



Digital-Public Spaces and the Spiral of Silence: Hyperliberal Illiberalism and the Challenge to Democracy

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Abstract

The digital space has created a new form of public space: one which provides a dangerous blending of public protest, mob justice, and acquiescence. It offers transformative beliefs a voice while mob justice encourages sanctions against (and the erasure of) detractors. This article argues that the digital is not antithetical to the public sphere but has instead generated a ‘false public.’ It argues that hyperliberal illiberalism acts as a form of social control that triggers a Spiral of Silence, an intolerance of opposing ideologies and a fracturing of the public sphere into macro- and micropublics. This article argues for a return to both free expression and meaningful debate which are fundamental to the proper exercise of democracy.

Keywords Hyperliberal illiberalism · Democracy · Digital publics · Spiral of silence · Macro- and micropublics

1 Introduction

I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor. That's not my business. I don't want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone—if possible—Jew, Gentile—black man—white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other's happiness—not by each other's misery. We don't want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way.

Charlie Chaplin, ‘The Great Dictator’ [1].

The World Wide Web put the world at our fingertips in 1991 and created a digital space that allowed everyday people to ‘visualize, explore, and exploit our environment more efficiently’ [2, 3]. Today, the digital space envelopes the individual in

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a virtually limitless digital space filled with content and opportunities. The digital space is vast, wide, and dotted by data like stars in the night sky. This analogy is more than metaphorical: it is *analogical*: scientists estimate that our galaxy includes as many as 100 billion stars, with the universe estimated as having up to 200 sextillion stars [4]. The digital space is no less staggering. While its specific size cannot be measured, estimates suggest the internet will have reached 120 zettabytes of data (or 141 quintillion bytes) by 2023 [5].

Everyday, we conduct an estimated 9 billion Google searches [5], make 4.75 billion posts on Facebook [6], share over one billion stories on Instagram [7], ‘tweet’ at least 540 million times [5], share 34 million posts via TikTok [8], publish 7.5 million blog posts [9], and upload 720,000 h of video content to YouTube [7]. This digital universe—or digital public space—holds more bytes of data than there are stars in our own galaxy. The shift to this digital universe has triggered a metamorphosis of the public sphere into new *digital* public spaces. These new ‘digital publics’ provide the individual with free and ubiquitous access [10],¹ the option to choose the particular forum or platform in which they participate, and the capacity to post their opinion to a specific audience of known and unknown members [11]. In digital publics, traditional news providers have lost their monopoly [12]. Now, anyone and everyone can publish and share their opinions: providing a place for productive and unproductive discussions. Opinions may be ignorant, ill-informed, insensitive, or inane and still reach an audience, forming the basis of discussion or debate, protest, or mob justice and retribution.

The digital space creates unlimited opportunities for expression and participation and a plethora of pathways through which we can access, parse, or retrieve data or information from various temporalities, contexts, and of vastly different origins. It is impossible to identify the most transformative aspect of our newfound digitality. However, social media and the digital space have clearly and permanently transformed public expression and debate. With the public sphere now available to anyone at any time, it provides a virtually limitless array of narratives and perspectives. The forum of public expression is equally vast, however *visibility* and *being heard* each have specific physical and conscious requirements.

In creating the unlimited opportunity for expression and participation, the internet has also created an ‘accumulation problem’ where ‘noise’ based on the interpretations, comments, or opinions of others can frustrate attempts to make objective, correct, or properly informed decisions [13]. Search engines such as Google therefore play a fundamental role in shaping and determining the visibility and audience of our own content, in addition to the content we find and, subsequently, what we know. In fact, one of the great challenges of the digital space is the ‘scarcity of human attention’ [14]. In response, digital platforms and content providers have implemented their own systems to maintain and increase ‘user engagement’ [15, 16]. These systems are known under various names such as ‘recommendation systems’, ‘personalised feeds’, or ‘for you pages’.

¹ It should be noted that approximately 33% of the world’s population do not—and have never had—access to the internet [10].

Algorithms lie at the centre of these systems forming the focus of many important cultural conversations, and rightly so. Gillespie argues that trending algorithms can become ‘cultural objects of meaning ... for those who see [them as] a reflection of the public in which they take part’ [17]. In the same way, the algorithms that inform our social media feeds will reflect the social network within which the individual exists. However, this ‘reflection’ is also heavily influenced by the platform and its inherent norms, its community, and its target audience. This interposition of external influences allows the digital space to go beyond influencing ‘what we find’ and ‘what we know’ to ‘how we understand our world’. They do so by dictating, limiting, or qualifying our opportunities for knowledge. In this way, the digital space supplements the individual’s reality to produce a new way of being or ‘digitality’ [18, 19].

