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Beyond Gatekeeping: Propaganda, Democracy, and the Organization of Digital Publics

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While there is disagreement as to the severity of the digital disinformation problem, scholars and practitioners have largely coalesced around the idea that a new system of safeguards is needed to prevent its spread. By minimizing the role of citizens in managing their own communities, however, I argue that these gatekeeping approaches are undemocratic. To develop a more democratic alternative, I draw from the work of Harold D. Lasswell and John Dewey to argue that we should study the organization of digital publics. For citizens to engage in democratic inquiry, publics must be organized so that they can (1) easily identify their common interests and (2) regularly encounter variety. I then analyze Facebook, showing how the News Feed and Facebook Groups together create a platform on which propagandists can effectively target and manipulate specific publics. I conclude by turning to Reddit to suggest alternative forms of organizing digital publics more democratically.

To illuminate the mechanism of propaganda is to reveal the secret springs of social action, and to expose to the most searching criticisms our prevailing dogmas of sovereignty, of democracy, of honesty, and of the sanctity of individual opinion.
—Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*

On January 25, 2018, Governor Jay Inslee of Washington declared a state of emergency. In the announcement, Inslee identified Clark County, just outside Portland, Oregon, as the epicenter of an "extreme public health risk" (Romo and Neighmond 2019). The cause of this particular "public disaster" was an outbreak of measles that ultimately resulted in 65 confirmed cases of the potentially deadly virus (Clark County Public Health 2019). This was a surprising—and quite troubling—development, largely because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had declared measles eradicated from the United States in 2000 (Romo and Neighmond 2019).

Since news of the outbreak first spread, explanations for the sudden resurgence of a previously eliminated disease highlighted the increase in nonmedical exemptions to vaccines, including that which protects against measles, over the past few years. Citing the "very aggressive anti-vaccine lobby" that operates largely by spreading anti-vaccination ("anti-vaxx") disinformation through digital platforms like Facebook, many argue that the success of the anti-vaxx movement is attributable to its "dominance" on social media sites (*The Takeaway* 2019). Through mechanisms like autofill search terms, closed and secret Groups, and ads that target women, anti-vaxxer groups are able to take advantage of Facebook's design in order to facilitate the spread of disinformation that can be—as was the case in Clark County, Washington—dangerous for democratic communities.

Unfortunately, this anti-vaxxer example is not unique. Over the past few decades, the growth of digital technologies has accompanied changes in the ways disinformation spreads throughout the modern public. Conspiracy theories of "crisis actors," "paid protestors," and QAnon, for example, have recently dominated news cycles, even as "deep fake" technologies allow for photo and video manipulation that can be undetectable to the naked eye (Coaston 2018; Conti 2017; Nicas and Frenkel 2018; Schwartz 2018). Prominent sites like YouTube can draw users into algorithmically induced encounters with more and more radical views (Tufekci 2018), while Facebook has increasingly come under criticism for collecting massive amounts of information on its users, allowing for targeted messaging on a scale never before seen (Angwin, Varner, and Tobin 2017; Shane and Frenkel 2018). More and more, it seems, digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are facilitating public manipulation in a manner that, ultimately, undermines democracy (Vaidhyanathan 2018).

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Despite the threats they pose, however, digital technologies are increasingly prominent in our daily lives. Facebook has more than 2.7 billion monthly active users; Twitter and Reddit are increasingly where public officials go to voice their opinions, make announcements, and interact with constituents (Constine 2017; Rogers 2012). These platforms are for many, as the US Supreme Court noted, "the principal sources for knowing current events, [and] . . . speaking and listening in the modern public square" (Packingham v. North Carolina, 582 U.S. [2017]). They are, in other words, well-integrated spaces of "everyday talk" in the contemporary deliberative system (Mansbridge 1999). Walking away from these technologies is therefore not an option; despite the challenges they present, we cannot return to a pre-Facebook public sphere. Instead, those concerned about the negative impact of digital disinformation must consider how to adjust these technologies to ensure they contribute productively to the processes of finding, sharing, discussing, and evaluating information for democratic decision-making.

Scholars have approached the problem of disinformation from a number of perspectives. Some have focused attention on the kinds of messages being transmitted and the media environment in which users engage with that content (Anspach, Jennings, and Arceneaux 2019; Bode 2015; Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003; Messing and Westwood 2014). Others have questioned the ability of individual citizens to make use of information effectively, arguing that even with accurate messages and ideal media environments, individuals are psychologically ill equipped to engage in effective democratic decision-making (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Lippmann 1922). And while there is some disagreement regarding the scope and severity of the digital disinformation problem (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019), scholars and practitioners alike have largely coalesced around the idea that "a new system of safeguards is needed" (Lazer et al. 2018, 1094) to mitigate the specific effects of disinformation in digital environments.

Suggestions as to the precise nature of these safeguards have included government regulations, collaborations between platforms and academics, and more robust editorial practices from traditional media outlets (Lazer et al. 2017, 2018). Most prominent, however, are the calls for companies like Google and Facebook to take responsibility for the content on their sites and adjust their platforms "to increase emphasis on quality information" (Lazer et al. 2018, 1096). These measures, like YouTube's algorithmic changes (The YouTube Team 2019) or Facebook's moderation practices (Fisher 2018), are intended to minimize the likelihood that users encounter disinformation on these sites. But by curating the flows of information online before they reach site users, what these recommendations have in common is that they reintroduce processes of gatekeeping into the digital public sphere.

Investing in gatekeepers as a mechanism to slow the spread of digital disinformation may be an effective solution. But it is ultimately an undemocratic one; relying solely—or even primarily—on gatekeepers undermines the practice of democracy by minimizing the role of citizens in managing their own communities. By shifting the responsibility to sort and evaluate information from site users to platforms, algorithms, and the corporations who control them, gatekeeping measures reduce the power of citizens to exercise control over their own environments. Instead, gatekeeping measures, like algorithmic changes that increase one's exposure to crosscutting content, work by imposing a standard of "quality information" on users; the users, by contrast, are passively subject to these determinations of quality made by external (and often invisible) "experts." As a more democratic alternative to gatekeeping, then—one that effectively sorts information while still including site users in that process of evaluation—I argue that we should study the role of social organization in fostering citizens' habits of democratic inquiry.

