

Engaging in civic dialogue or opinion battles?

The epistemic risks informed approach to platform governance

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I examine the risks and consequences of platformisation through the lens of building societal resilience to information disruptions. The current epistemic crisis – driven by disinformation and the dominance of dysfunctional communication (e.g., hate speech and related antisocial online behaviours) – serves here as an illustration of key epistemic risks: uncertainty, distorted and false beliefs, and people’s misdirected attention. These risks should be central when framing platform governance proposals aimed at fostering informed opinions and engaged digital citizenship. The argument suggests that digitally sustained “societal resilience” is inherently ecosystemic; therefore, national policies must address people’s social and (dis)information-related vulnerabilities in a coordinated manner, focusing on structural and algorithmic features of platforms and information “supply”, on the one hand, while also considering the life experiences, worldviews, and individual capacities of people shaping information “demand”, on the other.

KEYWORDS: epistemic crisis, epistemic risk, (dis)information vulnerability, societal resilience, platform governance

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Introduction and background: Epistemic challenges

European digital media policies depend heavily on a blend of “hard” and “soft” strategies when responding to the disruptive nature and all related ills of digital transformation, including the abundance of manipulative content and the radicalisation of public discourse. This dual approach involves regulatory measures alongside diverse stakeholder engagement strategies aimed at fostering societal resilience (Brogi et al., 2025; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023; Papaevangelou, 2023). Especially in recent years, policymakers have favoured collaboration among various stakeholders when drafting policies to counter disinformation. Defined as a “whole-of-society” strategy, this approach aligns with the democratic principles of universalism, diversity, and inclusion, and aims for collaboration and good practice exchanges among organisations and individuals.

Indeed, the whole-of-society approach seems highly appreciated, especially when there is no agreed view on the risks imposed by digital transformation, and there is no clear consensus on how the digital public sphere affects the health of democracy. Such an approach also pays off when society’s resilience development is treated as an ongoing project, especially in response to algorithmically driven pressures in opinion formation.

The abundance of disinformation and hate-laden discourse is just one of the broader challenges that the transformed media and information ecosystem poses to the public sphere (Üzelgün et al., 2024). A harmful effect on the functioning of everyday democracy comes from coordinated actions aimed at using information tactically and destructively, increasingly common within domestic malicious actors and foreign information operations, posing a threat to democratic well-being in particular. These result in a loss of social integrity, most evident through the increasing radicalisation and polarisation in small and large, older and younger European democracies. Some younger European democracies, such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia, have been noted as extreme cases of rising political radicalism (Bustikova, 2019; Caiani, 2024). Populist politics and political extremism have also been observed as prevalent in classical liberal democracies. This has been exacerbated in Sweden, Germany, and Austria recently.

While in the early stages of digitalisation it may have seemed that technological advancements and innovations were to blame for information disruptions, most recent analyses reveal that various social causes – unresolved issues and entrenched inequalities affecting people’s lives – are at the heart of social discontent, which is further amplified by platform logics and algorithms resulting in increased online conflicts and discursive clashes (Kreiss, 2017; Livingston & Miller, 2025).

In the most general sense, the phenomenon of platformisation is to be understood as a socio-technical process that feeds on the digital-technological and political-economic aspects of data infrastructures and

algorithmic features (van Dijck, 2021). Nevertheless, since user choices shape both the “supply” (content, frames) and “demand” (needs and values) sides of online information circulation, we need to study all these technological and social factors together. As is discussed in the other sections of this chapter, the latter element – predominantly the platform-shaped mechanisms of people’s decision-making and the norms that guide their understanding (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2020; Siapera, 2022; van Dijck, 2020) – is not sufficiently conveyed when designing and promoting specific policy frameworks.

Overall, in this chapter, I now advocate for a holistic approach that considers both digital infrastructure and audience preferences and habits, replacing the currently dominant, highly fragmented policymaking that treats each component in isolation. I take a “processual approach” and examine how the process of platformisation reshapes social systems of knowing and the ways people build relationships and make sense of the world in a rapidly changing digital media environment. I reveal how technological affordances of platformisation – greater accessibility and both disinformation and information abundance – along with the public’s motivation to engage in digital communication, shape opinion formation processes and fuel social uncertainties and unrest, and the rise of conflict and disagreement. These dynamics make informed and resilient citizenship harder to achieve.

A more integrated approach is needed

Along with the freedoms and uncertainties brought about by platform-driven communication, both online expression and the way public opinion is formed have changed. In digital media, public opinion is best understood as a discursive process of people’s expression and negotiated acceptability within spaces shaped by media logic (Baden et al., 2024). A new perspective on public opinion also redefines the idea of digital civics (Dahlgren, 2018). As digital media use intensifies and content diversity accelerates – spanning trusted and fact-checked information, authentic content, as well as peripheral views – both well-informed and strategically cultivated opinions are proliferating, alongside variations in people’s online expression and engagement that are used to mobilise the public on specific acts. Still, what is problematic is that the same information and patterns of online engagement can also be taken up by people for so-called “alternative reasons”, leading to elevated levels of incivility and conflict.

Although numerous studies have investigated the norms of online expression (Gagrčín et al., 2022) and ways to assist users in forming an awareness of their media practices (Paciello et al., 2023; van Zoonen et al., 2024), there is a scarcity of theorisation about what constitutes “civic dialogue”, “responsible communication”, and “good citizenship” in information arenas sustained

by platform infrastructures (Üzelgün et al., 2024). Though deeper public engagement and interactivity levels are attainable in online environments (Zelenkauskaitė, 2022), online expression on social media rarely manifests extensive dialogue or informed conversation. In most cases, expressions and arguments centre on claims and statements, such as user posts, media excerpts, or assertions of momentary significance.

