Technology Ethics : A Philosophical Introduction and Readings*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bond/detail.action?docID=7169137

Shao, C., Ciampaglia, G. L., Varol, O., Yang, K.-C., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2018). The spread of low-credibility content by social bots. *Nature Communications, 9*(1), 1-9.

Sharoni, S. (2012). E-citizenship: Trust in government, political efficacy, and political participation in the Internet era. *Electronic Media & Politics, 1*(8), 119-135.

Skoric, M. M., & Zhu, Q. (2016). Social media and offline political participation: Uncovering the paths from digital to physical. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 28*(3), 415-427.

Skoric, M. M., Zhu, Q., & Pang, N. (2016). Social media, political expression, and participation in Confucian Asia. *Chinese Journal of Communication, 9*(4), 331-347.

Snow, N. E., & Vaccarezza, M. S. (2021). *Virtues, Democracy, and Online Media: Ethical and Epistemic Issues*. Routledge.

Tang, G., & Lee, F. L. (2013). Facebook use and political participation: The impact of exposure to shared political information, connections with public political actors, and network structural heterogeneity. *Social Science Computer Review, 31*(6), 763-773.

Tucker, J. A., Theocharis, Y., Roberts, M. E., & Barberá, P. (2017). From liberation to turmoil: Social media and democracy. *J. Democracy, 28*, 46.

Tudoroiu, T. (2014). Social media and revolutionary waves: The case of the Arab Spring. *New Political Science, 36*(3), 346-365.

Vallor, S. (2016). *Technology and the virtues: A philosophical guide to a future worth wanting*. Oxford University Press.

Wang, P., Angarita, R., & Renna, I. (2018). Is this the era of misinformation yet: Combining social bots and fake news to deceive the masses. Companion Proceedings of the The Web Conference 2018,

Weismueller, J., Gruner, R. L., Harrigan, P., Coussement, K., & Wang, S. (2023). Information sharing and political polarisation on social media: The role of falsehood and partisanship. *Information Systems Journal*.

Yamamoto, M., Kushin, M. J., & Dalisay, F. (2015). Social media and mobiles as political mobilization forces for young adults: Examining the moderating role of online political expression in political participation. *New Media & Society, 17*(6), 880-898.