That the organization of publics would influence how—and how well—their members process information together is unsurprising. Cognitive scientists have shown that we process information better as part of collective bodies than we do individually (Mercier and Sperber 2017; Sloman and Fernbach 2017). Building on these dynamics, democratic theorists have argued that deliberative minipublics can serve as "trusted information proxies" (Warren and Gastil 2015) for other citizens and that "deliberative contact" in structured, face-to-face discussions can shift participants' attitudes toward members of out-groups (Kim, Fishkin, and Luskin 2018). They have demonstrated that deliberative norms can mitigate the effects of group polarization and that changes to the rules and procedures involved in deliberative settings can shift both the process and outcomes of deliberation (Baccaro, Bächtiger, and Deville 2016; Grönlund, Herne, and Setälä 2015). Yet while this work highlights the success of democratic inquiry as a collective enterprise, it largely focuses attention on formal spaces of deliberation, where publics are organized around a clear purpose, there are stated rules and (often) moderators, and the participants are selectively chosen.

But democratic politics cannot be restricted to these formal institutions; the discussions that take place in the informal spaces of daily life—increasingly, digital sites like Facebook—also have wide-ranging effects for democratic decision-making. Yet to date scholars interested in addressing the

problem of digital disinformation have largely failed to consider ways of achieving similar deliberative outcomes by way of these digital platforms. Instead, scholars have proposed solutions to the problem of disinformation that are insufficient to addressing the underlying problems with the ways these digital publics are organized. While algorithmic changes and editorial curation might ensure that users see "quality information," in other words, these gatekeeping strategies all suggest ways that elite actors can mitigate the individual *effects* of a disorganized public; they do not consider how we might tackle the underlying *cause* and reorganize digital publics so that citizens can more effectively make these determinations of quality for themselves.

There is more at stake in this critique than a mere preference for popular decision-making. Democracy, as John Dewey wrote, is best understood as a method, one that "signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (2008c, 226). Democracy, in other words, is more than a system of government. As "socially organized intelligence," democracy is a "way of life," a set of practices through which we share information, test ideas, discuss results, and work cooperatively and intelligently toward our collective goals. The process of decision-making is, in many ways, just as important as what the public ultimately decides on. And because, as Dewey reminds us, intelligence is a collective, not individual, capacity, an exclusive focus on the individual users of digital platforms, and the elite gatekeepers who manage them, is insufficient. Instead, we must also consider how publics are organized by digital platforms and whether these digital publics are equipped to engage in the often difficult, always demanding work of democratic inquiry.

In what follows, I outline the social conditions required for democratic publics to combat the effects of disinformation by engaging in self-correcting cooperative inquiry. Drawing from the work of Harold D. Lasswell and John Dewey, I argue that citizens are particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns—a specific example of what Lasswell calls "propaganda"—when they are unable to recognize themselves as members of multiple, overlapping publics. But to properly engage in democratic inquiry to protect against this manipulation, I argue, democratic publics must be organized to (1) develop a "social point of view" by easily identifying and communicating *common interests* and (2) diversify their interests and correct misperceptions by regularly encountering *variety*. I then use this conceptual frame to analyze the case of Facebook, showing how the site's personalized News Feed, exacerbated by Facebook Groups, ultimately creates a platform on which propagandists can very effectively target and manipulate specific publics. But while this social organization

frame ultimately identifies many of the same sources of the digital disinformation problem as traditional approaches, it differs in its proposed solution. I conclude then, by turning to Reddit to suggest alternative forms of organizing digital publics more democratically.

PROPAGANDA AND THE PUBLIC'S PROBLEM

Disinformation is a problem for democracy; if the public lacks access to the appropriate information, its preferences will be warped and its decisions corrupted (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Yet there has long been disagreement over whether citizens possess the capacity to accurately source, evaluate, and use information effectively for the purposes of democratic governance (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lippmann 1922). While some scholars have demonstrated that citizens are open to updating their misperceptions in light of more accurate information (Hill 2017; Wood and Porter 2019), others have studied how individual psychological phenomena, like information overload, motivated reasoning, and confirmation bias, make it difficult for citizens to participate in democratic decision-making in the way theorists expect them to—at least without some help (Flynn et al. 2017; Gaines et al. 2007).[1] Moreover, scholars have identified external factors—like the presence of "flawed ideologies" (Stanley 2016) or algorithmically generated "filter bubbles" (El-Bermawy 2016; Pariser 2011)—that can exacerbate these psychological deficiencies.

Recognizing the ways that digital technologies proliferate these external factors, many scholars have argued that digital platforms should take responsibility and curate the media environments they create, by tweaking algorithms to show more crosscutting information (Sunstein 2017), automatically flagging or correcting misinformation (Bode and Vraga 2015; Clayton et al. 2019), or "dampening" the spread of false or misleading information (Lazer et al. 2017). What all of these approaches have in common, however, is their focus on individuals. The problem of disinformation is, according to this tradition, largely one of individual cognitive deficiencies. While studies of filter bubbles and echo chambers gesture to group dynamics, even this work largely emphasizes the ways that digital technologies exacerbate the individual

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1. Despite these individual psychological proclivities, there is literature that suggests individuals can use heuristics to effectively make decisions even in the absence of complete information (see Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This question of precisely how much information citizens require to make competent decisions—as well as how they choose information sources—is an important consideration but falls outside the scope of this article.

psychological proclivities that enjoin us to stay with like-minded groups (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015).