This article seeks to take this analysis one step further, adding to the preceding list of ‘what we find’, ‘what we know’ and ‘how we understand our world’ by exploring ‘how digital platforms *direct* knowledge’—not only in its position or presentation within digital space, but in its scope and depth of expression—just as stage directors direct the actors on stage. This paper therefore focuses on a different set of challenges that threaten self-expression and democracy across the infinite expanse of public spheres and digital spaces. Far from creating a transformative space that motivates discussion and debate, studies on self-censorship and free expression suggest that the internet has, instead, created a space that stifles or frustrates the free expression of opinion [20, 21]. Within this space, civil discourse has become decidedly *uncivil* [11] and high-risk, leaving individual legal subjects without the opportunity to freely express their opinion, engage in meaningful debate, or participate in the deliberative process. Part two of this paper considers democracy, and the changing nature of the public sphere and digital publics. Part three explores fallibilism, the current state of public discourse and the need for free expression. Part four applies Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence theory to these spaces to account for the rise of micro- and macropublics, the rise in populism and extremism and the emergence of hyperliberal illiberalism. This paper concludes that the only solution may be to recognise the value of counter-expression and free speech. Without robust and free speech, feelings of exclusion and disillusionment will only increase leaving discourse and debate limited and lacking in meaning and forcing actual discourse to seek refuge ‘underground’.

2 Democracy and the Public Sphere

Machinery that gives us abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities life will be violent and all will be lost... You the people have the power, the power to create machines, the power to create happiness. You the people have the power to make life free and beautiful ... in the name of democracy let us use that power—let us all unite.

Charlie Chaplin, ‘The Great Dictator’ [1].

Jürgen Habermas' describes the public sphere as one in which 'the sphere of private people come together as a public' to 'debate over the general rules governing relations' and 'the lives of the polity' [22]. While the purpose and substance of these goals remain the same, the interposition of the digital has transformed the processes of discourse and debate that were so central to democracy. Habermas' public sphere offered a vehicle for public opinions that 'put the state in touch with the needs of society' [22]. While, at first, the making of public representations was tied to nobility, wealth, and the formalities of true discourse, the eventual 'public sphere' would be open to all, and allow all kinds of exchange—formal, informal, or otherwise. Perhaps the drive to express ourselves and to be heard comes, in-part, from the initial denial that burdened all but the noble and powerful classes. For Habermas, the public space allowed for (and facilitated) the conceptual integration of the civil and the political; a place where citizens could participate in the democratic process and ensure the sustainability of that process [23]. A functioning public sphere facilitates public discussions of social and political affairs thereby shaping and informing public opinion via a process of *ongoing* negotiation between the members of the public and the state [24]. Rosa describes this process as one that incorporates 'mutual *listening and responding*' and 'mutual *adaptation*' and therefore, relies on an iterative and gradual evolution of 'individual opinions and positions' so that the polity may reach a consensus, a compromise, or—failing that—acquire sufficient public support to reach a decision [24].

Truly democratic decisions require each argument and counterargument to have a voice *and* be heard. Democracy relies on the conception of reciprocity and the recognition by all that the parties must speak *and* listen with a willingness to move—perhaps even incrementally—forward together. Where these requirements are met, majority decisions will remain legitimate even if decided in opposition to the minority view [24]. As mentioned above, digital intervention means that the creation of public opinion no longer occurs in a fixed *sphere*, but across many spaces simultaneously. None of these spaces have a finite edge, beginning, or end. They are both amorphous and atemporal, and it is this lack of shape, form, or and the (almost) complete absence of rules that makes these digital publics so valuable and fraught.

The digital space fosters the creation of social networks, connecting people in ways that build a sense of community, both in-person and online [2]. It permits and encourages 'active behaviours such as information search, interaction and choice', and provides exposure to contradictory viewpoints [20, 25]. However, as public opinion becomes more polarised, it becomes safer and easier to watch from afar [21, 26, 27]. Yet, the public space was always a place of danger for some. When Alexis de Tocqueville journeyed to America in 1831, he did so in the belief that democracy would soon make its way to France, as with every other part of the world. Tocqueville considered democracy to be inescapable. It was a force towards which all men toiled—deliberately and knowingly or unwillingly and unwittingly—these men were mere instruments in the hands of a God [28]. Given his family's history and Tocqueville's position as a member of the French

aristocracy, it naturally followed that Tocqueville would also be alive to the threat democracy posed to nobles and aristocrats.²

Tocqueville attributed this drive towards democracy to the desire for an ‘equality of conditions’ among men. Equality of conditions therefore, manifested in every shift of wealth or property *from* the noble class *to* any man based on their ‘strength of intellect’ and their capacity for science, discovery, or ideas. For Tocqueville, each shift was ‘a germ of power placed within the reach of the people’ [28]. He warned that the European perspectives on democracy as ‘weak’ were incorrect and that, if anything, democracy created a power of the people that was too strong. By creating a power based on the majority, democracy therefore created an *absolute* power that could not be resisted. Of particular concern to Tocqueville (and one of his most famous insights) was democracy’s potential to create a tyranny of the majority.³ Democracy was therefore, no better than an aristocracy, a monarchy or a republic, and potentially worse:

The authority of a king is purely physical, and it controls the actions of the subject without subduing his private will; but the majority possesses a power which is physical and moral at the same time; it acts upon the will as well as upon the actions of men, and it represses not only all contest, but all controversy [28].

Despite lingering questions regarding the providence of some of Tocqueville’s wisdom, his concerns and their insights are incredibly prescient given our contemporary version of democracy, the changing nature of public space, and the limitations on free and robust debate. Countless scholars have echoed these concerns. Habermas notes that, although the digital space initially dissolved boundaries by democratising the news and allowing anyone to become an author, the digital space has triggered the fragmentation of that space [23].