The opinion formation approach draws our attention to several facets of the digitally mediated discursive process, predominantly its “social” dimension. As rightly pointed out by the scholars from the Knowledge Resistance project, when taking the processual and socio-constructivist view and exploring the process of digital opinion shaping and the reasons behind it, it becomes crucially important to investigate the algorithmically managed supply side of information provision as well as its demand aspects (Strömbäck et al., 2022). Shifts towards greater media hybridisation (Chadwick, 2013) and discursive transmediality (Jenkins, 2006) prompt us to ask how AI agents and technological affordances, such as information abundance, interactivity, attention captures, and the changed and fragmented logic of information provision and circulation (the supply) (Munger & Phillips, 2020), influence demand features: people’s intentions and needs. What drives people to engage with digital media content? What types of (dis)information vulnerabilities arise from this? Are citizens equally equipped to navigate the challenges of responsible information selection as they form and express their views?

Raising these questions widens the chapter’s scope; however, I believe that only a broadened view can clarify the essence of the current epistemic crisis. Can an “informed public” persist in an era of algorithmic information management, intensifying fragmentation and expressive diversity? How should we handle the emergence of epistemic variations, “opinion battles”, and ongoing disagreements about people’s beliefs? What capacities should citizens be equipped with, and what roles must traditional news media and other epistemic institutions (education, culture) and communities fulfil in assisting citizens in their endeavours?

In an attempt to address some of the questions above, predominantly the aspect of opinion formation, in this chapter I present a conceptualisation that combines an information disruptions–focused analytical discourse with research on democratic civics. Several terminologies appear of particular significance here: most notably, “expressive civics” and “epistemic resilience”. The idea of expressive civics is a relatively new conceptualisation developed in relation to changed civic acts and activism appearances in digital media environments (e.g., Baden et al., 2024; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). It mainly emphasises human-centred (“agentive”) aspects of the expressive use of digital media affordances that combine rhetorical and technical features such as emoticons, hashtags, and memes to make one’s voice heard and actions seen. Meanwhile, epistemic resilience puts more stress on one’s ability to sustain

knowledge and beliefs and to control and self-regulate one's responses, which, again, are "agentive" features, despite uncertainties, information disruptions, and shifts in the information provision system.

As I argue in this chapter, this latter perspective – namely, the focus on the epistemic side of resilience development – appears problematic. The conventional policy approaches relying solely on people's epistemic skills, such as fact-checking and information verification, as strategies to strengthen the public's capacity for resilience are overly one-dimensional and thus restrictive, that is, assuming that it is possible to cure epistemic failures with epistemic means. Instead, I propose that coordinated social and communications policy efforts must collectively address social variations, precisely the individual (dis)information vulnerabilities linked to people's lived experiences and worldviews, their relations to media and information, which arise from traditions, principles, and values that are also infused through the process of platformisation.

Factors influencing public opinion development in digital media environments

Conceptually, media, publics, and the governance of public life are tightly interlinked (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). In a representative democracy, the public has the power to elect its representatives. Hence, freely accessible, high-quality information is paramount for opinion-making and for reaching a state of informed citizenship. In essence, without accurately informed civics, democracy cannot effectively operate.

In all kinds of media environments – digital or not – the idealistic (normative) vision of well-functioning information circulation and informed civics is not without problems. Yet, the digital media ecosystem has distinctive specificities: It is relatively fluid and largely boundaryless, shaped by the infrastructural and algorithmic features of social media platforms, among which interactivity and the hybrid character of transmedial communication allow for collaboration and co-creation of various content by various actors. Under the combined influence of infrastructural power (Helberger, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2021), which operates under the auspices of digital platform capitalism (Kopecka-Piech & Bolin, 2023; Mansell, 2023), this serves as a foundation for a new kind of mediatised (or, in fact, platformised) actor – an active agent – who engages in various digitally managed content production efforts.

The concept of "actor mediatisation" (Hjarvard, 2008; Kantola, 2014) is not new. It emphasises that digital infrastructures and mediated communications environments – including both traditional news media and "peripheral" outlets (digitalised alternatives and digital content of essentially alternative character, as defined by Hanusch & Lohmann, 2023) – are deployed by

diverse actors as techniques of power and tools of hegemony in flexible opinion-making and digital capitalism.

Despite the extensiveness of research on online opinion formation practices and the detrimental effects this process might produce, such as populist polarisation and discursive radicalisation, researchers and policymakers still focus too much on digital content itself. My aim is to draw attention to a significant gap in available analyses and the scholarly understanding of how people's intentions, knowledge, and beliefs are formed or confirmed through the use of social media. Moreover, it also remains unclear how individuals uphold their beliefs in an environment where their opinions are constantly challenged and their views are contested.

At the same time, we know that the abundance of both information and disinformation can lead to detrimental changes in opinion formation and hinder the development of people's trust in sources. With increasing digital choice possibilities, the ability to make informed decisions and to choose wisely becomes of strategic significance. Likewise, the more critical the motivation and skills of users become, the greater the importance of differences between people's life experiences and worldviews (Strömbäck et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the more significant people's life experiences become, the more substantial attention must be paid to their social positions in shaping their intentions and the relationships they form.