This emphasis on individual susceptibilities to manipulation, while common, is nevertheless an incomplete picture of how information circulates in democratic societies; it ignores the role of social organization in determining how—and how well—citizens engage with (dis)information. In this section, then, I turn to the work of Harold D. Lasswell to articulate the relationship between propaganda and the organization of publics that engage with it. Writing in the early twentieth century, Lasswell devoted much of his career to studying the causes, effects, and techniques of propaganda in modern democratic societies (Dorzweiler 2015). And while Lasswell himself remained largely ambivalent to the effects of propaganda for democracy (Farr, Hacker, and Kazee 2006, 2008), we can nevertheless draw from his work a more accurate diagnosis of the conditions that lead to propaganda's success. Notably, throughout Lasswell's work he emphasizes the role of social (dis)organization in creating the conditions under which citizens are susceptible to the manipulation of outside actors, or "propagandists."

Lasswell defines propaganda in the widest terms, as "a technique of controlling attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (1928, 264). By targeting specific groups with tailored messages, propaganda operates by altering people's perceptions of the world around them and their relationships with others, all with the goal of ultimately changing their behavior. Yet while Lasswell wrote extensively about particular strategies of propagandists and the effects of their messages on the public (Lasswell 1927, 1938, 1951), he is also quite clear throughout his work that these specific techniques are secondary in determining propaganda's success.

In particular, Lasswell identifies the *social context* of propaganda—a factor outside the control of the propagandist—as key to its effectiveness. "No matter how skillful the propagandist may be in organizing his staff, selecting suggestions, and exploiting instruments of transmission," Lasswell tells us, "his manipulative skill will go for naught if there is no *favorable juxtaposition of social forces* to aid him" (1938, 222; emphasis mine). The skill of propagandists, he implies here, is not to be found in their ability to construct a message or to identify the right means of transmission. Instead, the critical skill of propagandists lies in their ability to identify and exploit a favorable set of social circumstances. The public must already be open to manipulation for propaganda campaigns to have any success; absent this "favorable juxtaposition," even the most talented propagandist with the best resources will fall short.

This favorable juxtaposition, furthermore, is the social disorganization that characterizes modern society. In short,

effective propaganda is, for Lasswell, a direct consequence of "a complex of changed circumstances which have altered the nature of society" (1927, 631). More specifically, "the rapid advent of technological change" (Lasswell 1938, 192) has led to a disorganized public in which members do not know how to relate to one another. The modern "Great Society," Lasswell tells us, is characterized by an "immensity" that results in a situation in which "power is subdivided and diffused" (222). The "bonds of personal loyalty and affection" (222)—both among citizens and between citizens and elites—have dissolved; the modern public instead "prefers to thrive on argument and news" (221). In this social context, individuals are isolated from one another, unable to see what ties them together. The result is "an atomized world in which individual whims have wider play than ever before, and it requires more strenuous exertions to co-ordinate and unify than formerly" (222).

It is this disorganization and confusion that leads Lasswell to claim that propaganda is "the new dynamic of society" (1938, 222). In the absence of organic ties of solidarity generated by citizens themselves, the public is left vulnerable to external manipulation by propagandists who can accurately identify their latent connections and direct them for their own ends. Propaganda, then, acts as a "new hammer and anvil of social solidarity" that organizes "certain cultural attitudes" (Lasswell 1927, 629) around specific objects, thereby signaling to citizens how they should relate to one another. Crucially, rather than pointing to propaganda as a cause of social disunion, Lasswell identifies the success of propaganda as an effect of a public that is already scattered and unfocused.

Lasswell's diagnosis of the mechanisms of propaganda thus helps to reframe the contemporary problem of digital disinformation. Instead of looking primarily at the tools and techniques of today's propagandists—digital platforms and their advertisers—or else focusing on the psychological capacities of individual site users, Lasswell's analysis directs our focus to the ways that digital platforms have introduced changes to the "material conditions and the convictions" (1935, 193) of contemporary publics in ways that leave them open to manipulation. Rather than look for solutions that tackle propaganda by focusing on the "menace" of elite propagandists, then, a more democratic alternative might examine the "material and the symbolic differences" (189) that characterize digital publics and consider how to reorganize them to reduce their susceptibility to propaganda in the first place.

REORGANIZING THE MODERN PUBLIC

Lasswell's analysis of propaganda is useful for sharpening our diagnosis of the digital disinformation problem: the

success of disinformation's spread on platforms like Facebook should be interpreted as a symptom of the underlying disorganization of publics on these sites. Yet Lasswell does not expand on the nature of this disorganization, nor does he give us ideas about how we might reorganize modern digital publics to address the problem of propaganda without turning to elite gatekeepers. For these more democratic alternatives, I turn to Lasswell's contemporary, John Dewey.[2] Dewey shares Lasswell's diagnosis of the disorganization of the Great Society, but unlike Lasswell, Dewey's firm commitment to democracy leads him to view this state of affairs with some trepidation and to identify solutions that preserve, rather than dismiss, the role of everyday citizens in exercising control over their environments.

Democracy, Dewey tells us, is the often difficult but ultimately rewarding process of cooperative social control. More than nominal rule by the people, democracy is a method that requires the "participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together" and demands that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them" (Dewey 2008d, 218). And the democratic method is, for Dewey, that of social inquiry and experimentation—the work of uncovering facts, exchanging opinions, and determining the best course of action, all while recognizing that political decisions are necessarily particular and contingent. Democracy, then, rests on faith in the "role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in the formation of public opinion, *which in the long run is self-corrective*" (Dewey 2008c, 227; emphasis mine)—faith, in other words, that publics are capable of intelligent inquiry.

Yet because "intelligence is a social asset" and "social method" that functions in the service of "social cooperation" (Dewey 2008e, 48), its success depends on certain social conditions to achieve. This is why Dewey argues that "the indictments that are drawn against the intelligence of individuals are in truth indictments of a social order" that fails to establish "conditions that will move the mass of individuals to appropriate and use what is at hand" in the work of social inquiry (38, 39). This emphasis on inquiry as a cooperative endeavor that requires a specific "social order" is what leads Dewey to claim that, ultimately, the problem of democracy is "the problem of that form of social organization, extending to all the areas and ways of living, in which the powers of individuals shall not be

merely released from mechanical external constraint but shall be fed, sustained, and directed" (25).