At the same time, the singular and private act of ‘being online’ creates simultaneous sensations of privacy, connection and self-representation wrapped in a cloak of anonymity and invisibility. In the following section, we explore the vast digital space: its substance, its matter, its timelessness, and its impact on democracy.

2.1 Digitality and Digital Publics

‘Digitality’ is a unifying concept that recognises the subsumption of the digital into our individual realities [18, 19].⁴ It is uncontroversial to say that our newfound digital competence has deeply changed the ways human beings communicate and receive ‘news.’ It has changed not only how we communicate with others, but also

² Tocqueville’s parents both narrowly escaped the guillotine during the Reign of Terror, but many members of his family did not.

³ Although, there is some argument that this idea may not actually belong to Tocqueville and may even be based on an erroneous understanding of sources such as Jared Sparks [29].

⁴ As the ‘interactions through data and the digital space’.

how communications are received, the nature of those communications, and the spaces in which those communications are made. Traditional news providers are no longer the gatekeepers of journalistic content. Nielsen and Fletcher refer to this as ‘democratic creative destruction’ [30]. As the internet became increasingly available to the masses, so too did the variety of content available, and our reliance on platforms and search engines to filter or optimise content recommendations [31]. While most (if not all) of us recognise the value of these recommendations, much has already been written of the impact of these recommendations on what we know [24, 32–34], believe [34–36], think [34, 36], or even become [19, 37, 38]. Fears have been raised about individual autonomy [18, 38, 39], our capacity for critical thinking [37], and democracy itself [11, 40–42]. It is impossible to divorce our understanding of the universe from digital in(ter)ference.

Digital content infers meaning into simple statements in many ways: by providing context (or removing it), providing background—whether comprehensive or otherwise, and by building new associations or connotations into commonly used terms [43].⁵ In response, the European Union proposed the ‘Declaration for the Future of the Internet’ [44]. To-date, more than 70 signatories have signed this declaration which seeks to ‘harness the potentials of new digital technologies’ to provide an internet that is ‘open, free, global, reliable and secure’ [44]. The declaration also recognises the risks posed by its misuse and seeks to ‘reclaim the promise of the internet’ once more. Much of this focus is trained on human rights abuses, or its exploitation and interference by autocratic governments. In the attempt to *make free*, to *secure*, to *reduce illegal and harmful content* and *protect other human rights*, it appears inevitable that other rights such as *freedom of expression* are destined to lose [44, 45].

Throughout history the public sphere has provided a venue for protest. These protests called for, and sometimes successfully, forced change and precipitated reform. Yet the public sphere also provided a place where the citizenry could commune and unite over common issues and concerns—shaping and identifying the public opinion to build consensus and facilitate rational debate. These same spaces were also the site of anarchy, revolution, repression, and violence. The digital public space creates a new form of public sphere: one which also facilitates public protest and mob justice but *encourages* acquiescence. Rather than blending and integrating disparate opinions—the move from the public sphere to the digital public space fractures the forums of discourse into a multitude of digital publics.

Digital publics are grounded in sensation. Sensation exists in physical or mental form: as a ‘state of feeling in response to a stimulus which acts on the body or mind’ [46]. Yet our understanding of sensation and what it means to be *sensational* has evolved with time [47]. Sensation is more than a ‘personal experience in response to a stimulus’, *sensational* acts are those that garner ‘great excitement or public interest’ [48]. Sensational content is often polarising and provokes (or intends to provoke) a strong emotional response [11, 42, 49]. However, sensational content will

⁵ For example, the letter ‘Q’ is commonly interpreted as a sign of something much more than a merely graphical representation of the 18th letter of the English alphabet.

be prioritised by news feeds as they evoke stronger responses from viewers and create higher levels of user engagement [16]. Sensational statements may—deliberately or otherwise, lack factual accuracy and court melodrama and/or controversy [47]. While some may actively seek controversy, others may simply wish to give voice to an unpopular opinion and to have that opinion heard: to have a voice, or to participate meaningfully in public discourse. However, discourse implies an exchange of ideas, or at the very least a conversation where participants exchange ideas and beliefs [50] in a way that offers meaning or insight [51].

The move to digital publics has created a vast expanse of options and spheres for self-expression. Where once the problem was a ‘scarcity of access,’ today the challenge revolves around the competition for scarce and finite human attention [14]. The question is *how* we balance the desire to be heard and attempts to grab that attention by any means necessary, with the competing desire and instinct to protect the vulnerable from harm. The question remains *where* and *how* we draw the line between harmful and hate-filled, and contemptible, nonsensical or unpopular.

In an open letter published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 2020, 73 academics, writers, authors, and journalists expressed their concerns about ‘censoriousness... an intolerance of opposing views, [and] a vogue for public shaming and ostracism’ calling for a return to ‘robust and even caustic counter-speech’ without fear of retribution’ [52].⁶ Until that time, individuals will select digital publics where they feel most comfortable to express their opinion. Forum-style platforms – such as Reddit, 4Chan and 8Chan—appear particularly popular for ‘underground’ or fringe narratives, or unpopular opinions. However, the social media mainstay, YouTube, has repeatedly drawn criticism for apparent pro-right/conservative leanings and its tendency to promote the dissemination of right-wing or extreme media content [42, 53].