In this context, what appears specifically needed is to fully comprehend the implications of these experiences and beliefs for people's civic and digital behaviour, including both new digitally initiated political activities, such as accessing social media, "translating" that knowledge into their views and expressing political opinions online, or joining more conventional acts, such as taking part in interest groups and participating in elections or policy formation.

Against this background, today's representative democracy and its rapidly changing information system contribute to three epistemic problems, each determining vulnerability and perpetuating social inequalities (Kreiss, 2017). Each of these possesses a character shaped by technological and political-economic, as well as social factors within the platforms' sustained information environment:

- The first is the risk of citizens' private data and digital rights being captured (Bolin, 2023) by algorithmic content management systems and exploited by global techno-capitalist powers. The democratic challenge is defined by manifestations of "data poverty" and the exploitation of users' attention in their digital media practices: information reach, channel selection, user intentions management, and so on.
- The second is the risk of citizens being continuously misguided by manipulative content, which affects opinion formation processes and

results in the appearance of “factual belief polarisation” (Rekker, 2022) and epistemic divergence (Kosowska et al., 2023; Robertson et al., 2024), causing disagreements over facts and the radicalisation of public discourse. The democratic challenge resides in persisting clashes and opinion battles over people’s varying perceptions of fact and truth.

- The third is the risk of citizens becoming ignorant and distrusting democratic institutions, and the democratic challenge results in the absence of social integrity and cohesion in society.

Overall, the potential for being disinformed, strategically misguided, and manipulated appears to be an undeniable aspect of digital opinion formation in algorithmically managed, information-rich, and fluid digital media environments (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2022). Therefore, the primary driving argument here is that structural features of platforms can shape individual thinking and beliefs in ways that could potentially trigger dysfunctional reactions such as hate speech and delegitimising opponents, as well as online behaviours leading to social conflicts and relational polarisation (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Yarchi et al., 2021). While exposure to online disinformation may cause confusion, its impact escalates into misguiding the focus of politics, when negativity seeps into broader public discourses, leading to dysfunctional reactions and responses. Thus, even small instances of confusion and public uncertainty should be handled with care.

(Dis)information vulnerability and epistemic resilience

When discussing the threats of online disinformation on democracy, the most commonly identified risks refer to disinformation’s potential for the utilisation of specific claims to enforce attacks against the legitimacy of social and political institutions (Claudia, 2022; Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023). Other studies refer to the negative aspect of populist discourses that feed on extreme language and manipulative claims to reinforce radicalism and “normalise” antisocial behaviours (Di Mascio et al., 2021; Tripodi et al., 2023). Through these disruptive actions, it is not only institutional trust that is affected. Since polarisation leads to radicalisation and extremism, disinformation directly undermines the societal sense of welfare, including the sense of togetherness, solidarity, security, and overall well-being.

Alongside European policy efforts and responses to online risks in informed opinion formation, the issue of (dis)information vulnerability emerges as a significant focal point of attention in developing societal resilience. Beyond analysing the scope of disinformation content and the selection of responses, the general emphasis in European policymaking on (dis)information vulnerability is to support traditional news media to enhance fact-checking

and to equip citizens with media literacy and information verification skills that are anticipated to play a significant role in rebuilding trust, both in institutions and among fellow citizens.

Though manipulative content has always existed, there is limited awareness of the factors contributing to digital (dis)information vulnerability. Namely, there needs to be more clarity about how algorithmic and AI-defined changes in communication architectures and conditions affect individual meaning-making and social relationships.

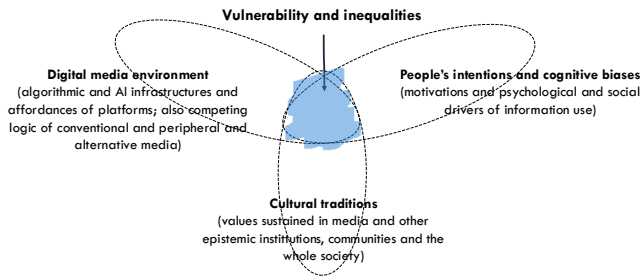
In European policy approaches and analyses, the achievement and sustainability of resilience are often used to guide strategic moves on several levels, including the individual, the organisational, and the societal dimensions. The most common argumentation in these writings rests on the idea that the resilience of societies and groups can be improved if (dis)information risk awareness is institutionalised in both policymaking and everyday practice (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025). To achieve such an integrated practice, which resembles a whole-of-society approach discussed at the beginning of this chapter, adequate knowledge awareness and risk perception are required on all levels, including policymaking, organisational performance, and individual capacities. As revealed in several studies examining the role of media in fostering a cohesive view of society, the economic viability of the traditional media and adherence to quality standards appear to be of critical significance in cultivating both journalists' professional capacities and the citizens' civic skills (see, e.g., Humprecht et al., 2020, 2021; CMPF, 2023). This shifts the focus to a more social- and human-centred perspective (Balčytienė & Horowitz, 2023; Balčytienė & Imbrasaitė, 2023; Lang, 2014) that argues risk management must account for individual people's capacities, such as situational awareness, intentions and motivation, and willingness for a well-informed reaction and responses to disinformation.

By advocating for an integrated approach of platformisation-implications analysis, this chapter endorses that digital information-related epistemic risks and crises are not solely linked to physical phenomena and digital infrastructures, such as digitally accelerated communication and the overabundance of content. Additionally, these risks reflect upon connections to people's life experiences and the evolution of their worldviews, which are determined by specific agentive features influenced by intentions and dominant information processing strategies, but also by social and psychological factors, and cultural and social traditions (Harambam, 2021).