Through Dewey's work, then, we can not only generate a fuller picture of the nature and stakes of a participatory democratic politics but also outline the forms of social organization that support it. More specifically, I argue that in order to successfully engage in democratic inquiry, publics must be organized so that their members can (1) easily identify and communicate their common interests, so as to approach objects of inquiry from a "wide standpoint" or "social, instead of purely personal," point of view, and (2) regularly encounter variety, to diversify those interests to accurately reflect the multiple, overlapping interests of their members and ensure that the results of cooperative inquiry are self-correcting.

Identifying a public through common interests

Democratic politics, for Dewey, is the shared work of managing the "indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior" (1946, 126). A public, then, is composed "of all those who are affected" by these consequences "to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (15–16). The fact that members of the public are all in the same field of influence is what brings about a "common interest which required for its maintenance certain measures and rules" (17). As a group, or groups, of citizens "working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims" (Dewey 2008h, 10), the existence of common interests is the very foundation of a democratic public.

And it is the *recognition*, not just existence, of these common interests that is important, Dewey tells us, because it has the transformative effect of shifting our perspective. It is only when members of the public are able to identify—and communicate—their mutual interests that citizens come to see "private activities in their public bearings and to deal with them on the basis of the public interest" (Dewey 2008g, 220). Because democratic inquiry is about collectively managing the consequences of *conjoint* activity, citizens must develop a "social, instead of purely personal" perspective on the issue at hand (Dewey 2008a, 181; see also Dewey 2008f). And the recognition of easily identifiable common interests gives citizens the "wide standpoint" (Dewey 2008a, 180) that grounds the difficult and often contentious work of democratic inquiry.

Members of democratic publics must recognize themselves as such to engage in cooperative inquiry. Yet it is a hallmark of the Great Society, says Dewey, that "the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and

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2. Although Lasswell acknowledged that Dewey's pragmatic emphasis on practical problem solving influenced Lasswell's idea of a "problem orientation" for the policy sciences, Lasswell's otherwise un-Deweyan approach to, especially, propaganda suggests more distance between the two. See Farr (1999).

complicated the scope of indirect consequences . . . that a resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself" (1946, 126). Simply put, in the modern public shared interests exist but are not recognized as such—there are many felt effects but few identified causes. The result is a public that remains "shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance" (142). Citizens, as a result, have only a partial understanding of the issues and information at hand. This modern disorganization—the same that Lasswell ties to effective propaganda—is what leads Dewey to claim that the "prime difficulty" facing the modern age is "discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests" (146).

Diversifying a public through variety

And yet, as Dewey warns, an overemphasis on common interests, communicated via shared signs and symbols, can lead to homogeneity and stagnation. Beyond mere recognition of shared aims, then, Deweyan democracy demands that those common aims be "numerous and varied" and that citizens have the inclination to seek "the expansion and reinforcement of personal understanding and judgement by the cumulative and transmitted intellectual wealth of the community" (Dewey 1946, 218). Citizens should constantly work to uncover new information and readjust their thought and action in light of new meanings presented to them, thereby expanding their field of possibilities. Democracy, then, entails a commitment to creating the conditions under which multiple groups connect, overlap, and work together to expand opportunities for interactions. The democratic ideal is, in other words, a "free, flexible, and many-colored life" (217) and a commitment to making it freer, fuller, and more flexible.

To function democratically, moreover, means that all citizens have a responsibility "in forming and directing the activities of the groups" to which they belong (Dewey 1946, 147). But because every person is a member of multiple associations (e.g., a family, office, neighborhood, school), each of these multiple groups must be organized to "interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups" (147). In a well-organized democracy, in other words, "the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord" (148). Importantly, this is not the eradication of conflict; instead, the "method of democracy" is "to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately" (Dewey 2008e, 56). Only with this free exchange between multiple, overlapping

publics will citizens be exposed to the different claims and perspectives required to engage in democratic inquiry, and only under these conditions can we be confident that the decisions the public is making are self-correcting.

Indeed, absent this heterogeneity, shared interests can become quite antithetical to democratic ends. Consider Dewey's example of the band of robbers: "A member of a robber band may express his powers in a way consonant with belonging to that group and be directed by the interest in common to its members. But he does so only at the cost of repression of those potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups. The robber band cannot interact flexibly with other groups; it can act only through isolating itself. It must prevent the operation of all interests save those which circumscribe it in its separateness" (1946, 148). By virtue of their membership in the band of robbers, the thieves are incapable of fully expressing their potential as members of other publics, like the state. One is a robber, in other words, *at the expense of* one's other capacities. And by restricting the interests of its members in this way, the robber band in fact eschews the self-correcting nature of democratic inquiry. If certain options are not open for consideration—if we cannot test our ideas against potentially viable alternatives—then we cannot be sure our chosen path is the right one. Only under conditions in which individuals can interact with the multiple, sometimes conflicting, groups to which they belong can we be sure that the results of democratic inquiry are the best and most accurate representation of the publics' diverse, and diversifying, interests.

Organizing a democratic public

Dewey's conception of democracy as a method of inquiry—as "organized intelligence"—demands much of citizens. But it is also, he makes clear, one that relies on underlying patterns of social organization to fulfill. Because "the way in which any organized social interest is controlled necessarily plays an important part in forming the dispositions and tastes, the attitudes, interests, purposes and desires, of those engaged in carrying on the activities of the group" (Dewey 2008d, 221), if publics are organized democratically—with clearly identifiable common interests and regular encounters with variety—they will be better prepared to practice democratic inquiry. This is why Dewey insists that the "wholehearted effort to make democracy a living reality . . . involves organization" (2008e, 64). The built environment can serve these organizational purposes of signaling shared interests and promoting variety (Forestal 2017), but so too can membership in groups, clubs, and other forms of association.

