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Matthew Chrisman
Professor of Ethics and Epistemology,
University of Edinburgh

Peter McColl
Futures + Policy

Social Media and Responsible Debate

The development of social media in the early 2000s seemed to promise increased opportunity for genuine and constructive political debate. In addition to a place to post pictures of our cats and children, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter gave us the opportunity to articulate and refine reasons for and against various public policies and to quickly share our ideas with a large number of people.

Optimistically, one might have hoped this would generate space for a new kind of public deliberation much richer and more widespread than occasional trips to the ballot box. However, we now know that these platforms often create **echo chambers**,[1] **stoke political polarisation**,[2] **exacerbate natural tendencies towards confirmation bias**[3] and provide a **forum for antisocial behaviour**,[4] rather than facilitate meaningful public debate.

Moreover, social media seems not only to have failed in its political promise but also to have taken much in-person political debate down with it. Shifts in public discussion associated with the rise of social media are, we think, a significant reason the YAS project to create a Charter for Responsible Debate has gained so much attention. It is time to use the Charter to reflect on how the political promise of online debate might be revived.

This is particularly important in an era in which the rapid advance of new technologies makes collective debate even more important for communal decision making. The roll-out of new digital technologies and data-led approaches for all aspects of our lives, and the shift to a society much more connected online,

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requires sophisticated decision making about individual and collective approaches to technology. For instance, driverless transport is technologically possible at present, but the question of what extent of public space should be given over to these vehicles is a social question, not a technological one. Similarly, it is technologically possible to use personal data to analyse rapidly the spread of infectious diseases; but determining how to do so requires the balancing of personal and collective rights.

This depends on creating a public sphere, which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state."[5] Unfortunately, however, large parts of the existing conception of how the public sphere should function is based on cultural understandings that do not easily translate to the internet. Social media platforms significantly lower the cost of access to the eyes and ears of large swathes of the public, which has a democratising effect; however, they reward engagement with others that is short-lived, emotive and unreflective.

1   https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult
2   https://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9216
3   https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biases-make-people-vulnerable-to-misinformation-spread-by-social-media/
4   https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/03/29/the-future-of-free-speech-trolls-anonymity-and-fake-news-online/
5   Habermas, Jürgen. 1962 (transl. 1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, 162. Cambridge: Polity.

Whilst countries such as Scotland and Ireland have begun to successfully adopt participatory methodologies such as **Citizens' Assemblies**,[6] to be successful this needs to incorporate online approaches. The proliferation of the kinds of bad behaviour that makes online debate toxic is often not carried over from real life: trolling, doxing and death threats are very unusual during an in-person debate, for instance. How can we shift from in-person to online whilst preserving and improving the cultural understanding of how the public sphere should function? In this piece, we seek to make and motivate some recommendations.

Structural:

The structure of social media is based on attracting people to spend increasing time on their apps – what is called the 'attention economy.' This means that it tends to promote voices that generate strong reactions – and although this has always been the case in politics, it is particularly significant in social media. As a result, one of the easiest ways to get attention is to express yourself very stridently, which is more likely to be rewarded with the 'like, comment and share' responses that promote a post. Although this promotes lots of engagement, it also creates reward pathways, which can make people behave in irresponsible ways, such as making intentionally inflammatory comments or promulgating unchecked conspiracy theories. This tension suggests it needs a response. However, it is not clear what the best response should be.

Recommendation 1

Social science research funders should encourage public policy think tanks and academics working in media studies, psychology, sociology and political theory to collaborate on user-based research into how to protect responsible debate online, whilst maintaining engagement, particularly around issues of public significance.

6   https://www.citizensassembly.scot/

Behavioural:

Discussions of problematic interactions on social media often focus on the poor behaviour of particular people. Beyond tackling specific transgressions, however, we should also confront the broader challenge of promoting individual and collective behaviours that encourage online debate to exemplify more of the principles in our Charter.

YAS's work on the Charter for Responsible Debate has been particularly indebted to Kal Turnbull, whose online discussion board **Change My View**[7]

on the Reddit platform gave us insight into the ways that online discussion could be designed to promote thoughtful engagement between those who disagree. As Kal put it, we need ways to reframe how we think about being 'right' or 'wrong' when discussing topics about which people deeply disagree. Rather than seeing online debate as beating back an opponent or seeking to convince the unconverted, we need ways to encourage people who disagree about particular topics to collaboratively seek truth and mutual understanding.

Recommendation 2

Social media companies, schools, universities and governments should collaborate to create and disseminate behavioural norms around online behaviour that promote good behaviour and create sanctions for poor behaviour, in order to replicate the norms of debate in the analogue world.

The YAS Charter for Responsible Debate aims to do this in a more general sense. We recommend this be used by platforms hosting debates to co-create with users an application designed for their online space and develop collective approaches to rewarding responsible debate and deprecating irresponsible actions.

7   https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/

Regulatory:

Much recent political debate about social media focuses on regulation. We think regulation should seek to fill the gaps left by structural and behavioural approaches, by seeking to identify the ways in which rules and laws can be used to promote responsible debate. This must include a careful analysis of the benefits of free speech, the need for political expression, the openness of social networks to scrutiny and the competing demands of creating profitable companies and having a functioning public sphere.

The spread of conspiracy theories and fake news is facilitated greatly by the shift to closed communication tools such as WhatsApp, which has end-to-end encryption that allows for

the dissemination of untruths that cannot either be analysed or countered. Whereas on Twitter or Facebook information can be challenged, on closed apps such as WhatsApp misinformation – most recently about vaccines – can spread without contestation. The speed and detail with which this information can circulate could cause even greater damage. This stems from a failure of other, open networks and suggests there needs to be a way to more effectively authenticate information, so that closed networks are of less significance. Where possible, fact checking and suppression of identifiably false information should be considered.

Recommendation 3

There should be communal efforts to create not-for-profit public sphere-focused social media, bringing together public bodies, institutions and new forms of governance to protect the public sphere. Where private companies are used to disseminate important information, open information systems should be privileged over closed systems, and those companies should allow freedom of political expression where it avoids hate speech and the spread of demonstrably false information.

Social media can serve other purposes than public debate, and we are not calling for State takeover of companies hosting various platforms. However, we do want to highlight the negative side-effects the status quo is having on public discussion of contentious issues. These platforms have the potential to facilitate constructive exchanges of conflicting points of view. And it is this sort of exchange that is crucial for genuine collective reasoning amongst people who often disagree but who are still committed to living together. This is why we'd like to see attempts to re-engineer social media so that it harnesses its potential to facilitate the sort of collective reasoning that would improve our democratic governance. //