Therefore, broadening the conceptualisation of (dis)information vulnerability must incorporate all aspects of the functioning of the digital media ecosystem, including its socio-technical affordances and individual responses and social reactions. Furthermore, on the individual side, understanding (dis)information vulnerability should not be limited to factors traditionally seen as individually segregating, such as socioeconomic disparities like age,

gender, level of education, and income. Overall, when identifying digitally shaped vulnerabilities, it is essential to consider the intersecting factors (see Figure 9.1): 1) the entire media environment as a whole, including the effects of platformisation and algorithmically sustained digital media affordances; 2) communication cultures and traditions; and 3) individual characteristics – especially epistemic capacities, shaped by intentions, lived experiences and worldviews.

Figure 9.1 An assemblage approach to disinformation vulnerability with social- and human-centred focus



The backing of a social-human-centred view is especially significant here. In relation to challenges brought about by the evolving digital media environments, information users must, first of all, be considered mediatised actors – and thus active agents – whose intentions, information accessibility and attention, decision-making, and opinion expression (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017) are pressured by infrastructural power (Helberger, 2020; van Dijck, 2021) and digital information capitalism (Mansell, 2023), as well as their values and perceived roles in traditional media and journalism and alternative content circulation.

Based on the argumentation presented above, the main idea promoted here is that, essentially, the features of digital opinion formation and resilient civics do not arise as the linear product or aggregation of content that is accessed and shared on social media. Instead, these manifest as a result of an ongoing process of “internal negotiations” between digital media and the affordances of platforms (the supply side), on the one hand, and people’s life experiences framed as epistemic resources that guide meaning-making practices and ideals about resilient citizenship (the demand side), on the other.

The following section examines these two dimensions and then I turn to the culture of communication (traditions and values).

Debates surrounding the supply and demand aspects in the digital realm

In this section, the supply (information content and frames) and demand (people's intentions and needs) dimensions are treated as analytical levers that reveal tensions among competing interests and logics in opinion formation processes.

When viewing the platformisation phenomenon in line with the theoretical conceptualisations of mediatisation research, deep-seated connections between domains of algorithmic systems (including AI agents), political economy, and knowledge production are revealed. As previously mentioned, the social-human aspect that implicitly shapes and defines the characteristics of each of these domains requires further exploration. As Bolin (2023) has illustratively explained, data (and AI agents) need social activity to exist in data capitalism, implying that “pure data” without human input is directionless. Put differently, this shifts an analytical focus from datasets and technologies to the social arrangements – thus, the “social-human” aspect – which treats individual engagement and participation as observable and traceable practices.

Similarly, the political-economic view on platformisation reveals potential power imbalances among participating agents, influencing digital communication and opinion formation. Digital power stems from the data used in algorithmic systems that track and manage people's intentions, attention, and responses. AI agents link users' data with the business logic that is integrated into algorithmic recommender systems to boost information circulation and people's traffic. The logic is relatively simple: More engagement generates more data, which platforms use to predict people's intentions, steer their attention, and shape media habits that guide the opinion-formation process.

As noted earlier, for individuals, relying on prior experience and available knowledge is crucial for forming opinions on online platforms. However, despite high engagement and interactivity features, social media fails on the supply side of offering knowledge integrity. Rather than integrating, digital media often disrupts the established knowledge hierarchy. The blurring of contexts, expanding actor involvement, and flattening of information hierarchies in digital media are primary features contributing to heightened uncertainty and, thus, epistemic crisis (Baden et al., 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023). It distorts classical understanding where communicative and constructive politics is understood as the goal to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, which is possible only in ideal deliberation (Steenbergen et al., 2003). On online platforms, the uncontrollable rise and abundance of low-quality content and the dominance of manipulative claims disrupt organised reasoning in deliberative opinion-making processes. Furthermore, disinformation's detrimental character and uniqueness also stem from discursive characteristics: the imitation of serious genres and a distinct ideological agenda based on

a specific conflicting value system. In disinformation discourses, hostility is foundational: with claims cast in categorical, either-or terms. Hence, the “enemy” is consciously constructed and maintained, so manipulative discourses implicitly aim at confirming predefined statements and are not keen on responding or listening – capacities that are essential for dialogue and practical understanding.

Despite these challenges, one could foresee that traditional news media are attempting to be more representative online. By setting digital agendas and framing news, they seek to meet the common interest. However, it remains uncertain whether a linkage between the two differing logics – traditional news media and disinformation – can productively emerge (Strömbäck et al., 2022). There is a chasm between the two discursive groups regarding their overall goals and value systems based on, for example, trust in scientific evidence. Thus, deliberation seems possible only within each group but not between them, which is a primary challenge when dealing with opinion battles and discursive conflicts.

As social media and digital communication evolve, long-standing audience habits (and thus the demand side) face pressure from all directions. In today’s globally connected and platform-driven information environment, characterised by algorithmic data management (Seipp et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2021), mass self-communication and individual expressions (Cardoso, 2023; Castells, 2009; Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), and diverging logics between reality-check production and propaganda (Strömbäck et al., 2022), the process of opinion formation or belief confirmation depends on individual capacities and self-perceptions, along with enduring vulnerabilities and values like interpersonal and social trust.