2.2 Macro and Micropublics

Large scale digital publics or ‘macropublics’ offer transformative beliefs a voice while mob justice encourages sanctions against (and the erasure of) detractors [54, 55]. However, in the rush to sanction perpetrators and protect the vulnerable, these movements may oversimplify opposing opinions and intentions, instead adopting a binary view that leads to simplifications, extremism, and moral (out)rage [55]. Opposing voices are excluded, while moderates are silenced, with counter-opinions force to move underground. This approach does not allow for nuanced and meaningful debate or the careful deliberation on complex issues but focuses on symbolic wins [54]. These movements can also lose sight of their objective in their rush to rituals of performative blood-letting [54]. This does not mean that digitality or the digital is *antithetical* to the public sphere. However it emphasises the extent of fracture that has shattered the public sphere into a series of ‘false digital publics’ and where participation requires agreement or acquiescence.

⁶ Signatories included Noam Chomsky, the late Drucilla Cornell, J.K. Rowling, Salman Rushdie and Gloria Steinem.

Another fundamental change created by the shift to digital macro and micro-publics is the lack of random encounters that unexpectedly expose individuals to a different perspective [56]. In digital publics, individual participation and self-expression is ‘highly contingent’ on social environment, platform construction and social cues [25]. However, anonymity and the protection from sanctions (that would require identification) may also allow the individuals to express themselves freely without fear of repercussion.⁷ However, individuals are still sensitive to the ‘climate of opinion’ and will be more likely to participate in discussions where they believe themselves to be in the majority [56]. An important part of individual identity relies on our connection to—and belonging within—society. Many will experience that connection based on their understanding of social norms and the dominant views of those close to us [21]. The holding of shared beliefs or a mutual understanding of reality builds connections and self-confidence in our capacity to understand the world around us [57]. The tendency to associate with those who share our beliefs can also create a ‘false consensus effect’ which leads the individual to overestimate the popularity of their perspective [58]. A functional deliberative democracy provides ample opportunities for all parties (including the deluded or misled) to be exposed to public consensus and opinion. The public sphere therefore provides an indispensable opportunity for public debate and exposure to contradictory viewpoints. To that end, this article moves away from the common focus on ‘cancel culture,’ arguing that cancel culture is merely a symptom of hyperliberal illiberalism. A new phenomenon which silences majority moderate voices for fear of censure and persecution from vocal minorities.

As the name suggests, hyperliberal illiberalism manifests in a *hyperliberal* shift towards illiberal practices that stifle individual speech through fearful self-censorship fracturing the public sphere into macro- and micropublics that follow a shared central dogma [25]. Compelled conformity, cancellation [54], and de-platforming victimise and strengthen ideological convictions while fostering neo-tribalist behaviour [59]. This encourages outgroup animosity, heightens polarisation and drives populist rationales [60]. The exclusion of moderate voices or balanced critiques divides social groups into ‘us’ and ‘them’ and denies opportunities for measured debate and critical engagement [61]. The issue is further complicated by the goal of being seen and heard: a goal that is best achieved through sensational or controversial means [49]. And yet, in the midst of all of this, is a majority who choose not to engage at all [60].

3 Fallibilism, Discourse, and the Practice of Democracy

In the 17th Chapter of St Luke it is written: “the Kingdom of God is within man”—not one man nor a group of men, but in all men! In you! You, the people have the power—the power to create machines. The power to create hap-

⁷ There are platform and personal factors which may modify the likelihood of anonymity. However, these factors are beyond the scope this article.

piness! You, the people, have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure. Then—in the name of democracy—let us use that power—let us all unite.

Charlie Chaplin, 'The Great Dictator' [1].

Fallibilism is a fundamental and precious feature of public discourse. Charles Sanders Peirce' used fallibilism to remind us that knowledge or discovery is not an end point. He noted that 'the universe is *not* a mere mechanical result of the operation of blind law. The most obvious of all its characters cannot be so explained' [62]. Instead, one must accept that one cannot ever be certain that their factual beliefs are correct and that all knowledge is fallible: we can only be certain it is correct *until* we discover otherwise—in which case we learn that it was not correct at all, and simply our best approximation based on contemporary knowledge at the time. An openness to inquiry and meaningful discourse allows knowledge to evolve.

There are numerous examples from history. We once believed the Earth was the centre of the Universe and the point around which the Sun, Moon and stars orbited. For believing otherwise, Nicolas Copernicus and Gallileo Gallilei were silenced and ostracized. They were eventually proven right. We also believed our galaxy was finite. Yet in 1929, Edwin Hubble observed distant galaxies and discovered that they were moving rapidly away from us. The phenomenon seemed to apply in every direction. His discovery proved that the universe was, and still is expanding, forming the basis of the Big Bang Theory [63]. The big bang theory provides an answer to the endless question of 'where it all began' and throws into question (or relief) long-held beliefs about the origins of humankind. It showed that humans are merely a small part of an expansive and expanding universe—not the centre as we once thought.