Consider the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). As an "ecosystem of individuals and organizations" with a "shared

vision and policy agenda" (Movement for Black Lives 2020), affiliation with M4BL signals a shared investment in Black liberation; it helps members develop a wide standpoint with which to coordinate and advance their shared interest in racial justice. Yet the structure of M4BL also works to promote the variety required for self-correcting democratic inquiry. M4BL's United Front is composed of a range of organizations, including groups with more specific interests in, for example, immigration, gun violence, and environmental justice (Movement for Black Lives 2020; Newkirk 2016). By creating conditions under which diverse groups can negotiate points of commonality and conflict, M4BL's structure supports members' work experimenting with, expanding, and clarifying their understanding of racial justice—the work of democratic inquiry (Woodly 2018).

Crucially, however, both of these organizational elements—identifiable common interests and access to variety—must be controlled by the members of the public. The mere presence of common interests or diverse perspectives is not enough to ensure that citizens will engage in democratic inquiry; if citizens are not actively involved in securing the conditions for inquiry, they will not be prepared to engage in the process of inquiry itself. This is because, says Dewey, "habitual exclusion has the effect of reducing a sense of responsibility for what is done and its consequences" (2008d, 224). Instead, the "argument for democracy" implies "that the best way to produce initiative and constructive power is to exercise it" (224). A democratic alternative to the problem of digital disinformation, then, demands a social reorganization that facilitates site users' participation in controlling the symbols of their common interests and managing the exchange of diverse opinions in the self-correcting process of inquiry.

REVITALIZING DIGITAL DEMOCRACIES

Dewey's insistence on the participation of citizens at each stage of democratic inquiry—from securing the necessary social conditions to drawing (temporary and contestable) conclusions—clarifies why gatekeeping approaches to the problem of digital disinformation are undemocratic solutions. Although platforms might tweak their algorithms to ensure variety and moderators could curate content to highlight shared interests, these strategies ultimately exclude users from the decision-making process. Rather than provide opportunities for users to engage in practices of democratic inquiry, which necessarily involve controlling their environment, gatekeeping tactics encourage user passivity since "absence of participation," Dewey tells us, "tends to produce lack of interest and concern on the part of those shut out" (2008d, 223). By giving individuals "no opportunity to reflect and decide upon what

is good for them," Dewey argues in fact that this kind of "exclusion from participation is a subtle form of suppression" (218). While gatekeeping measures might work to prevent the spread of disinformation, in other words, they do so at the expense of the democratic inquiry they are intended to facilitate.

Instead of relying on elite gatekeepers to address the digital disinformation problem, moreover, Dewey provides insight into a more democratic alternative. Retaining his democratic faith in public participation, while not disavowing the dangers posed by modern technological changes, Dewey's solution to the challenges of the modern Great Society was to call for a reorganization of the public, by reinvigorating "local communal life" so that it would draw an "inexhaustible and flowing fund of meanings" (1946, 216–17) from its larger relationships with other groups. These ordered and stable local spaces would provide opportunities for citizens to develop the "vital, steady, and deep relationships" that give individuals the grounding necessary to meaningfully discuss issues of the day in an increasingly fast-paced and frantic globalized world (214). Rather than eschew either the global forces of modernity or the responsibilities of individual citizens, Dewey instead outlined a networked "Great Community" in which citizens would come to understand their place in the world with and through their local communities (Kosnoski 2005).

While it is true that Dewey himself envisioned these local communities to be traditional physical sites of schools and neighborhoods, arguing that "in its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse" (1946, 211), it is also clear that digital technologies are playing an increasingly prominent role in our social and political lives. To that end, it is my goal to take the spirit of Dewey's insistence on local communities and adapt these ideas to suit the needs of our digital age. "The idea of democracy," says Dewey elsewhere, must be constantly "rediscovered, remade and reorganized" (2008b, 182). And the "standing danger" is that old ideas "will be acted upon implicitly without reconstruction to meet new conditions" (Dewey 2008e, 37). In that spirit—to "remake" democracy in a world dominated by digital technologies—I argue we must expand our understanding of how to generate local communities of inquiry, by focusing on the form of social organization, rather than the mode of communication, that characterizes them.

In what follows, I analyze the example of Facebook to show how two key elements of the site—the News Feed algorithm and Facebook Groups—operate to exacerbate the problem of social disorganization that Lasswell and Dewey identify as the source of propaganda's success. I argue that the

News Feed, in conjunction with Facebook's dyadic relationship structure, makes it difficult for Facebook users to identify their shared interests and communicate with one another. At the same time, Facebook Groups help publics identify shared interests but—given the effects of the News Feed—are not built to invite the kind of variety that is necessary for users to engage with these interests in critical, self-correcting ways. Ultimately, I argue, publics organized by Facebook are not suited to democratic inquiry but are instead quite susceptible to manipulation by propagandists. But this need not be the case. To suggest an alternative model for organizing digital democratic publics, I turn to discuss Reddit before concluding with some suggestions as to future work.

Networked individualism: The Facebook News Feed

Over the past few years, Facebook has repeatedly been criticized for its role in spreading disinformation and otherwise undermining democracy (Vaidhyanathan 2018). Rather than lay blame for Facebook's disinformation problem on Russian operatives, Facebook moderators, or users themselves, however, Lasswell and Dewey remind us to consider that disinformation's success on Facebook is a function of the way the platform organizes its social network. Notably, Facebook organizes its users in ways that largely obscure their memberships in different publics; rather, Facebook users are generally responsible for curating their own personalized experience on the site (Oremus 2016). The result echoes Lasswell's description of modern society: it is "an atomized world in which individual whims have wider play than ever before" (1938, 222)—and one in which users are primed for manipulation.