In a general sense, perceptions of vulnerability are linked to socially underprivileged groups such as migrants and minors or other groups whose distinct material or cultural features instigate injustice, which makes them susceptible to exploitation, leading to inequality. However, in digital media environments, people might be exploited differently. Since platformisation implies public engagement and interactivity, which are attention-driven and intention-generating acts, it can lead to various vulnerabilities and inequalities formed on highly varied matters – that is, formed on life experiences, where cognitive biases and competing motivations can become paramount (see Figure 9.1).

At large, vulnerability is socially constructed and dependent on power relations in a concrete social context (Limantė & Tereškinas, 2022). Likewise, in digital environments, a broader spectrum of factors, such as individual political and social preferences as well as media accessibility and reach and media-use skills, may contribute to the conditioning of digital disadvantages and vulnerability to information disorders (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019; Nieminen, 2019; Radechovsky, 2023). These factors can also affect digital platform-infused representations and online visibility, resulting in different levels of

attention provided and varying power arrangements between communicating participants (Helberger, 2020).

Furthermore, people possess different vulnerabilities and express variations in digital skills and information literacy, which can influence opinion formation. For example, as for the age dimension, research studies tend to have a consensus that older people are more vulnerable to information disorders, including disinformation (Boulianne et al., 2022; Claudia, 2022; Golob et al., 2021; Miyamoto, 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023); yet, young people also have their challenges, associated mainly with the extensive use of digital technologies (Miyamoto, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2022). Education has some positive effects (Golob et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023), but it is not always decisive (Boulianne et al., 2022; Claudia, 2022). Additionally, a higher income is often mentioned as a factor that correlates with resilience against manipulations. As for the gender question, there are very different findings among scholars.

However, if inequalities and vulnerabilities in social media are both structurally managed and socially constructed, then so too are collective feelings of togetherness and solidarity. Hence, the task is to cultivate infrastructures and conditions to sustain feelings of togetherness and not of confrontation, and unity over conflict.

To meet a challenge of this scale, we must focus scholarly efforts on the processes through which people form intentions and engage in critical reasoning, including key components of meaning-making: values and perceptions.

Back to the citizens!

One more helpful definition closely linked to the social-human side of the debate and notions of vulnerability and resilience (see Figure 9.1) is that of “human agency”, which refers to the capacity of an individual to respond to practical situations that arise based on the individual’s contact with reality, for example, with mediated and non-mediated messages. In digitally mediated confrontations with reality, such as accessing content on social media, the agentive aspect of one’s mental actions is dependent on the association between intentions, motivation, and knowledge (arousal and other reactions), on the one hand, and changing information and digital conditions, on the other. Still, it bears noting that human responses are grounded on values and are norm-driven: Even when someone acts on a mistaken belief, their overall capacity and ability to make information choices is intact (O’Brien & Soteriou, 2009).

Human agency is constituted by one’s capacity and responsiveness to reality by adjusting one’s behaviour considering the evaluative judgments made by one’s practical reasoning. Suppose we contend that agency is the capacity to

make decisions based on one's judgments (knowledge), beliefs, and values and to respond to digitally mediated situations. In that case, assessing how people reflect on such a capacity is critically significant. In other words, the key question is whether individuals feel empowered by the digitally rich media environment, motivating them to engage and to act responsibly in mediated situations, or if, instead, they feel deprived. In that case, responsibility for resolving the situation should be led by institutions and actors in media, education, and policymaking.

It is evident that apart from personal engagement with content and understanding digital threats, the overall circumstances of the digital information ecosystem, including sustainability and credibility of news media (i.e., its institutional trust), play a significant role in determining the quality of people's digital interactions. This factor is crucial for developing individual "self-efficacy", which, in social psychology and learning situations, refers to confidence and the ability to control one's motivation, behaviour, performance, and responses to the social environment (Bandura, 1991). The ability to self-control one's impulses, automaticity, and immediate responses refers to individual capacity and awareness, which develops within high-quality learning environments and everyday situations (including mediated responses). Briefly, self-efficacious performance includes the ability and willingness to notice one's impulses and self-regulate one's responses (Bandura, 2006). To reiterate, all these agentic capacities play a vital role, particularly in new and challenging public communication situations, which can be digitally mediated or happen in face-to-face interactions, when decisions must be made based on various life experiences and the knowledge gained about whom and what to trust.

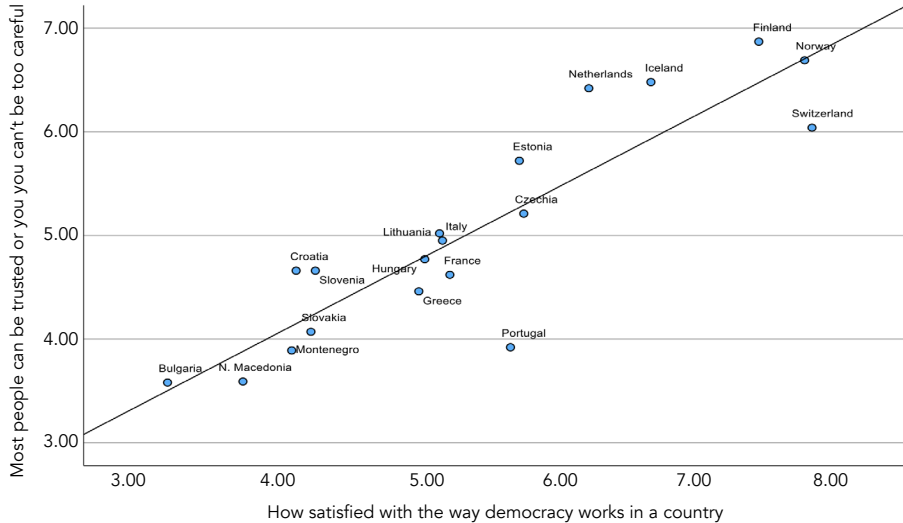
Therefore, the scholarly analysis of modern communication should focus on people's actions of accessing and sharing online information, recognising that such a process includes not only the spreading of content – such as knowledge and facts – but also the sharing of attitudes and worldviews as well as moral formations embedded within these acts and experiences. Hence, for contemporary opinion formation analyses in digital environments, it becomes critically important to learn how such an epistemic tradition and moral culture become locally embedded and institutionalised (eventually leading to the routinisation and normalisation of communication practices), what responsibilities and communication principles, such as transparency and accountability, they acquire, and how they are accepted, maintained, and shared by different groups of people.