Once more, we find a parallel between the stars in our universe and data or people in the digital space. Both are undergoing endless and limitless expansion on a scale which is entirely unfathomable. Both came from comparatively small beginnings. ARPANET, the first iteration of the internet or 'world wide web' shows a similarly impressive expansion rate. During its infancy in the early 1970's, the ARPANET connected and facilitated communications between four 'nodes' and underwent a series of gradual expansions before finally becoming the World Wide Web—the backbone of the internet we know today. At the time, the internet was capable of transmitting approximately 100GB of traffic per day [64]. Today, it would take approximately 32 s to download that same amount.

The first (important) search engine, 'AltaVista' was launched in 1994, and followed by Google in 1997. This was the first appearance of Google's PageRank system and our first real experience of algorithmic intermediation [2]. Information communication technologies developed gradually after that, with the first feasible and useable mobile phones appearing around 1990, and the emergence of smart phones in the early 2000s [2]. The triple revolution of the 2000s brought together the internet, mobile communication and social media networks and changed life as we know it. Facebook was founded in 2004, followed by YouTube in 2005, with Twitter following soon after in 2006. The rest is history.

The question is *how* the public sphere and the praxis of democracy has been changed by the interposition digital. *Whether* or *if* such change has occurred is now irrefutable. Whether the democratic shift towards populist politics was precipitated by, hastened by, or entirely unaffected by the digital-public space, is much more difficult to resolve. One of the more popular criticisms of digital media is its role in the production and dissemination of misinformation or fake news [58]. Misinformation is often used by populist parties to generate sufficient groundswell for their movement to succeed [42].

In western democracies, the term ‘populism’ appears to be disproportionately applied to right-wing groups and carries a strongly negative connotation.⁸ Blokker describes populist motivators as an ‘[alleged] impatien[ce] with the procedures and institutions’ imposed or enacted by intermediary bodies (such as the judicature), with populists preferring a more direct relationship between the ruler and the people [65]. Populism is commonly associated with extremist views and described as a ‘thin ideology’ that is based on a simple assumption that sees society as split into two distinct groups: the ‘*pure* people and the corrupt elite’ [65]. According to Schulz, this dichotomy is fundamental to all populist ideologies. This creates an ‘us versus them’ mentality and is often combined with a distrust of (and hostility towards) the traditional media [58]. Allegations of ‘Fake News’ abound based on the belief that the populist group is really the ‘silent majority’ whose opinion is suppressed [58]. However, Blokker argues that populism should be understood as an ‘intrinsic part of democratic systems’ as populist critiques tend to orient around the priorities of liberal democratic governments, rather than challenge governments or governance [65]. They do so on behalf of what is *in fact* the majority.

However, this does not preclude the existence of an *actual* silent majority. Nor is the existence of a silent majority co-requisite to a distrust in media or news organisations. According to Sakariassen and Meijer, the majority of internet users do not participate in social network sites (‘non-participants’) [66]. It does not automatically follow that non-participants all share the same views or abstain from online engagement *because* they disagree with the dominant opinion. However, the trend is significant. Sakariassen and Meijer further note the cognitive and emotional effort involved in non-participation and argue that it should be seen as an act—and therefore, active—rather than passive, and thus a form of speech [66]. The decision *not* to participate also *contributes* to the formation of public opinion [66]. Although these contributions are likely to have unintended consequences.

3.1 Speech, Opinion, and the Desire to be Heard

With the development of social media, the world felt a little bit smaller. The information superhighway (as it was once called) was at the individual’s fingertips, and so was the world. As a society, we took our first steps towards the digitality of today with the official launch of Facebook in 2004. At that time, Facebook had

⁸ This may also be an incident of the current political climate.

approximately 1 million users. By the end of 2005, that number had increased to 5.5 million. Less than two years' later, in 2007, that number had increased ten-fold to 55 million. By the end of 2009, that number had increased again, this time to 350 million. Facebook reached more than 1 billion users by September 2012 [67]. In a release to its investors for quarter 2 of 2023, Facebook reported as many as 3.03 billion monthly active users [68]. The scope of Facebook's success is not news to us. Modern society is well-aware of Facebook's massive growth, influence, and potential for misuse. However, we may be less conscious of *how* our changing relationship with digital space affects us on an individual level. As but one in a sea of many—including anyone and everyone we have ever known—individuals are now at the centre of the panopticon. Individuals cannot know when they are being viewed, examined, or deliberately ignored. The private individual is 'shifted out' of his comfortable and unnoticed existence into the centre of a story that could be written or read at any time [69]. In exchange for the opportunity to drop-in and out of the lives of friends, we left a trail of data behind us.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Jean Baudrillard warned of such a shift, one where the urge to share everything, would lead, in turn, to the sharing of every *thing*: '*[t]his loss of public space occurs contemporaneously with the loss of private space. The one is no longer a spectacle, the other no longer a secret*' [70]. The outcome is that self-representation is less about the representations one makes about their own 'self' and instead becomes constitutive. The 'self' is informed by the ubiquitous knowledge available to others *about* the individual, rather than a reflection of how the individual sees themselves. Luciano Floridi refers to this as the narrative approach to individual identity. Citing from Proust, Floridi notes that:

Even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone... We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him ... [in] the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks ... to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice that these seem to be no more than a transparent envelope, so that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is our ideas of him which we recognise and to which we listen [35, 71].

