

Democracy and the Contemporary Media: What is the Problem?

Alexander Prescott-Couch

Abstract: The dissemination of “fake news,” the focus on trivialities and polemics, and the covert diffusion of government propaganda have raised concerns that media organizations amplify views and issues not deserving of attention in public debate. Such media criticism is typically framed around the concern that these problems with the media are a “problem for democracy.” But how exactly do these problems connect to democracy? This paper considers a number of distinct values that are threatened by problems with the current media environment. Besides worries that current public discourse is leading to poor substantive political outcomes, I consider how the current media environment might undermine democratic self-determination and egalitarian social relations. I then consider potential conflicts among the various values that underlie the value of democracy, and suggest two mechanisms by which conflicts among these values can be attenuated: collective intelligence and mediated deliberation with a “division of interpretive labor.” I conclude by suggesting some avenues for normative reflection and empirical research.

1. Introduction

Recent political events – Brexit, Trump, populist movements in Europe – have brought renewed scrutiny of the public sphere and worries about

the processes of public opinion formation. The dissemination of “fake news,” the focus on trivialities and polemics, and the covert diffusion of government propaganda have raised concerns that media organizations amplify views and issues not deserving of attention in public debate. At the same time, certain options and perspective are arguably underrepresented, leading to bias and distorted coverage.

Such media criticism is typically framed around the concern that these problems with the media are a “problem for democracy.”¹ But how exactly do these problems connect to democracy? A natural answer is that bad processes of opinion formation yield bad opinions, and thereby bad political outcomes. Bluntly put, misinformation and other problems is how we got Trump, Brexit, etc.

This paper aims to supplement this answer by considering a number of distinct values that are threatened by problems with the current media environment. Next to worries that current public discourse is leading to poor substantive political outcomes of the sort just mentioned, I consider how the current media environment might undermine democratic self-determination and egalitarian social relations. I then consider potential conflicts among the various values that underlie the value of democracy, and suggest two mechanisms by which conflicts among these values can be attenuated: collective intelligence and mediated deliberation with a “division of interpretive labor.” I conclude by suggesting some avenues for normative reflection and empirical research.

¹ There are numerous examples of such concerns, e.g. Gebelhoff 2019 and Beauchamp 2019.

2. Public Discourse in the Contemporary Media Environment

Recent criticisms of the media environment have highlighted ways in which public discourse is both too exclusive and too inclusive.

Concerns about exclusion often start with the observation that members of the commentariat and political press differ from the average citizen in a number of ways. Journalists are more liberal, better educated, and wealthier than the average person (Shafer and Doherty 2017) as well as more likely to be white and male (News Leader Association 2020a, News Leader Association 2020b). They are also more likely to live in a major metropolitan area, a trend that has only accelerated with the decline of local press (Shafer and Doherty 2017). As political cleavages along the lines of education and population density (urban vs. rural) become increasingly important, such differences matter more and more.

These observations give rise to three distinct concerns about exclusion in the mainstream media. First, individuals from different social positions do not have equal ability to access positions in the media. Gatekeeping is not seen as legitimate because not everyone has the effective opportunity to be a gatekeeper. Second, there are certain perspectives, interests, and issues that are (thereby) excluded from consideration and discussion in mainstream channels. Discussion revolves around topics of elite interest rather than broad public importance. Third, the style of discussion is conducted in a manner that is comfortable to some but alienating to others—for instance, the style is

elevated and formal rather than “folksy.” These varying concerns often come together to create a perception that the political press is operating within a “media bubble” in which the full diversity of social and political perspectives are not sufficiently or appropriately covered (e.g. Silver 2017). Media gatekeepers are keeping exclusive company, and these patterns of exclusion are distorting public discourse.

Public discourse is also sometimes thought to be problematically *inclusive* – the gatekeepers are not keeping enough out. The public sphere is full of junk, fake news, and foreign propaganda (Albright 2017). Here, there are a number of concerns. First, there are worries about certain kinds of *positions* or *contents* being amplified that do not deserve inclusion. For instance, if our public sphere is full of fake news and conspiracy theories, it is easy for citizens to be misled and hard for them to focus on the positions that truly merit discussion (Jamieson and Albarracin 2020; Ingraham 2020).