Facebook relationships are, for the most part, dyadic. Users connect with each friend individually; one's network on Facebook is therefore centered around each individual user rather than a community's shared interest.[3] The result is what Wellman et al. (2003) characterize as "networked individualism" in which "people remain connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network." As a result of this organization, Facebook users are unable to properly situate themselves in a community with shared interests; they ultimately lack the proper tools to be able to understand and act on information as part of an organized public.

Instead of facilitating the development of the wide standpoint necessary for democratic inquiry, in other words,

Facebook's organization encourages users to retain their narrow personal perspective and act as individuals. Facebook users largely engage in "directed communication with individual friends," "passive consumption of social news," or "broadcasting," posting general content for others to passively consume (Burke, Kraut, and Marlow 2011). The result is, as Dewey warned, a site on which "the individual views everything with reference to his ends and needs in isolation from the society of which he is a member" (2008a, 180)—a site that lends itself not to the self-correction of democratic inquiry but instead fosters "knowledge in the form of opinion and dogma" (180). Because publics on Facebook are scattered and inchoate, individual users cannot easily understand their connections to others, nor can they develop the social point of view that grounds democratic inquiry.

Yet while users cannot easily identify and communicate as members of publics on Facebook, these publics nevertheless exist. They are, as Dewey might say, "latent." Indeed, Facebook's profit model is based on advertisers paying handsomely for the opportunity to target these latent publics—groups as specific as "women ages 18 to 20 who live or were recently near Washington, District of Columbia," "Jew hater," and "pretending to text in awkward situations" (Angwin, Mattu, and Parris 2016; Angwin et al. 2017; Tobin and Merrill 2018). While individual users can see their own personal "interests," moreover, these too are atomized; because Facebook does not disclose to users the other members of these groups, the result is an information asymmetry in which advertisers—Lasswellian propagandists—can very effectively identify, target, and manipulate Facebook publics by shaping their information choices and influencing their opinions in ways that users are not fully aware of (see Mansbridge 2003; Zaller 1992). And the Facebook publics, unable to recognize themselves because of the way Facebook organizes the site, cannot collectively act to contain, counter, or even reflect on the "social suggestions" they see.

The effect of this "networked individualism" is thus precisely what Lasswell and Dewey warned of. By making it difficult for citizens to recognize their membership in any number of publics on the site, Facebook keeps its publics disorganized. Users cannot easily identify other users they share interests with and are therefore unable to communicate and act to manage those interests efficiently. As a result, Facebook users are primed for propaganda; unable to identify shared interests and to develop the corresponding wide standpoint necessary to critically engage with those interests, Facebook users are left to focus on their own narrow individual concerns—concerns that are then easily manipulated by contemporary propagandists.

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3. This is a change from the older Facebook model that was centered around university-specific networks, gated by a .edu e-mail address (Chan 2009).

Facebook Groups: Shared interests without variety

Although Facebook's basic structure is oriented around individuals, the site has more recently introduced changes to the News Feed algorithm that are intended to reinvigorate Facebook Groups. Introduced in 2010, Groups are intended for users to "communicate about shared interests with certain people" (Facebook 2020). Importantly, Groups are a tool ultimately controlled by users; users can, and do, create Groups for a variety of reasons, from the mundane ("Instant Pot Community") to the controversial ("I'm 10-15," for current and former US Border Patrol agents). By highlighting users' shared interests, Facebook Groups facilitate the formation of publics on an otherwise individualized platform, providing users with the context necessary to develop a wide standpoint with which to interpret, understand, and act on news and information in a more collectively oriented way.

Recall, however, that the mere recognition of common interests and the cultivation of a social point of view is not enough to secure the conditions for self-correcting democratic inquiry. And, in fact, Facebook Groups have notably been criticized for their role in facilitating the spread of, for example, anti-vaxxer misinformation. Operating in "closed" (meaning Group members must be approved by Group administrators) or "secret" (meaning Groups are unsearchable on Facebook) Groups, many anti-vaxx proponents use Facebook Groups to both draw in new members and bar access to those who might disagree. Thus, they are "able to serve undiluted misinformation without challenge" (Pilkington and Glenza 2019). And the result is, as Dewey warned, a narrowing of the Group's focus and a corresponding retreat into the "dogmatic habit of mind" that accepts some ideas "without question and without reason" (2008a, 188).

Again, however, we can trace this to a problem with the way that Facebook organizes its publics. Recall that practicing habits of inquiry not only demands a social point of view but also requires opportunities for users to engage with their overlapping interests and work through the conflicts that inevitably develop. While Facebook Groups can help facilitate a wide standpoint by making common interests easily identifiable, these groups often work in tandem with other Facebook mechanisms—like targeted advertising, autofilled search suggestions, and the News Feed—that are built to feed users content that is similar to what they already engage with (Wong 2019a). The result is often, as with the case of anti-vaxxers, a "'small world' network structure," where "information diffuses quickly and easily through the network" as users comment and share among the multiple like-minded Groups to which they belong (Smith and Graham 2019, 1323). In so doing, users may develop a particular social point of view—but one that is not self-correcting.

In the absence of variety, moreover—or the "interpenetration of populations" that Lasswell tells us "make it difficult to control sentiment at will" (1938, 187)—Facebook Groups can in fact make it easier for propagandists to target and manipulate publics on the site. Drawing on the tensions—the "public anxiety, nervousness, irritability, unrest, discontent or strain" (190)—evident in a Group's discussions, propagandists can take advantage of the "favorable conditions" of Groups to more effectively target messages intended to manipulate these publics into certain actions. Indeed, a number of anti-vaxx proponents who administer closed Facebook Groups have been shown to spread misinformation by targeting Facebook users interested in "vaccine controversies" as well as encouraging members of their Groups to purchase products and services that further entrench their anti-vaxx perspective (Pilkington and Glenza 2019; Wong 2019b). It is the combination of closed and secret Facebook Groups and the personalized algorithms that govern the site, in other words, that leads to the formation of, for example, anti-vaxxer publics that are not well suited for self-correcting democratic inquiry but are instead rendered susceptible to dogmatic beliefs, conspiracy theorizing, and propaganda.