Yet there remains the compulsion to speak, to be heard, to communicate and the desire to participate meaningfully in one's own society. Mary Chayko suggests that the act of communication is worth far more than the sum of its parts: its origins were 'prehistoric, preliterate, preverbal and ... non-verbal' and represent a 'timeless desire to communicate' with others. These acts of communication allow us to be seen, known, and understood [2]. Studies have shown that social media users will decide whether to share their opinion based on their 'imagined audience' or based on their fear of social rejection or 'cancel culture' [21, 72]. The instinct is therefore to moderate what we say—or to say nothing—to avoid conflict *unless* we feel particularly passionate on the matter [72]. However, this is far from the radical and progressive ethos that the internet first promised [73]. Participation therefore moves from macropublics like Facebook or Twitter to private messaging or sites that allow (pseudo)anonymous posts such as 4-Chan, 8-Chan, or Reddit, thereby relying on

micropublics filled with likeminded individuals so that they may speak freely [74, 75].

4 Mass Media, Public Opinion, and the Spiral of Silence

Soldiers! don't give yourselves to brutes—men who despise you—enslave you—who regiment your lives—tell you what to do—what to think and what to feel! Who drill you—diet you—treat you like cattle, use you as cannon fodder. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men—machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines! You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate—the unloved and the unnatural! Soldiers! Don't fight for slavery! Fight for liberty!

Charlie Chaplin, 'The Great Dictator' [1]

According to Hensman, 'the ultimate goal of liberal democracy is the political organisation of peaceful disagreement between individuals and groups whose liberty and equal opportunity rights are exerted through reciprocal representative and participatory means' [73]. Habermas describes deliberative politics as an 'existential precondition' in any pluralistic society that intends to call itself a democracy. This positions the public space as the 'sole locus' for the formation of public opinion and the political will [23].

Public consultation is key to establishing the public opinion and social consensus that democracy requires. Mass media play a pivotal role in this process by providing the individuals with access to information beyond their immediate personal sphere [76]. The intermediary role of mass media is both a blessing and a curse: they inform individual understandings about the world around them, facilitate the search and retrieval of news and other content, and provide online forums for social interaction [76].

However, the shift to mass media, has also changed the role and contribution of traditional news outlets from gatekeepers to mere content producers [25]. The result is a blend of mass amateurization and expert-curated content [59]. This shift has also changed how consumers find and access their news, such that 55% of global internet users now access news sites via social media or social networking sites [25]. On the one-hand, mass media provides access to a broader variety of perspectives and debates [12, 40, 42]. On the other hand, the shift to mass media has allowed misinformation, disinformation, and rumour to flourish [12] thereby presenting a 'growing threat to liberal democracy' [77]. In addition, mass media serve an important agenda-setting function by indicating public opinion and matters of significant importance [76].

In Part 2, this article addressed democracy, the digital-public space, and the importance of 'mutual listening and response' and 'mutual adaptation.' The aim is to foster a true consensus of opinion which develops through the participatory engagement of the state and its citizens. Free expression is fundamental to that process, otherwise the public opinion produced *will not* represent the actual opinion of

that public. Yet the individual's willingness to engage in free expression, to participate in public opinion formation, will most likely depend on how they believe that opinion will be received [21, 72, 78]. Noelle-Neumann refers to this as the 'opinion climate' [76].

Of course, the opinion climate will be entirely context-dependent, and as Noelle-Neumann said, will therefore depend 'on who talks and who keeps quiet' [76, 79]. This opinion climate is the centre point to Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence. The Spiral of Silence explains why individuals are so sensitive to the opinion climate and why they are so unwilling to go against it. This makes 'public opinion' easy to define for Noelle-Neumann⁹ who simply characterised it as the '*opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanction*' [77]. Noelle-Neumann also notes that public opinion can be a significant 'tool of social control' that incorporates top down and bottom-up assumptions: that deviant individuals will be threatened (or punished) with isolation, and that individuals fear that isolation from society [59].

4.1 The Spiral of Silence in Action

The Spiral of Silence begins with the assumption that individuals are likely to remain silent where they believe their opinion would be unpopular or controversial and poorly received. The 'spiral' aspect of Noelle-Neumann's theory comes from the corollary that each act of self-censorship decreases the public expression of that opinion, making it *less* common and therefore making others *more* likely to suppress or censor their opinion. Noelle-Neumann breaks this process into a series of individual cognitive considerations as set out below:

1. **Distribution: Assessing local public sentiment**

First, the individual forms an understanding of public sentiment on a particular topic. The individual monitors not only the current state of consensus, but also monitors for increases or decreases in the strength of that consensus [76]. Individuals pay especially close attention to popular or public consensus for matters they feel strongly about, or which are particularly important to them. This relies on a judgment of the individual's degree of 'exposure' if they share their opinion.

2. **Willingness: Whether or not one is willing to expose or express their view**

The second consideration assesses how *willing* the individual is to expose their view publicly and based on the trend and distribution of similar beliefs in their environment. Individuals are more likely to share their opinion if they feel their opinion is gaining ground—even when in the minority position [76]. This aspect can also explain why hyperliberal narratives and call-out/cancel culture evoke such a strong and swift response: The shared sense of moral outrage creates pleasurable feelings of 'working together; fighting for justice and helping the vulnerable [defeat] the perpetrator' [55].

