



Cass R. Sunstein: *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*

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#Republic addresses the future of democracy with the rise of social media. Sunstein recognises the threats posed to democracy by social media, yet he is careful to distance himself from decrying social media. Democracy is compromised ‘by a fragmented system of communication’ but nonetheless requires a communication system (213). As a widespread communication system, social medias have a role to play in democracy’s future. *#Republic* suggests consumer sovereignty has fuelled online polarisation and social fragmentation. Sunstein’s proposals involve a move away from consumer preferences, providing suggestions for using social media (and the internet more broadly) to improve democracy in the future.

The opening of *#Republic* discusses how a healthy democracy is undermined by people living in increasingly isolated pockets of information. Exposure to information we did not select *in advance* is crucial for deliberation and the functioning of democracy. Information is a public good; my possession of particular information may not prove useful to me, but may prove useful to you if sharing is possible (57). Yet, the current architecture of social media platforms increases the possibility to insulate ourselves from unexpected information.

Public spaces and general interest intermediaries (e.g. newspapers/television) act as sources of publicly available information and shared experiences. The rise of social media has changed this. The same available information exists (i.e., news outlets still exist), but *consumer sovereignty* prevails online. Social media’s need to hold our attention leads platforms to use our activities/interests to provide us with more of those same interests. This is not surprising to those of us using social media daily. However, the lack of *serendipity* online (arguably present in the pre-social media landscape) fuels partisanship, bubbles and polarisation. We can create online communities reflecting our own attitudes and values. Importantly, this is not always to the detriment of social progress and democracy; dissenting voices otherwise silenced through

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fear/prejudice may find safe spaces online. However, by less frequently encountering viewpoints we would not have chosen in advance we risk reinforcing our preexisting beliefs.

Later in *#Republic*, Sunstein addresses questions surrounding government regulation and freedom of speech. The general focus of his arguments centres on US opinion and policy. Sunstein suggests anti-regulation lobbying is generally motivated by vested interests against *particular* regulation rather than regulation *per se*. These groups conveniently ignore the level of regulatory benefits conferred on them (181). For example, broadcasters have control over particular bandwidths, afforded to them by regulation. Regarding freedom of speech, Sunstein is arguing that First Amendment rights should not be identified with consumer sovereignty. Freedom of speech has limits (e.g. criminal activity), but governments need to be wary when employing regulation. Sunstein raises difficult questions, arguing in favour of regulation (importantly, within clearly specified limits), and acknowledges freedom of speech is not an absolute right. The purpose of raising such questions is that Sunstein provides the context through which to view his own proposals.

Sunstein offers modest remedial measures to counteract the current tendency to form opinion bubbles or *echo chambers* in which we find ourselves merely exposed to reflections of our own views. These bubbles limit our exposure to critical viewpoints; ultimately leading to increasingly partisan views of critical issues. Sunstein draws an important distinction between our desires as consumers and our aspirations as citizens. There is a failure in the current social media landscape to address the latter. As citizens we may be interested in information from opposing views, even if, as consumers this may be something we do not seek out online.

Some of Sunstein's proposals offer interesting opportunities to improve our online networks, such as introducing serendipity into the structure of social media platforms. This would offer users the choice to expose themselves to an *alternate* newsfeed reflective of differing attitudes. Yet, I find other proposals too optimistic. Sunstein recognises there cannot be a one size fits all approach to different communication systems (must-carry requirements are effective on television, but seemingly impossible online). However, Sunstein's (229/230) suggestion for news outlets to refer to other 'dramatically different' views on the same positions seems unlikely in competitive attention markets. Attention is a scarce commodity, and given such scarcity it is implausible to expect outlets to redirect the attention of consumers to sites potentially undermining their preferred narrative.

Moreover, there are wider questions about whether social media companies can ever provide the same networking available in public spaces. Social media companies require us to be on their platforms, and our presence on the platform is their source of profit. This need to keep us online, on their preferred platform, will always inform their decision making on how they design social media platforms. At this stage, it is hard to see how the attention market can be reconciled with public responsibility. Whilst expectations of reconciliation are part of *#Republic*, I feel these questions are difficult to answer and to an extent left open.

Finally, some of Sunstein's concerns appear too cautious. Specifically, he cautions against corrective information as it may be ineffective in already divided speech markets (111). As Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found, corrections do not always reduce misperceptions. Moreover, their study found instances of a 'backfire effect' in which misperceptions *increased* when corrections were given. The implication is that we should be cautious to provide correctional information so as to avoid making situations worse. Yet, Nyhan & Reifler have conceded that new research by Wood and Porter (2016) suggests the effect's prevalence may have been overstated. Further, collaborations are shedding light on this (Nyhan et al. 2017). The 'backfire

effect' is not integral to Sunstein's arguments, but it is indicative of a level of caution Sunstein employs throughout *#Republic*. Moving forward, proposals offered in *#Republic* might provide part of a broader approach continually informed by research. One emerging picture suggests we needn't be *as* cautious to engage in corrective measures when encountering misleading or 'fake' news. Perhaps corrections will offer effective counter measures to misleading information and the partisan behaviour it fuels online.

Sunstein does not commit to strong proposals. He fairly voices opposing views throughout. This makes his overall arguments more modest than they might otherwise have been. Yet, given his subject matter this serves as a good example of how one might avoid partisan attitudes. His optimism on democracy's future, and the positive role social media could play, is refreshing. Whilst I question his optimism, perhaps Sunstein is correct to expect more from social media's role in democracy.

References

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