Second, there are concerns about which *topics* are receiving attention. For instance, there is too much focus on personalities and trivialities (gaffes!) at the expense of discussions of substantive policy and principles (Otten 1992). Moreover, even if there focus on issues that might matter substantively, the importance of the issue does not determine the degree of coverage (“but her emails!”) (Faris et al 2017). More broadly, as political scientists often point out, there is much coverage of the “horse race” and the political effectiveness of various

policies, potentially crowding out discussion of the substantive merits of various political positions (Patterson 2016, Pew Research Center 2010).

Third, there are worries about the *style* of discussion. Instead of reasoned debate, we have insults on Twitter or other social media platforms. Simplistic and specious arguments are repeated rather than more careful forms of reasoning considered. Many political actors are seeking to appeal to small groups of like-minded partisans rather than aiming at building consensus and seeking to understand alternative viewpoints (Stewart et al 2019). There is grandstanding rather than serious attempts to reckon with alternative viewpoints (Tosi and Warmke 2020), and, at the extreme, we have hate speech and harassment (Pintak et al 2019).

Finally, there are worries about *who* is talking. Perhaps some outside powers is illicitly influencing what is discussed and how, and automated bots have become increasingly powerful in shaping the news agenda (Morgan 2018). Is “the people” directing discussion, or is it outside actors who are “manipulating” public opinion?

Taken together, I will refer to these problems as “problematic public discourse,” making further differentiations as needed.

3. Democracy and Deliberation

What is “problematic” about problematic public discourse? The broad problem is that such discourse corrupts the processes of

deliberation about political issues, and deliberation is crucial for a well-functioning democracy.

While views about the importance of deliberation for democracy differ, a prominent strand of democratic theory places public discussion directly at the center of an account of what democracy is and what makes it valuable. So-called “deliberative democrats” propose a model of democracy that focuses attention on talk- or persuasion-based solutions to political conflict, in contrast to solutions based on suppression, bargaining, or aggregation of opinions.²

On this view, the ideal of democracy involves (i) collective reasoning (ii) about the common good and (iii) on terms of freedom and equality (terms in which all individuals are free to express their views without fear of sanction and where each’s viewpoint is taken into account). The paradigmatic democratic process is not voting but rather the town hall meeting, where citizens convene to discuss their views and come to a decision on the basis of argument, rather than, say, the mobilization of competing interest and identity groups in electoral competition. Moreover, on this view, public discourse—in the media, informal political discussion, and scholarly work—is often thought of on the model of an informal town hall spread out across space and time (e.g. Habermas 1991).

Needless to say, these three conditions on deliberation are very demanding. Contemporary public discourse certainly fails to meet them.

² See particularly Bohman and Rehg 1997 for an overview of deliberative democracy.

What problems that are raised by this failure for democracy? I will argue that there are a number of distinct democratic values that problematic public discourse impacts, and there is therefore a plurality of distinct ways that the current media environment might be thought to undermine democracy.

4. The Bad Effects of Problematic Public Discourse

When journalists, pundits, academics, and others worry that such problems with the media are a “problem for democracy,” their primary focus is often on the outcomes of democratic procedures. If discourse is exclusionary, certain important considerations will be neglected,³ and if it is full of invective rather than reasoned discourse, those considerations will not be able to be rationally assessed in the appropriate manner. Similarly, if our information sources are flooded with fake news and lies, then citizens will not have an epistemically reliable basis for deliberation, which in turn will yield poor judgment. Poor public discourse is a particular problem for *democracy* because democracy is comparatively more sensitive to citizen opinion and press scrutiny, which are heavily influenced by the quality of public discourse. Ultimately, according to this line of argument, the problem is such discourse’s tendency to produce bad outcomes.⁴

³ A number of theorists have argued that we are less likely to come to good judgments about public policy and social issues if we fail to hear from a diversity of perspectives (Anderson 2010, Landemore 2012).