⁹ Scholars such as such as Montaigne, Rousseau, Hume, and Locke found the term 'public opinion' much more difficult to define.

3. **Accuracy: If they have misinterpreted apparent public sentiment, the question is why?**

This often happens as part of the spiral itself. This is not the tyranny of the majority so much as a tyranny of the *minority*. The opinion most often heard and repeated will appear to hold the consensus—regardless of whether this is the case. This aspect has the direct consequence of limiting or silencing opposing views.

4. **Temporality: Is this consensus likely to hold?**

The temporality aspect of Noelle-Neumann's theory recognises that individuals will also make decisions based on the likelihood that this view will maintain its dominance. Perceptions and expectations of future dominance will further strengthen the dominance of that narrative.

5. **Trend: Is now the time to express my disagreement?**

The fear of social isolation underlies most decisions to remain silent [20]. However, this risk is reduced once public sentiment begins to shift [76]. Individuals become increasingly likely to express counter opinions once they perceive the tide has turned. This also strengthens that shift, making it more pronounced.

Digital publics add significant confounding variables to each of these assessments. On social media platforms, the application of algorithms and 'content feeds' work to curate and deliver 'more of the same'. These systems work precisely by using content-based filters to recommend more of what the user has liked in the past, or what similar users have liked [80]. However, these same systems also prioritise and incentivise 'click-bait'-type content or controversial posts which often strengthen the resolve of the ingroup and further marginalise out-group perspectives [81].

This is the other side of the Spiral of Silence: once the individual realises their opinion is incongruent with the majority's, many will begin to question the voracity of their own beliefs. At the same time, they will weigh the potential cost of self-expression against the risk of social isolation or exclusion that may result [76]. This impact is even more profound in exclusive or non-public places where the majority has the right to exclude non-conformists. Likewise, non-conforming parties will be particularly vulnerable in echo chambers, or other homophilic communities where consensus is wide and largely unchallenged. Expressions of opinion will be limited to those that conform with that opinion. This, in turn, strengthens the opinion climate in favour of the dominant opinion, and makes counter-expression less and less likely to occur. Some may speak up and risk isolation, others may leave the fold for a community that aligns better with their own beliefs. However, minority factions may also arise. These will often consist of a 'hard core of persons who are not prepared to conform,' change their opinion, or remain silent, and support their belief by seeking out other like-minded individuals (and media sources) that share their opinion [76].

In most cases, the nonconforming party will choose to remain silent, especially where their view is likely to be unpopular. Yet, if the tide of opinion turns, the nonconforming party will become increasingly likely to share that view [76]. At the heart of the Spiral of Silence is a tendency to self-censor due to the fear of social or political isolation. In this way, public opinion may also act as a process of social

control that forces individuals to self-censor when their opinions are incongruent with the majority view [20].

‘Cancel culture’ or the fear of ‘cancellation’ has a profound impact on self-expression online. Cancel culture is.

A phenomenon by which a public figure experiences public shaming or the withdrawal of support for their expression of no longer socially acceptable views or behaviours pertaining to topics like race, gender, or sexuality [75].

However, the fear of social repercussions—akin to cancellation albeit on a much smaller scale—is not limited to public figures and celebrities. Studies have shown that the spiral of silence (or fear of cancellation) is also common within college students [21], academia [78], and brands. Abdalla et al. found that the majority of college students have refrained from posting their opinions online for fear of being “called out” and have decreased their use of social media as a result [21]. Many cite a fear of the ‘constant surveillance of online activity’ as the reason for their disengagement with online spaces [21]. Norris found that this impact was not limited to students, but also extended to members of academia [78]. Cancel culture was a consideration for both left- and right-wing academics, although a higher proportion of right-wing (cf. left-wing) academics reported an increase in the prevalence and impact of cancel culture over recent years. When considering the respect for open debate, right- and left-wing academic opinions followed a similar pattern. However, left-wing academics were significantly more likely to state that the respect for open debate had not changed while right-wing academics were more likely to report that academic freedom had ‘got a lot worse over time’ [78].

Fear of cancellation represents an appreciable threat that remains cognizant in the minds of those engaging online. If a democratic goal is for discourse and debate to put the state ‘in touch with the needs of society’, the spiral of silence robs the digital space of opportunities to enact its transformative potential. Controversial perspectives or positions are particularly difficult to address in light of the hyperliberal turn.

4.2 Illiberalism and the Hyperliberal Turn

Illiberalism refers to a set of ‘social, political, cultural and legal and mental phenomena’ that are associated with the waning of individual liberty [82]. Illiberal acts deny public reason and rely on contingent ideologies such as populism or communitarianism. They may also reject rational discourse and promote intolerance [82]. In populist groups, illiberal tendencies manifest in various ways. Blokker argues that there is a clear distinction between these manifestations. This will depend on the overarching ideology of the group [65]. For example, the illiberal ideals of right-wing groups are often prompted by a backlash against liberal models that are grounded in extensive human rights and minority group protections. They seek to challenge legal norms founded on human rights and argue that these protections apply to groups that were ‘previously marginalized but [are] now privileged ... [and are counter to] the interests of the traditional community and the “ordinary people.”’ [65]. Conversely, left-wing ideologies focus on critiquing the establishment as not going far

enough. According to Blokker, theorists such Chantal Mouffe argue that the illiberalism behind left-wing populism seeks to mobilise the will of the people to reform the liberal approach in a way that ‘[puts] democratic values in the leading role’ [65]. The two focuses are directly antithetical and unsurprisingly worsen the divide.