Hence, a shift in thinking is needed to perceive the significance of values and to stress those on which the idea of "the public" and of digital civics is formed in digital media (Dahlgren, 2018). For that to occur, we must acknowledge communication's dependence on cultural and contextual traditions and historical and cultural repertoires and narratives (Carey, 1989) – dependencies that also carry over to digital media.

Generally, media environments are key sites for social trust-building and contests for identity formation, and both are ongoing processes. Likewise, nurturing societal resilience as a structurally and individually supported development should also be perceived as a contested, discursive process that is conversational, dialogic, and reflexive. As already noted, in new transmedial communication environments, the qualities of deliberation and dialogue are predominantly challenged by the infrastructural logic of social media platforms, as well as by the increasing need of individuals and groups to proclaim their own identities, ideologies, and ways of life. Likewise, in fast-paced, digitally mediated interactions, differences in people’s value orientations toward a changing reality become paramount (Steinert et al., 2022) – a finding that underscores the importance of contextual traditions. A brief account of that aspect is provided in Figures 9.2–9.5.

As depicted by illustrations from the European Social Survey (European Research Infrastructure [ESS ERIC], 2023) analysis, people’s prevailing attitudes are also evident in broader societal trends and differences among countries. They are reflected in people’s expressions of trust, perceptions, and satisfaction with how democracy functions (or does not meet subjective expectations) in different European states (see Figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2 Linking people’s perceptions of social trust with their satisfaction with democracy



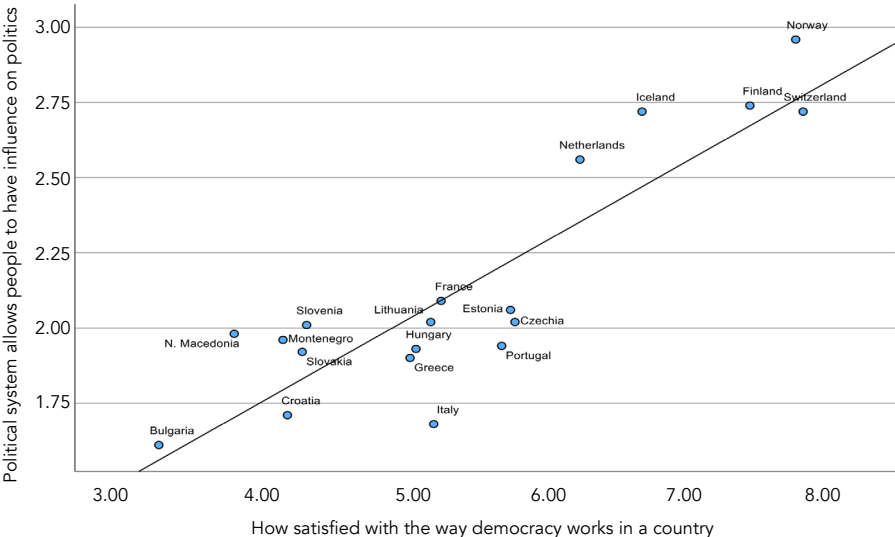
Comments: R2 Linear = 0.786. Survey question: “Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Responses are provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “you can’t be too careful” and 10 refers to “most people can be trusted”.

Source: ESS10, 2020

Some of the younger democracies are seen in the middle cluster, such as Estonia, Czechia, and Lithuania. The highest ranking is shown for the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which are known for their policies’ commitments to inclusiveness and universalism (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Country group variations are also seen (see Figures 9.3–9.4) when systemic conditions and individual capabilities to influence politics are depicted. This indicates that greater social trust, inclusive policies (noted in universalist principles and the assessment of the political system’s inclusivity), and a sense of satisfaction with democracy are essential safeguards of a sustainable democratic way of life (see Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3 Comparing people’s perceptions of the political system’s inclusiveness to their satisfaction with democracy