⁴ This view often reflects, but does not require, the assumption that the democracy is ultimately justified by its tendency to produce substantively good outcomes. In Richard Arneson’s (2004, pg. 42) words, “Democracy, when it is just, is so entirely in virtue of the tendency of democratic institutions and practices to produce outcomes that are just according to standards that are independent of the standards that define the democratic ideal.” As we will see, there is reason to think there are valid considerations beyond those of substantive reliability. Moreover, as I will discuss later, the question of what “justifies” the democratic state is ambiguous among a number of normative issues that

Here, there are three kinds of outcomes that might be adversely affected by problematic public discourse: policy, perceived (or “sociological”) legitimacy, and democratic culture. First and foremost, public discourse shapes *substantive policy outcomes* in a variety of ways. Most obviously, it influences the decisions of voters in electoral campaigns, thereby influencing which parties and individuals have power to pass legislation. However, public discourse influences policy in other ways as well. When it functions well, media discourse has the power to inform the agenda of legislative, executive, and administrative agencies, as well as provide a check on poor or controversial decisions. However, when public discourse fails to feature those with different perspectives and tends to focus on trivialities and horse-race coverage, public discussion cannot perform these basic accountability and governance functions. For all these reasons, problematic public discourse can yield bad policy.⁵

Besides compromising the substantive merits of policy, bad public discourse also has a tendency to undermine citizens’ perception of the legitimacy of political decisions. Citizens are, as a matter of fact, less likely to accept political decisions if their voices are excluded or if they perceive their co-citizens as immoral and irrational. Failures of perceived

we should disentangle, such as what explains the legitimacy and authority of democratic decisions.

⁵ When democracies function well, there are a variety of “good outcomes” they are often thought to promote: economic growth (Acemoglu et al 2019), peace (Reiter 2017), respect for rights (“domestic peace”) (Conrad and Moore 2010, Davenport 2006), and avoidance of humanitarian disaster (Sen 1983), just to name a few. There are a number of mechanisms by which these good outcomes may be thought to be brought about, e.g. through the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki 2005) or by preventing elite entrenchment (Bagg 2018). Problematic public discourse undermines the conditions that enable democracy to achieve these outcomes.

legitimacy are important because they may lead to political instability and, when combined with perceived illegitimacy of political opposition, such feelings may encourage “constitutional hardball” and democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).⁶ Moreover, “legitimation crises” may be bad in and of themselves, as those who see their government as illegitimate may not be able to feel fully free in obeying its dictates (Habermas 1975, Taylor 1985).

Finally, problems with the media may affect the broad democratic *culture*. A number of democratic theorists, political scientists, and historians (Tocqueville 2004, Almond and Verba 1963, Kloppenberg 2016) emphasize the democracy is not just a set of institutions but a “way of living.”⁷ While a precise account of democratic culture may be elusive, the broad characteristics are thought to include a respect for pluralism, a conception of other citizens as political equals, and a disposition to aim to resolve conflicts through discussion rather than force. Democratic culture is important both because it is a precondition for well-functioning formal institutions as well as because there is value in a social environment characterized by e.g. mutual respect and peaceful modes of

⁶ We should not confuse *perceived* illegitimacy with the real thing. Perceived illegitimacy is important for reasons different from those that explain why actual legitimacy is important. I will discuss ways in which problematic public discourse may undermine actual legitimacy in the next section.

⁷ There is a related point that public discourse can serve various *educative* functions. A number of theorists have emphasized that in encouraging citizens to reflect on difficult and abstract political issues, citizens learn concrete facts and develop broader intellectual virtues (Mill 1859, Arendt 1958). Here, the idea is not that democracy is an idiosyncratic means for promoting life-long learning. Rather, participation in deliberation promotes the kind of knowledge, ability, and self-confidence needed to sustain the intellectual conditions and dispositions needed for mature decision-making, i.e. democratic culture. However, as Elster (1997) points out, the educational benefits of deliberation only arise if participants think deliberation is important for a distinct reason, i.e. getting good results. Consequently, it seems that these educative benefits cannot be fundamental and must rather be parasitic on a distinct justification, at least from the point of view of participants.

conflict resolution. However, if public discussion is structured around trivialities and driven by anger and invective, then public discourse cannot cultivate the kind of virtues and relationships that citizens need to effectively maintain this culture. If anything, such discussion might seem to cultivate ignorance and intellectual vice (something those who are sceptical of mass engagement in democratic politics emphasize (Brennan 2016)), which tends to cause democratic cultural decline.

