Which Democratic Way to Go?
Using Democracy Theories in Social Media Design

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ABSTRACT

There are concerns amongst researchers and the general public that social media platforms threaten democratic values. Social media corporations and their engineers have responded to these concerns with various design solutions. Though the objective of designing social media democratically sounds straightforward, the concrete reality is not. The authors discuss what a democratic design for social media platforms could look like by exploring two classical conceptions of democracy, one in the liberal tradition and the other in the deliberative tradition. In particular, they discuss three concerns: 1) mis- and disinformation; 2) hate speech; and 3) the relations between filter bubbles, echo chambers, and public debate. By describing the underlying ideals of the two traditions and translating these into design guidelines, the authors make explicit how varied and contrary the implications of different conceptions of democracy can be for addressing public concerns and designing for democratic social media. With these things in mind, this article responds to a call, which is to raise awareness among social media corporations, engineers, and policymakers about varying democratic ideals and the implications that these may have for social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizens use social media platforms to be informed, share their viewpoints, and engage with others. Simultaneously, these platforms have come under growing scrutiny and pressure from the public to better regulate the use of social media through design. Three concerns, in particular, are hate speech and bullying on social media, false and misleading information, and the question of whether users should be encouraged to debate with those who hold opposing viewpoints (see, for example, Guiora & Park, 2017, on hate speech; Farkas & Schou, 2019, on post-truth and fake news; and Pariser, 2011, on filter bubbles). In response to these concerns, social media companies have implemented various new design features. For example, users are discouraged from bullying with questions such as 'Are you sure you want to post this?';Meta works with impartial fact checkers who review and rate content

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on Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp;[1] users are referred to alternative sources; and Twitter has Community Notes[2] – a community-based approach to addressing misleading information. These design solutions, however, are not uncontroversial. When social media platforms blocked the account of former President Donald Trump in response to the Capitol raid on January 6, 2021, newspaper headlines expressed concern that silencing a President in such a way might be undemocratic.[3] This episode illustrates how complex the notion of democracy is, conveying, for example, both the values of safety and free speech and the range of questions to be answered when designing social media for democracy. Should we design for free speech, or is censoring speech – perhaps even users – at times justified and democratic? Should platforms ensure that all users have an equal voice online through design mechanisms? What functionality should we design recommendation algorithms for? In short, what design choices should engineers make if they are to build a (more) democratic social media?

The public concerns about social media platforms and related design choices are discussed at length in the academic literature.[4] However, to our knowledge, there is little literature that discusses social media design principles as a whole, viewed in light of different theories of democracy. Some notable exceptions are Dahlberg (2011) and Bozdag and van den Hoven (2015). Dahlberg's paper sketches four different democratic theories (liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist) and their relation to digital technologies, but he does not go so far as to investigate specific design choices for social media. It is exactly this task that Bozdag and van den Hoven (2015) call for as they reflect on the design solutions to the so-called filter bubble effect. They argue that in order to strengthen and diversify designs solutions, engineers should be exposed to various traditions of democracy that embody different democratic norms and thus bear alternative implications for the (re)design of social media. There are a variety of different philosophical approaches to democracy, ranging from branches of classical liberalism (which emphasise the rights and freedoms of individuals) to libertarian accounts (which stress the importance of freedom and opt for minimal governmental intervention) to deliberative approaches (which emphasise the importance of public deliberation over the mere aggregation of votes) to more recent calls for 'radical democracy' (which emphasise the agnostic character of public debate and are sceptical of enlightenment ideals of rationality). Given the scope of this paper, we cannot explore all these different accounts. Rather we choose to focus on two prominent theories. By exploring the traditions of liberal democracy and deliberative democracy, we underline the call by Bozdag and van den Hoven (2015) and illustrate how varied the design directions can be when we design for a democratic social media.

We focus on these two conceptions of democracy for several reasons. the work by philosophers in the liberal tradition, such as Mill and Locke, and the deliberative tradition, such as Habermas, Cohen and Mansbridge, have been of paramount importance for our modern understanding of democracy. While there is also an overlap between the liberal and the deliberative tradition, these views diverge with regard to some aspects of democracy. For instance, whereas Mill's work strongly emphasises freedom, and freedom of speech in particular, Habermas argues for positive communication norms. These two philosophies, applied to social media design, would yield conflicting results. Thus, the works of both traditions help to illustrate the range of design implications that are possible when designers aim for democracy in social media. These theories also partially reflect the current public debate between conservatives who emphasise freedom of speech and progressives who argue for certain limitations (Lakier, 2021).[5] While we recognise and briefly discuss the main criticisms that these traditions have received, we refrain from an in-depth debate on democratic theory. Instead, our aim is to offer a kind of thought experiment whereby we use these theories of democracy to demonstrate the diversity of their implications for designing democratic social media platforms. We expect that future research will continue this thought experiment and explore more theories of democracy. This will help to make designers and regulators (more) aware of the type(s) of democracy to which their design activities contribute. Thinking critically about the design choices and implications of social media design is crucial, as design choices affect online and offline behaviour and attitudes.

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