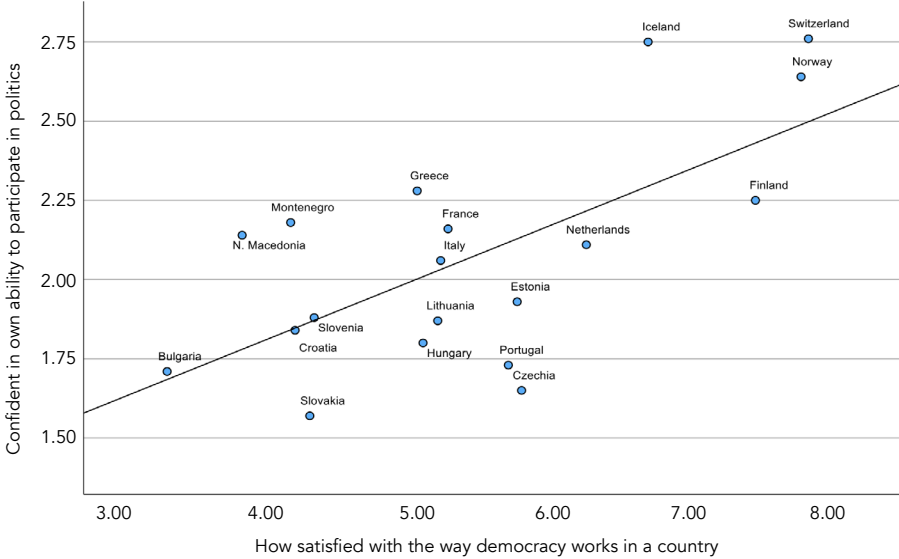


Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.777. Political system inclusiveness was measured by responses 1 (not at all) and 5 (a great deal).

Source: ESS10, 2020

Furthermore, confidence in one’s ability to participate in politics is a sign of the earlier noted self-efficacious assessment, which is one of the fundamental characteristics contributing to the development of resilience (see Figure 9.4).

Figure 9.4 People’s perceptions of their confidence to participate in politics compared to those of satisfaction with democracy

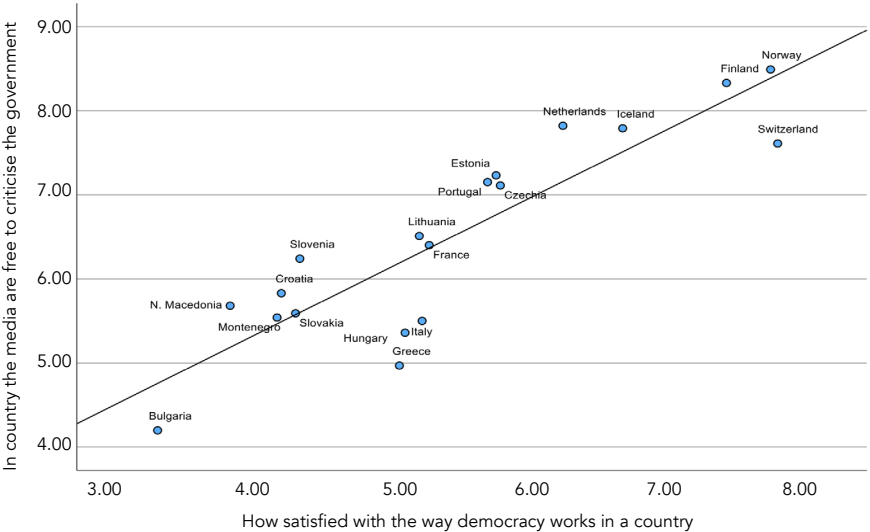


Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.442. People’s confidence was measured with 1 (not at all confident) and 5 (completely confident).

Source: ESS10, 2020

Figure 9.5 illustrates a notable trend concerning communication rights and media freedoms. Implicitly expressing the feeling of being informed and trusting the media institution’s freedom to fulfil its primary call – namely, to be free to perform the watchdog function and criticise the government – this assessment directly correlates with the perceived individual level of satisfaction in how democracy works in a country.

Figure 9.5 Assessment of media role by satisfaction with how democracy works in the country



Comments: R^2 Linear = 0.778. Survey question: “The media in country are free to criticize the government”. Responses are provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “Does not apply at all” and 10 refers to “Applies completely”.
Source: ESS10, 2020

The country-level value differences are evident in respondents’ answers (see Figures 9.2–9.5), reflecting how individual agency is expressed, for example, in the assessments of individual capacities, satisfaction with democracy, and evaluations of the media. Indeed, this draws attention to the fact that, as epistemic community builders, news media and journalism have the potential to become even more inclusive and responsive – essentially “more democratic” – by addressing people’s daily needs, intentions and expectations, thereby meeting their demands and increasing audience satisfaction.

Overall, the news media’s internal “democratisation” could be considered an engaging process transcending the traditional functions of news media and journalists, namely information providers, agenda setters, fact-checkers, and watchdogs. Instead, it involves embracing the media’s role as “sense makers” – helping people connect events to broader meanings. Following such an account, journalism should not only be socially inclusive in its contents by addressing issues of traditionally deprived groups, such as minorities or women, but also become more attentive, compassionate, and empathetic while listening to the perceptions and mindsets of various people (Wasserman, 2015).

Likewise, for citizens, fostering greater media awareness regarding the quality of represented issues is crucial for nurturing the required media responsiveness.

Discussion

This chapter's discussion centred on (dis)information vulnerabilities as foundations of epistemic risks in digital media environments. Disinformation, being a highly abstract phenomenon, sustains a far-reaching impact. False narratives and discourses are based on various claims that are changed and altered in an ongoing discursive process distributed over numerous digital channels and sites.

The social-human-centred approach (see Figure 9.1) addressed here appears to be a powerful strategy, considering the processual aspects of meaning-making in platform-sustained environments. With digital media, people form opinions over time, with varying content and in different social contexts. Algorithmically managed information flows coupled with various techniques of individually framing and shaping opinions, fuel ongoing negotiations of stances in the public discourse (Baden et al., 2025). All the participating actors seek to present, advance, and promote their claims by positioning themselves in the broader conversation. When confronted with conflicting narratives and generally dysfunctional communication and disinformation, individuals tend to rely on their biases and prejudices to confirm their pre-existing beliefs, thereby deepening divisions and increasing suspicions. As a result, relationships and trust also becomes a contentious issue, further contributing to societal disintegration and intensifying conflicts (Huurne & Gutteling, 2009).