5. Implications of Problematic Public Discourse for Freedom and Equality

While important, bad outcomes are not the only problem for democratic systems raised by the contemporary media environment. The quality of public discussion also matters because it determines whether the political system can effectively realize both freedom and equality.

First, problematic public discourse might undermine collective self-determination, a particular kind of freedom. It is a platitude that democracy is “government by the people,” and one crucial way “the people” govern is through collective discussion and deliberation. Having a vote is not enough – self-government is about considered decision-making, not just picking a policy or candidate, so participation in the processes of deliberation that inform judgement is crucial to self-government. While a number of thinkers have expressed doubts that platitudes about “rule by the people” can withstand careful scrutiny (e.g. Kolodny 2014a), there is reason to think that at least *part* of what makes

democratic procedures valuable is that they enable a kind of collective authorship of decisions.⁸

Problematic public discourse threatens to undermine collective self-determination in a number of ways. First, if important swaths of the population are excluded from—or underrepresented in—deliberation, then they are thereby also effectively excluded from these aspects of self-government. They do not have an equal voice, even if they have an equal vote. Second, if public deliberation focuses on trivialities, is shot through with misinformation, takes place in a strident tone, and fails to consider all relevant perspectives, then the political judgements it yields will fail to be considered and informed. As a consequence, decisions made on the basis of those judgments may not count as “self-determined” in the relevant sense. Just as individual autonomy is undermined by misinformation and irrationality, so too is collective autonomy. Third, if outside actors are having an outside influence on discussion, then it is not really “the people” who are governing in the discursive arena but rather foreign actors.

However, self-determination is not the only important consideration beyond bad outcomes. Part of what makes democracy valuable is the *egalitarian* character of democratic decision-making.

Democracies distribute political power more evenly than other regime

⁸ While I do not aim to robustly defend this claim here, a few remarks might be helpful. One can imagine non-democratic systems of decision-making that deliver substantively good outcomes and do not introduce inequalities of power. To take an example from Zuehl (2016), imagine we are ruled by a hyper-intelligent AI. Whatever the ultimate merits of such a system, it seems that there is *something* of value that is lost in comparison to democratic systems. Plausibly, what is lost is self-rule. For a recent defense of the connection between democracy and self-rule, see Lovett and Zuehl (ms.).

types, and differences in such power—created e.g. through representation or bureaucratic position—are attenuated by mechanisms of accountability. Relationships characterized by equality of power—like most friendships—have a kind of value that more hierarchical relationships do not have, and they possess that value in virtue of the egalitarian character of the relationship (see Viehoff 2014). Similarly, *societies* that lack disparities in social and political power have a special value that hierarchical societies lack. Democracy is a crucial component of such an egalitarian ideal (Kolodney 2016a 2016b).⁹

Problematic public discourse raises a number of concerns from an egalitarian perspective. Failure of public discourse to include certain perspectives deprives their adherents of an appropriate channel of *influence*. Even if those citizens have an equal vote, they do not have an equal influence, since voting is only one means by which citizens may exercise influence. Second, to the degree to which discourse is a *check* on other forms of social power, public discussion focused on trivialities is not in the position to provide such a check. It therefore removes a mechanism for attenuating the translation of various social inequalities (e.g. of wealth, race) into inequalities of political power. Finally, even if, as is unlikely, the way that journalists differ from the broader population did not prevent them from appropriately covering those with different views, it would still be the case that certain kind of cultural and political power—power than could be exercised in one way or another—is located

⁹ As I will discuss later, attenuating differences in social and political power might be important for additional reasons. For instance, egalitarian political decision-making might provide authority and legitimacy to political decisions that is lacking in non-egalitarian political systems.

in the hands of those who have particular social positions and political preferences. Because there are few checks on the exercise of that power, those excluded from the media are consequently at the mercy of others.¹⁰ That is, inegalitarian media undermines the egalitarian character of broader political system. If part of what explains the value of democracy is its egalitarian character, then exclusionary media is a problem for democracy.

Finally, beyond contributing to the *realization* of freedom and equality, deliberation has an important *expressive* dimension. Because good deliberation requires willingness to listen to others views and accept the force of the better argument, deliberation expresses a certain *respect* for others, respect for their equal status as contributors to collective decision-making.¹¹ Moreover, if participants in deliberation are making arguments about the common good in good faith, then they are thereby expressing a public *commitment* to the common good (Christiano 2008, chapter 5). Such a commitment provides assurance that decision-making is proceeding with the appropriate aim and taking citizens interests equally into account.