A more democratic alternative: Reddit

While this emphasis on social organization might identify the same problems as many media and technology scholars working today—in targeted ads and algorithmically generated personalized filter bubbles—it also points to a more democratic means of addressing them. Rather than rely on platforms like Facebook to block or ban ads or else tweak its algorithms, the kind of democratic alternatives Dewey points us to would instead consider how best to design digital platforms that empower users to take responsibility for not only sorting information efficiently but also securing the social conditions under which they can effectively engage in this work themselves. And one possible model for this, I argue, is Reddit.

Reddit is a popular link-sharing site that emphasizes user-managed and user-generated site structures and content. The self-ascribed "front page of the internet," Reddit is built around the idea that its over 330 million monthly active users (self-described "Redditors") are participants in building and maintaining the site's 138,000 active communities, all dedicated to a specific topic ranging from the mundane (e.g., r/movies) to the extremely specialized (e.g., r/politicalphilosophy) and from the benign (e.g., r/aww) to the contentious (e.g., r/politics).[4] Upon joining the site, users can become

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4. Data are as of November 2017. The site also averages over 20 billion screen views per month (Reddit 2018).

members of existing subreddits or create new ones based on their interests. As a result, subreddits exist for whatever users want to create (and join) them for; it is this support for niche communities, and the corresponding availability of diverse content on the platform, that Redditors cite as the site's "greatest pull" (Newell et al. 2016, 285).

Organized around membership in, and interactions between, a diverse array of subreddits, Reddit reflects the kind of Great Community—a network of multiple, overlapping publics—that Dewey envisions as a cure for the modern public's problem of disorganization. Like Facebook Groups, subreddits are user generated and user controlled. Unlike Facebook, however, users cannot engage with Reddit except through subreddits. As "local communities," each clearly organized around a particular topic, the subreddits make it immediately clear to Redditors that they hold interests in common with others. If you join r/askpoliticalscience, for example, you know that everyone in that subreddit is interested in political science. And having this foundation of shared interests means that members of these subreddits can more easily develop a "social point of view," one that is reflected in increased expressions of collective identity in users' posts (Hamilton et al. 2017) and influenced by the unique signs and symbols of communication that govern each subreddit— norms that both differ between subreddits and make communicating with these specific publics easier (Chandrasekharan et al. 2018; Horne, Adah, and Sikdar 2017).

Like Facebook Groups, then, the subreddit structure facilitates the formation of publics on Reddit, by helping Redditors easily identify interests they share with others and cultivate a wide standpoint from which to discuss and evaluate those interests. Unlike Facebook Groups, however, Reddit organizes its users in a way that deliberately acknowledges their multiple interests and thus introduces variety into Redditors' experiences. Whereas Facebook users engage with the site through a personalized News Feed of individual posts that are filtered to show more of the same, Redditors' "front page" is a feed that collects the top posts and threads from each subreddit they are subscribed to—all of which are marked as belonging to a specific subreddit community.[5] Reddit is thus designed such that users can and do simultaneously engage with many overlapping publics, encouraging Redditors to

pursue a variety of interests and activities across the platform (Waller and Anderson 2019).

By facilitating the overlapping memberships of each Redditor, Reddit organizes its users in a way that invites contestation both within and among subreddits as they engage with the new information and ideas that disseminate across the site (Cole, Ghafurian, and Reitter 2017). Not only does Reddit see inter-subreddit conflicts, as different communities disagree with one another (Datta and Adar 2019), but it also hosts intra-subreddit contestation as well, as communities negotiate between different perspectives on the interests they share (Buyukozturk, Gaulden, and Dowd-Arrow 2018; Leavitt and Clark 2014). The result is a dynamic, digital Great Community, where over time individual subreddits shift and change both membership and emphasis (Habib et al. 2019) and Redditors diversify their interests, posting in a greater number and variety of subreddits, the longer they are users of the site (Tan and Lee 2015).

Unlike Facebook, then, which creates conditions under which publics are atomized and rendered particularly susceptible to suggestions from propagandists, Reddit's design facilitates—even encourages—the kind of interpenetration of populations that Lasswell argues protect publics from the manipulative effects of propaganda. As a result, Reddit can and does host subreddits that, for example, engage in "constructive, public discourse about the practices of democratic institutions" (Buozis 2019, 358); share, discuss, and contextualize news and information regarding current events (Gui et al. 2018; Leavitt and Clark 2014); and support citizen journalism projects characterized by "nuanced, comprehensive debate and coverage" (Mitchell and Lim 2018, 414). Rather than remain in echo chambers, subject to filter bubbles and closed communities, Reddit's design facilitates the kind of critical, diverse, and collaborative engagement with information that Dewey argued we would see from democratically organized publics.

Yet there are, of course, subreddits that do not facilitate the kind of self-correcting inquiry that marks democratic politics. Reddit often makes headlines for the conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns that are generated and spread by communities such as r/conspiracy, r/TheRedPill, r/the_donald, and, famously, r/pizzagate. While these kinds of subreddits are a small subset of the overall Reddit ecosystem, they account for the majority of "alternative news sources" shared on the site (Zannettou et al. 2017). In these subreddits, moreover, we see dynamics like those of the Facebook antivaxxer Groups, where long-time members of these communities "show signs of radicalization through their increased— and increasingly exclusive—engagement with the conspiracy theory community" (Samory and Mitra 2018, 348). Because

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5. In r/popular, the default view for logged-out users, selected posts are "the most shared, upvoted, and commented," while r/all are "the most active posts from all of Reddit." In either view, posts are sorted by "hot," meaning they are randomly selected and normalized by "top posts" from each subreddit. As of 2018, however, logged-in users can also choose to sort by "best," which personalizes the "hot" sorting by selecting from more desired communities and filtering old posts.

these subreddits restrict, or often ban, users and information that might contradict or expand their stated purpose, the longtime members of these communities end up generating the dogmatic approach to their shared interests that we see in Facebook's anti-vaxxer Groups.