Based on the previous section's insights, it appears that social conditions for (dis)information vulnerability will be most severe in contexts, societies, and communities where people's social rights are limited or unevenly distributed (see Figures 9.2–9.5). As known from earlier analyses, vulnerability is often connected to socially underprivileged groups: non-citizens, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, and so on. As could be hypothesised, all these socially determined traits of vulnerability are also reflected in digital communication contexts, affecting how people access information and the reasons why they use it. In digital media environments, demographic attributes like age, education, and social status also play a role in conditioning vulnerability to information disorders, including specific types of information content and thinking patterns, such as lies, conspiratorial thinking, rumours, and overall suspiciousness.

Identifying vulnerabilities is selective in all societies, yet it is unlikely that any polity could free itself of vulnerabilities. Considering that vulnerability is a dynamic and contested notion, it is crucial to recognise that individuals or groups can become vulnerable, depending on several factors, including individual (skills, experiences, and views), socio-structural (inequality and marginalisation), and situational conditions (emergencies and crises). Developing capacities and resilience to respond to detrimental features in the digital communication environment must consider all these levels. The integrated approach often refers to citizens' rights addressed on a policy level (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019), as well as being adept at individually controlling and organising awareness (e.g., Bandura, 1991). To excel in the latter

task, it is necessary to engage in continuous and informed reasoning and moral perceptions, to develop skills to navigate highly selective information environments, and to be attentive to the worldviews of the self and others. Beyond individual learning, information processing requires attention to the social practices through which capacities are acquired, including values and traditions shared among groups (Harambam, 2021).

Conclusion: What can be done, by whom, and how

In highly interconnected and hybrid media environments, where different mediatised actors, their intentions, and interests compete for attention, not only are the forms of democratic meaning-making and civic participation transformed towards manipulated, populist, and generally dysfunctional communication, but the process of informed opinion-making is also challenged, resulting in a transformation of the systems of belief.

Algorithmically managed abundance of information and disinformation, which exceeds people’s ability to process it, will continue to deepen fragmentation in the public sphere and increase vulnerability to epistemic risks. The question persists of developing and sustaining the required systems and epistemic structures, as well as one’s capacities to feel cohesion, coherence, and a consequent sense of security at the individual level, and a higher degree of social cohesion and integrity at the collective level.

Even with rising concerns about online disinformation and its harmful social consequences, such as the growth of populist polarisation, instigations to conflict, and the dominance of antisocial behaviours, the debates on how to respond often have no clear consensus on the definition of the “core problem”, nor on viable and acceptable solutions to address it. As a single market, the EU aims to establish regulatory measures to tackle disinformation, which can have an impact even on the largest globally operating digital platforms. Likewise, it must be acknowledged that the region is not uniform, and that each country faces distinct challenges and applies different remedies to address disinformation and information manipulation.

Disinformation emerged as one of the most urgent political problems worldwide in the past decade, with different countries and contexts being impacted and addressing this challenge differently. Still, as illustrated in this discussion, it appears that societal resilience and democratic sustainability are most effectively attained as a society’s ability to safeguard democratic structures (see Figures 9.2–9.5). The question then is how to support knowledge institutions that instil trust and reinforce citizenship by promoting democratic values, thereby augmenting people’s capacity to recognise and apply principles of responsible and effective communication. As a universalist strategy or a “democratisation” perspective, it could be one way to address the epistemic risks outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the digital media environments (and, hence, for democracy) is making digital engagement, and thus individualism, a significant characteristic algorithmically sustained by digital platforms and media ecosystems, consistent with the ideals of social connectedness and community adaptation. This chapter suggests that paying closer attention to communication intentions, related vulnerabilities, and inequalities stemming from divergent agency and worldview characteristics could be an innovative strategy to address persistent social inequalities and epistemic differences that lead to opinion battles, conflicts, and eventually polarisation.

To address the question of what could be done, by whom, and how (if at all) to make the communications arena an engaging and pleasant place, a few additional points must be made.

Decision-making and opinion formation in digital technology-rich and information-saturated environments are much more complex than efficient information retrieval and facticity verification. Thus, the whole-of-society approach must aim to develop sound (i.e., responsible and effective) communication strategies that guide everyone. Traditional media organisations and journalists must take a more substantial role in responsibly explaining their roles and functions to citizens. Media must also understand, actively listen, and engage with their audiences to identify enduring problems. Also, shifts in media literacy education should be considered by drawing attention to people's self-efficacious learning (including those individuals representing epistemic professions: journalists, teachers, librarians) to proclaim the importance of individual capacities and life experiences. Specifically, instructional interventions should not focus just on the epistemic aspect of knowledge acquisition, such as checking facts, as people may have false prior knowledge and beliefs. Instead, the central focus must be on integrating people's life experiences with their individual awareness and self-regulatory capacities required to balance their responses. In the end, people decide – whether individually, in groups, or in policymaking situations. Therefore, assisting them in developing the capacity to understand how their relations and intentions are also defined by algorithms and AI agents may encourage them to question the currently dominant ways of thinking about digital media environments and to become more resilient within them.

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