¹⁰ Of course, those who are excluded may contest their representation in the media, but it is often difficult to do so effectively if they are in fact excluded. After all, the channels for effective contestation are exactly those channels to which they lack access. According to some, a reason why many individuals have been turning to populist rhetoric is that certain perspectives and styles of life have been systematically excluded from mainstream media channels. For a discussion of the way being at the mercy of others is a form of *unfreedom*, see Pettit (1999).

¹¹ Here, what is at issue is not positive appraisal of others but rather appropriate consideration for their status (see Darwall 1977).

Problematic public discourse, by contrast, has a negative expression dimension. If certain classes of individuals are excluded from discussion, then this conveys that they are not worth being heard from and their perspectives not worth being taken into account. For example, when conservatives criticize the “mainstream media,” what they are typically criticizing are media platforms that purport to represent all reasonable positions, but as a matter of fact exclude *them*. Given the purported aims of these organizations, such exclusion expresses a form of disrespect, as the exclusion of conservatives expresses they are not worthy of being heard. Moreover, when public discussion revolves around trivialities and is characterized by invective, it expresses disinterest in mature political decision-making and disrespect for one’s interlocutors.

All these reasons to care about deliberation—its effects, as well as its connection to freedom, equality, and expression of respect and common commitment—are things that plausibly bear on the *legitimacy* and *authority* of democratic decision-making. Roughly, legitimacy concerns the state’s permission to enforce its decisions, while authority concerns the obligation citizens have to obey those decisions.¹² For

¹² I say roughly, as characterizing the relevant normative properties is complex (as is the explanation for why those properties matter). For example, in the case of legitimacy, should we characterize it in terms of the state’s permission to enforce its decisions, or that others are not permitted to try to stop the state from enforcing its decisions, or something else? Which of these properties, if any, matter from a normative point of view? For more detailed discussion, see Kolodny 2014a (section 1) and Simmons 1999. I should note that there are puzzles around how to understand legitimacy in particular. If a policy is unjust, there is some sense in which its enforcement wrongs citizens, and it seems odd to say that there can be such a thing as a permission to wrong someone. Some have thought that legitimacy should be understood in terms of the (paradoxical-sounding) “right to do wrong” or perhaps in terms of the obligations that agents of the state have to follow directives delivered by democratic decisions. However, entering into these complications would take us too far afield.

example, what makes it permissible for the state to enforce (via threat of coercion) a misguided tax policy, and what makes it the case that citizens have a (pro tanto) obligation to pay the corresponding taxes? Legitimacy and authority as properties of political decisions are both distinct from whether those decisions are (substantively) good, since the state may be permitted to enforce bad decisions and citizens may have an obligation to abide by them. What exactly makes a state's decisions legitimate and/or authoritative is complex and contested, but good effects, self-determination, and public expression of respect are all good candidates to be part of the story. Consequently, to the degree to which problematic public discourse undermines these values, it plausibly undermines the legitimacy and authority, not merely the substantive value, of democratic decisions.¹³

6. Individual and Structural Aspects of Problematic Public Discourse

So far we've considered a number of different problems that problematic public discourse raises for democracy. In order to address those problems, we need to think about their *source*. Some of these problems are generated by the bad, or at least imperfect, behaviour of individuals. For example, individual journalists may be prejudiced or lack self-awareness of the differences between their own lives and the lives of

¹³ Deliberative democrats often emphasize a connection between deliberation and legitimacy. However, there are a number of different accounts of *why* deliberation contributes to legitimacy. Is it e.g. the epistemic benefits of deliberation, the fact (if it is a fact) that deliberation tends towards consensus, the connections between deliberation and freedom and equality, or some combination of these factors? While important, we will not pursue these questions here.

others. Social media is a cesspool of epistemic vice, where many spend more time thinking up witty insults to share with likeminded people than developing defences of their positions that might convince someone with a different viewpoint. When it comes to such cases, one could, in theory, address the problem by convincing individuals to change their behavior, for example by appealing to the reasons good deliberation is important for democracy (i.e. the reasons just canvassed).¹⁴

However, many of these problems have a more *systemic* character. For instance, it is no accident that media organizations are staffed by people with a particular demographic profile. To be competitive for a job in journalism these days, you generally need a high level of education and be willing to take unpaid internships. Combined with the fact that journalism is not a very financially stable profession to begin with, these factors lead journalism to draw from those with more affluent backgrounds. Moreover, many jobs in journalism (particularly at the national level) are located in urban, high-cost areas. The upshot is that these structural factors effectively exclude certain social groups from being represented in the journalistic profession.