Reddit's response to these kinds of fringe subreddits—on the occasions when site administrators take action—exemplifies the traditional gatekeeping approach. By banning or "quarantining" problematic communities, either removing a subreddit from the site or else clearly labeling it as problematic, as well as tweaking the front page algorithm to downplay content from these groups, Reddit engages precisely the "system of safeguards" scholars argue platforms should use to combat the spread of digital disinformation.[6] And while research into the effectiveness of these gatekeeping mechanisms on Reddit is mixed (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017; Habib et al. 2019), they are nevertheless, as I have been arguing, fundamentally undemocratic approaches.

Yet all hope is not lost. Reddit's structure also provides some indication of the success of more democratic alternatives to outright banning or censoring troublesome subreddits. A 2018 study, for example, showed that "toxic" subreddits, such as r/conspiracy, are often thwarted when they try to spread their conspiratorial messages to other subreddits. When the "attacked" communities respond directly to the disinformation, and work collectively to counter these messages, the disinformation fails to spread (Kumar et al. 2018). These results align with other research that indicates that citizens may be more open to corrections than previously believed (Hill 2017; Wood and Porter 2019), that social corrections—correction by others that users recognize to be in their network—can be an effective deterrent for the spread of digital disinformation (Vraga and Bode 2018), and that imagined audiences shape users' strategies of correction (Arif et al. 2017).

As I have been arguing, however, these corrective interactions are only possible under certain social conditions. The organization of the publics in question can explain why some studies show social corrections to be successful, while others find fact checking to be largely ineffective (Friggeri et al. 2014; Shin et al. 2016). The community dynamics—the social organization of the public—matters. As Margolin, Hannak, and Weber (2018) argue, corrections work when users "have a bond or share a community" with the corrector (214). And in order to develop those bonds, as I have shown,

publics must be organized so they can (1) easily identify common interests, which facilitates the recognition that one shares a community or audience and enables collective responses to disinformation, and (2) experience a variety of perspectives, derived from the interpenetration of populations, which enables corrections in the first place. Rather than turn immediately to elite gatekeeping mechanisms to address digital disinformation, then, we should consider how to reorganize digital publics so they can develop and maintain the social conditions that support these decentralized and participatory practices of democratic inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of digital disinformation is, rightly, a concern for all those invested in maintaining a robust democracy in a digital age. Recent solutions, however, have taken a narrow approach to the problem of digital propaganda, emphasizing the role of elite gatekeepers. Turning especially to Facebook and Google as modern "purveyors of news," many have demanded a higher level of curation from "experts." In return, these sites have introduced new moderation practices, as well as changes to their site algorithms, all intended to control the flow of information for users who are ill equipped to do so for themselves. But while the effect may be a more efficient presentation of facts, it has also minimized the role of members of these digital publics in taking responsibility for managing their own communities. These gatekeeping solutions are, in other words, fundamentally undemocratic.

Such responses to "fake news" are premised on the understanding that members of digital publics are incapable of performing the kinds of tasks democratic theory requires of them. But, I argue, this claim may be premature. "Capacities," as Dewey tells us, "are limited by the objects and tools at hand" and depend greatly on the underlying form of social organization (1946, 210). Rather than assuming citizens incapable, then, and looking for ways to affix constraints on where, when, and how publics grapple with issues of public concern, another approach to the problem of the digital public consists in the "practical reformation of social conditions" (211). It calls for a reinvigoration of the habits of collective inquiry and increased attentiveness to the forms of social organization that secure the conditions under which citizens can engage in these practices.

Of course, this "practical reformation" is no easy task. It requires, first, that companies like Facebook make a serious commitment to supporting democratic communities and invest in making the kinds of structural changes required to achieve those goals. And while there are some indications that Facebook, for example, might be amenable to empowering users to control their environments—in February 2019,

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6. As of November 2020, for example, Reddit administrators have enacted such measures against all four subreddits listed above: r/the_donald and r/pizzagate were banned (removing them from the platform), while r/conspiracy and r/TheRedPill are quarantined.

for example, Mark Zuckerberg posited a "crowdsourced model" of fact checking (Levin and Wong 2019)—the company is sending conflicting signals, introducing additional changes intended to promote private, group-based communication (Isaac 2019) that would further erode the social conditions necessary for such instances of collaborative inquiry to succeed. It therefore remains to be seen whether Facebook and other digital platforms will be willing to forgo their current profit margins to generate the conditions necessary for democratic inquiry.

In addition to securing the cooperation of digital platforms, moreover, more work must be done in clarifying the proper relationship of experts and citizens in this new configuration. The reorganization of the public and the reinvigoration of citizens' role in democratic inquiry does not require the eschewing of expert knowledge any more than it requires valorizing it. Simply turning to Facebook (or democratic theorists) to redesign the site to support democratic inquiry is, however, an approach that is as undemocratic—and undesirable—as the gatekeeping measures being implemented today. Instead, the practical reformation of platforms like Facebook must involve the participation of both experts and site users alike. The task, then, is for experts to work collaboratively with site users to determine how best to establish these social conditions. Efforts like J. Nathan Matias's work with Redditors to improve discussions in r/science and r/worldnews, for example, are thus promising models of how to include experts in the process of democratic inquiry—without disempowering citizens (Matias and Mou 2018).

Despite these challenges, we cannot yet give up on digital media as potential sites for democratic politics. Equipped with this vocabulary of social organization, we can better understand the ways in which platforms like Facebook organize digital publics—or else how they fail to do so—and can develop more targeted interventions to ensure they do so democratically. "Centralized, top-down control is a solution of the past," proclaimed a 2017 article in *Scientific American*. "Therefore, the solution for the future is collective intelligence" (Helbing et al. 2017). Instead of abdicating citizens' responsibility for creating conditions for inquiry, we must renew our commitment to "collective intelligence" and rebuild digital platforms to support that end.

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