Perhaps encouragingly, there is some commonality between the two: both left- and rightwing populists share a dissatisfaction with the liberal priorities of a liberal democratic government. *Right-wing populism argues that liberalism has gone too far* and forgotten the ‘ordinary man’ in favour of making reparations to a (now privileged) minority. *Left-wing populism argues that liberalism has not done enough* to resolve the failings of neoliberalism and ‘the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and social benefits’ and structural inequalities [65].

One of the more novel aspects of the digital-public space is the emergence of hyperliberalism. Hyperliberal Illiberalism refers to an extreme form of illiberalism that could be referred to as *hyperliberal* and therefore ‘over, beyond, or above’ the traditional, common, or ‘typical’ liberal view in terms of content, voracity, or tolerance [83]. John Gray offers a more pointed critique, describing ‘hyper-liberal ideologies’ as those ‘that aim to purge society of any trace of other views of the world’ [84]. This description aligns well with criticisms of social media—and therefore, digital publics which create a ‘drastically simplified version of social interaction and communication’ [85] that reduces nuanced issues to binary distinctions [55]: ‘us’ or ‘them’.

Hyperliberalism *seems* well-intended. It draws a bright line between what *is* and *is not* acceptable, thereby reinforcing social norms and furthering liberal ideals. In hyperliberalism, public opinion moves from a potential process for social control, to a punitive measure enacted by a vocal minority or majority *when liberalism has not done enough*. Most liberals would recoil at the idea of public punishments meted out by an angry mob. But they are an incredibly effective form of social control when transgressions can be punished by public shaming, ostracism, or the mere fear of similar repercussions.

The nett effect is a hesitancy to engage in non-conforming speech acts for fear of retribution. The outcome is often silence or acquiescence. The dominance of hyperliberal tropes, and the vehemence with which these narratives are promulgated and performed, therefore ensure an apparent consensus in line with their ideology. When combined with Spiral of Silence effects, there is limited opportunity for debate and a decreased exposure to diverse ideologies or opinions [86]. Not only is the exposure to opposing beliefs essential for reasoned public debate and deliberative democracy, it also facilitates political tolerance and a better understanding of complex political issues [20].

Hyperliberal illiberalism, the spiral of silence, and the tendency to self-censor or constrain participation to homophilic macro- and micropublics is the consummate ‘bait and switch’. Digital publics promised and delivered a space where traditional news media were no longer the gatekeepers of knowledge, where individuals could voice their opinion, and start movements aimed at meaningful social change. The switch is obvious. What is less clear is precisely *when* this switch occurred. It seems likely that it coincided with increasing levels of polarisation. It also seems clear is that the spiral of silence risks the generation of false consensus in publics

which *are* democratic, but where the loudest voices may not be the majority at all, and where *published* opinions do not match the *public* opinion.

5 Conclusion—Truth and Its Perfect Formulation

Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people! Now let us fight to fulfil that promise! Let us fight to free the world - to do away with national barriers - to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers! in the name of democracy, let us all unite!

Charlie Chaplin, 'The Great Dictator' [1]

As human beings, we are fallible. Our quests for knowledge, for betterment, for progress all seem to have reached their perfect formulation—until we learn otherwise. This is not a loss, but a boon—a gift! Peirce said that 'the last philosophical obstacle to the advance of knowledge ... [was] holding that this or that law or truth has found its last and perfect formulation [62].' He argues that '... fallibilism cannot be appreciated in ... its true significancy until evolution has been considered.' Peirce continued, explaining that evolution is 'growth in the widest sense of the word'. It is 'diversification': the move from the 'homogenous to the heterogenous' [62]. And as we learn better and seek to do better, to restore justice, or to prevent the repetition of past wrongs or harms, fallibilism reminds us that we may yet to have reached that perfect formulation.

The move to sensationalism, to partisanship and self-censorship, has stifled what was once a free and liberal democratic space. Hyperliberal Illiberalism seeks to do good, cancel culture seeks to create accountability, but we must remember that transformation comes from transformative beliefs and unorthodox practices. The threat of cancellation, the reality of hyperliberal illiberalism, the rise of populism and extremism, and increasing levels of polarisation are stifling that expression and debate. Yet the loss is far more profound than our simple retreat from online social media. This loss makes individuals outsiders in what once felt like home.

However, all is not lost. This article concludes by echoing the calls of the Open Letter: *for free and robust—even caustic—debate* [52]. We know that evolutionary insights can spring from new and controversial thought, but that thought must be spoken and heard. Copernicus believed the Earth was not the centre of the universe. So too did Gallileo. Both were ostracized. Both were sanctioned—and both were right. The universe is expanding, the digital space is expanding—so too should our capacity for free speech, rational thought, and our toleration of contradictory views.

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