Similarly, when it comes to over-inclusion, many of these problems are generated by a set of structural incentives that determine what kind of stories receive attention. The news environment is increasingly competitive, and staying profitable requires media organizations to

¹⁴ Of course, such appeals will be ineffective in many cases. The point is simply that some problems are in principle solvable by individual appeal, while others are not. Moreover, there may be some problems that are *only* solvable by individual appeal, given that it would be morally impermissible to solve them in other ways (such as through coercion or even state-directed incentives). In such cases, frustratingly, individual appeal may be the only permissible means of solving the problem, even if such appeals are likely not to be effective.

acquire and retain people's attention. This favors loud and outrageous voices over restrained and measured ones, stories about personalities rather than policy discussion, and other similar problems (Munger 2020, Dunaway and Lawrence 2015). When the public sphere is populated by competing, profit-seeking businesses, the result isn't quality discussion but rather a cacophony of attention-grabbing clamoring.

When it comes to such systemic problems, we need to consider what deliberative theorists call the "deliberative system," the practices and institutions within which deliberation takes place (Parkson and Mansbridge 2012, Owen and Smith 2015). It is in looking at this structural level that considerations about the full set of underlying values affected by the quality of public discourse is particularly important. Different ways of intervening on and restructuring a deliberative system might promote certain of these underlying democratic values only at the expense of others, so failing to consider the complete set of these values runs the risk of unintentionally rendering public discussion less democratic. For instance, in trying to foster a kind of public discourse that will yield better policy results, we might aim to highlight the contributions of experts at the expense of the views of those in the general population. However, even if this would improve political outcomes, it is not clear that such a strategy would really honour the values of self-determination and egalitarianism. In the deliberative sphere, we would have technocracy rather than democracy.

One might be concerned that there is a deep tension between these various values such that no deliberative system can co-realize them all.

For consider that there are three basic properties that a deliberative system would seem to need to possess if it is to promote good outcomes while respecting freedom and equality: (i) a good deliberative system should be *inclusive*, (ii) it should not make participating in deliberation *too demanding*, and (iii) it should feature *high-quality* deliberation. A deliberative system that failed to be inclusive would make public deliberation elitist, depriving it of the self-determinative and egalitarian character that makes it democratic.¹⁵ Making deliberation too demanding would force many citizens to choose between having a voice in politics and other valuable pursuits. Low-quality deliberation threatens to prevent public deliberation from having the epistemic benefits that its proponents desire and are, arguably, crucial to its justification.

Unfortunately, these three values seem to conflict under a plausible auxiliary assumption: that it is demanding to make high-quality deliberative contributions. Such contributions would seem to require careful normative reflection and detailed institutional and policy knowledge, and—as classic discussions of the rationality of political ignorance emphasize (Downs 1957)—engaging in such reflection and acquiring such knowledge has substantial costs. Moreover, as recent discussions about the extent and depth of political knowledge (Achen and Bartels 2016, Brennan 2016, and Somin 2013) dramatize, few citizens seem willing to pay those costs.

That is, so the worry goes, we face trade-offs when it comes to the

¹⁵ There are ways in which a public sphere might be exclusive but not elitist—for instance, if public discourse is so poor that it effectively excludes anyone who is not completely intellectually corrupt (the people who stick around are not a deliberative elite but rather those who unburdened by unfair and specious argumentation). Of course, in such a situation, the deliberative system would not evince high quality.

values crucial for a system to be deliberative and democratic: we can make participation in the public sphere more inclusive or less demanding, but this risks quality. Some have argued that this is what we see with the rise of social media, blogs, and internet discussion fora. More voices are heard but at the expense of the quality of deliberation.¹⁶ The problem may not be social media itself but rather a broader tension among deliberative ideals, a tension put clearly on display by social media. So, the (depressing) thought goes, we simply cannot have it all when it comes to deliberative, democratic politics.

