

Truth, knowledge, and democracy: Reflections on the role of social media in shaping (un)democratic processes

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The nature of democracy

What is democracy? I like Abraham Lincoln's characterization: it is government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Some will no doubt view this as naïve: in the 1940s, for instance, Joseph Schumpeter influentially argued that this kind of definition is too vague (e.g. for the purposes of political science); and he held instead that 'the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Schumpeter 1943, 269). In short, free and fair competitive elections are the essence of democracy.

I think this is wrong-headed. First, it ignores the existence (e.g. in Ancient Greece) of (sortative) democracies in which representatives are selected by lottery. Equally, it ignores direct (rather than representative) democracy (e.g. in certain small-scale democratic organizations). Schumpeter's definition misclassifies these examples and is therefore quite simply mistaken.

But it is also misguided. The objection that a Lincoln-style definition is too vague depends, in my view, on the outdated philosophy of science of the 1930s that confounds truth and knowledge. The objection is that Lincoln's definition gives no method for determining whether, or verifying that, a given state is a democracy. But the idea that a definition should do this has long since been abandoned: it is now widely thought that a definition should tell us when it is true that it applies. It need not tell us whether it does.

In recent work, Philip Kitcher (2019) has suggested that there are three levels of democracy. At the first level there is Schumpeter's kind of electoral system. Kitcher calls this 'Bush league' (i.e. low-level) democracy. We can see why. Authoritarians are

increasingly able to exploit state infrastructure that is democratic in this weak sense. It is possible to have Schumpeterian democracy without even approximating government by the people.

Nevertheless, there is an ideal that is presupposed by, and even embodied in, Schumpeter's institutional structure: equality. Citizens in democratic states in this sense have an equal vote. Of course, this ideal can be perverted in practice, but it is important that 'Bush league' democracy aspires to equality.

At a second (and 'deeper') level, there is what Kitcher (2019) calls 'Millian' democracy. In this liberal conception of democracy, the kind of free and open discussion of issues allows citizens to achieve knowledge of how best to pursue their individual good through the electoral system – which in turn is expressed in citizens' votes.

Although Kitcher (2019) doesn't argue this, I think a case can be made that there is a second ideal embodied in the liberal conception of democracy: liberty. In particular, it might be thought that without the open discussion of issues, votes will not be cast freely.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for concern about liberal democracy. Kitcher (2019) worries that it institutes the epistemic but not 'the affective conditions democracy requires' (forthcoming, p.5); and he suggests that democracy at a third, still deeper level – Deweyan democracy – remedies this defect. This kind of democracy emphasizes collective decision-making through inclusive, informed deliberation, requiring not just liberty and equality, but also fraternity.

Arguably, then, the characterization of democracy with which I began – Abraham Lincoln's government of the people, by the people, and for the people – involves a commitment to the three ideals of the French revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. And while

Kitcher (2019) does not stress this, the epistemic requirement on democracy (which underpins it as an autonomous form of self-government) is that of a citizenry able to pursue the collective good rather than their individual self-interest (cf. Ball, 2020).

The roles of truth and knowledge in action

Philosophers (following Williamson, 2000) are increasingly recognizing the importance of knowledge, rather than belief, as the proper basis for deliberation and action. For instance, we ought to take our knowledge into account when estimating likelihoods and we ought to take such likelihoods into account when deciding what to do. The trouble with relying on belief is that it may be mistaken. Only knowledge (not mere belief) guarantees truth; and so only knowledge is a proper basis for action.

This applies to both individual and collective action. We need to know whether climate change is caused by our carbon emissions - or at least take account of the likelihood that it is - if we are to make an appropriate decision regarding carbon taxes.

The undermining of democracy by social media

Social media can prevent the formation of group knowledge within a democratic electorate in (at least) two ways (cf. Ball, 2020). It can facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation and it can increase hyper-partisanship (e.g. in online discussion). In each of these ways, trust can be eroded. If erroneous information is rampant, individuals may become more sceptical of the information they encounter. Such factors can lead to increases in false individual beliefs. Hyper-partisanship may prevent people from obtaining evidence that would allow them to revise their mistaken opinions. Of course, if individual opinions are highly polarized, or agnosticism is widespread, then effective, rational, collective democratic decision-making, action, and self-governance in that group will be impossible.

What can be done?

There are (roughly) two strategies that could tackle the kinds of concerns raised (cf. Cairncross, 2019). We

(via our governments) could encourage increased critical media literacy or we could regulate social media companies and other online platforms. While implementation of the first would no doubt be welcome, it is my view that the second alternative should not be neglected. By way of analogy: to avoid the consumption of contaminated water, we do not teach citizens the chemistry required to test water; rather, we regulate to ensure that the water is not contaminated. And it seems to me that something similar can be said about the case at hand.

Of course, pursuing the second option will require great care - regulation must not be pursued which would preclude satisfaction of the epistemic conditions on democracy stressed under the liberal conception. Showing that this can be done is a task for another occasion: here, I simply note that there are regulations in place in the UK that do not violate these conditions, namely those governing the broadcast media. I see no reason of principle why these cannot be adapted to the case of the new social media. We don't need to re-invent the wheel - we just need to use it as and when appropriate.

References

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