7. Two Paths Forward: Collective Intelligence and Mediated Deliberation

However, all is not lost. There are two features of deliberative systems that can be harnessed to address this tension: collective intelligence and mediated deliberation through the “division of interpretive labor.”

One strategy for addressing this tension is to appeal to *collective intelligence*. Under certain conditions, a large number of lay deliberators will tend to reach better judgments than a smaller number of experts due to the benefits of cognitive diversity (Landemore 2012). The basic idea is simple: deliberation among a larger group of non-experts can achieve better results than deliberation among a smaller group of experts because the larger group may have more cognitive diversity—different ways of looking at problems and searching for solutions—and be able to

¹⁶ Some theorists have started from a tension between inclusion and deliberation to argue that many deliberative approaches to democracy are objectionably exclusionary (Young 2001, 2002).

draw on a larger stock of collective knowledge. We resolve the tension by showing “low-quality” deliberative inputs can, counterintuitively, yield high-quality outputs.¹⁷

However, there is much empirical work that would need to be done to see how such mechanisms can operate in actual existing democracies. The most famous arguments for collective intelligence (e.g. Page 2008, Landemore 2012) rely on idealized models with unrealistic assumptions, making it hard to see how they could apply to actual deliberative systems (Brennan 2016, Somin 2013). For example, one needs to consider what might be done to bring individual citizens knowledge and cognitive skills to a level where their contributions can contribute to collective intelligence, and how we might structure institutions and practices in order to facilitate the right kind of exchange and perspectival pooling. It is a massive idealization to think of democratic deliberation on the model of deliberation among a manageably-sized diverse group, and empirical investigation into the institutions and practices that structure deliberation in modern societies is needed to see how the broad ideal might scale up. Moreover, even if we discover how to engineer a deliberative system to pool information in a way that yields intelligent results, we still need to consider whether that system realizes the *other* values – freedom, equality, and positive expressive characteristics – that play a role in establishing the desirability, legitimacy, and authority of democratic decision-making.

¹⁷ Things are slightly more complicated than this, as collective intelligence requires that individuals possess a certain minimum standard of knowledge and communicative ability (see Page 2008, Landemore 2012, Brennan 2016).

Investigation into how collective intelligence might be realized should therefore be supplemented by a second feature of deliberative systems: “mediated” deliberation and informal representation in the public sphere. In formal political institutions (like parliament), you have parliamentary representatives to articulate views and defend the interests of constituents. In the *informal* political area of the media environment, there is also representation and mediation among different citizen viewpoints. This takes place when journalists or interpretative social scientists investigate, articulate, and “rationally reconstruct” the political points of view citizens for one another.

For example, consider how an urban progressive might engage with the views and arguments of Trump voters. There are probably few Trump voters in her immediate environment, so the opportunities for direct engagement are limited. If such a person is to engage with Trump voters’ views at all, she is likely to engage with them by reading an article or a book about them. Rather than face-to-face discussion, she engages in what Robert Goodin calls “deliberation within” (2000), the process of thinking through issues from other perspectives. In a modern society, her access to such a perspective is *mediated* by actors in the media and academia, whose research synthesizes the views and describes the life experiences of those in different structural positions. Such “deliberation within” enabled by intermediaries is crucial to how deliberation across geographic and political divides functions in a modern society.

To see how this works, consider sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in their Own Land*. Hochschild went to parts of rural Louisiana

to understand the life and political viewpoint of those who felt left behind by changes in American politics and culture. Through interviews, observation, and informal discussion, Hochschild was able to articulate the “Deep Story” behind her subject’s cultural concerns and political preferences. The articulation of this story enabled other citizens to *understand* the concerns and broader perspective of rural Louisianans, enabling more sophisticated rational engagement with their views than would have been possible if these citizens had only been able to engage with the surface manifestations of those views.

In providing such understanding, Hochschild is not a mere stenographer. Rather, she needs to take a more active, interpretive role in representing the viewpoint. Hochschild’s work is just one example of what I will call a “reconstructive” project in journalism and social science. When journalists or social scientists aim to provide understanding of e.g. the ideology of Trumpism, the worldview of Brexit voters, the social views of the Alt Right, or the views expressed in Black Lives Matter protests, they are typically starting from some more *inchoately* held political viewpoint – potentially expressed in tweets, protest slogans, or underdeveloped argument – and then aiming to enrich it and put it on display systematically. For example, in providing a reconstruction of rural Louisianan worldview, Hochschild makes explicit background assumptions and implications and show the logical connections between different parts of the viewpoint, thus making it easier for other citizens to discursively engage with it. This makes achieving deliberative quality less demanding for citizens because the

work of working out and systematically articulating a political viewpoint is partially given over to the journalists and social scientists.

In such cases, mediated deliberation is structured by a “division of interpretive labor” in which journalists and interpretive social scientists “make sense” of inchoate viewpoints, in effect performing the kind of interpretive work that other citizens would otherwise have to carry out if they were to aim to engage with these viewpoints in a sophisticated manner (Prescott-Couch forthcoming, Prescott-Couch ms.).

Once we recognize mediated deliberation of this sort, there is a path for addressing some of the concerns about over-exclusiveness and over-inclusiveness raised above. With regard to over-inclusiveness, when journalists and social scientists act as informal representatives, they act implicitly as gatekeepers of a certain kind. They take non-discursive modes of political expression and stitch them together to create a more rationally coherent points of view and arguments, things other citizens can easily discursively engage with. With respect to over-exclusiveness, if we set up our deliberative system in the right way, then media and social-scientific actors might be able to be incentivized to respond to the points of view that deserve attention. The upshot is that we can address the tension among deliberative ideals by thinking more structurally and less individualistically about the problem.

To be sure, there are many questions about such informal representation and associated division of interpretive labor. First, there are philosophical questions. If citizens receive their understanding of Trump voters from e.g. Arlie Hochschild, have they really *included*

Trump voters in deliberation? Or is some other kind of more direct participation in deliberative processes required? Is such a division of labor objectionably paternalistic?¹⁸

Second, there are empirical questions about the kinds of policies that would facilitate this kind of informal representation and make it function effectively. In particular, how do we set up a system to provide fair representation and systematic accountability of the right kind? What are the analogues to things like voting, petitions, and referenda, i.e. the mechanisms that provide for accountability in formal political institutions?

The mass media is sometimes thought of as a danger to deliberation, as media communication is “monological” rather than “dialogical” (Chambers 2009)—citizens are *talked at* by politicians and commentariate rather than *talking with* one another. However, examining mediated communication and the division of interpretive labor can help us see how dialogue might be realized through the mass media, so long as it is structured in the right way.

This points to a way of structuring research in media studies about the public sphere. First, we need to start from a normative theory that specifies the plurality of values that underlie democratic decision-making. We then need to consider ways in which these values might be realized in mass institutions, ways that differ from how they are typically realized in a more interpersonal setting. For example, we need to

¹⁸ See Prescott-Couch (forthcoming) for a discussion of these issues.

examine how pooling mechanisms, functional differentiation, and the division of labor can be harnessed to realize the identified values, as well as consider what kinds of incentive structures are needed to make those institutions function effectively. Third, we need to identify the distinct normative concerns that arise in the institutional realization of those values such as, in this case, concerns about power and representation, and consider what kinds of policies might address them.

Here, I do not aim to defend any particular menu of policies that would solve our political problems with the media. Rather, I aim to help structure research into this area by identifying the values that structure the problem we are trying to solve and by pointing us towards some solutions.

8. Conclusion

This paper has considered what explains why problematic public discourse is a problem for democracy. The problem is not only bad outcomes of various kinds but also that problematic public discourse undermines self-determination and public equality. These values, in turn, might serve as a guide when structuring empirical research into how to improve our deliberative system. I have argued that these values might seem to be in tension with one another and have considered how to address this tension through consideration of collective intelligence and the division of interpretive labor.

Once we frame the problem in this particular way, a set of normative and empirical issues about informal representation and the

design of deliberative systems emerges. More broadly, we need to think more carefully about potential interventions that can enable the public sphere to not only yield better judgments, but to yield those judgments in a way consonant with democracy.¹⁹

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