

## What is Social Media’s Place in Democracy?

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**Abstract:** In his recent analysis of digital platforms as a medium for (democratic) political communication, Jürgen Habermas has proclaimed a constitutional imperative to maintain a functioning public sphere—leaving open, however, what this would require. While a growing literature develops ideas for social media reforms, these models put the cart before the horse. To restructure social media in a targeted manner, one first needs to determine the platforms’ desired contribution to democracy—which is far from obvious. Social media have a plurality of democratic affordances and can thus be assigned different, sometimes competing roles. To determine social media’s place in democracy, we need to do what Habermas has failed to do: locate social media in the center–periphery model of political communication in media society. In doing so, I argue that social media reforms should primarily aim to empower agents in the periphery.

The rise of social media has changed the ways in which citizens search for information and consume news about politics, and has enabled new forms of political interaction between citizens as well as between citizens and politicians.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, social media are increasingly seen as having disruptive effects on the opinion and will formation of democratic societies with the spread of mis- and disinformation. Jürgen Habermas has recently entered this debate with a new book, arguing that the digitalization of political communication, especially its platformization on social media, distorts citizens’ perception of the public sphere and leads to its fragmentation. He concludes that it is “a constitutional imperative” to maintain “a media

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<sup>1</sup>Rasmus K. Nielsen and Richard Fletcher, “Democratic Creative Destruction? The Effect of a Changing Media Landscape on Democracy,” in *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, ed. Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 139–62.

structure that ensures the inclusiveness of the public sphere and the deliberative character of public opinion and will formation."<sup>2</sup>

While Habermas leaves open what would be required for democracies to live up to this proclaimed constitutional imperative, the literature has quickly responded to his plea and started considering possibilities for social media reforms. Thorsten Thiel has claimed that more far-reaching measures than new laws are needed and has called for innovative forms of public data governance and the development of digital public infrastructures.<sup>3</sup> Simone Chambers has argued that the fragmentation of the public sphere is difficult to address through regulatory instruments because it is not the result of digitalization but rather the polarizing strategies pursued by certain political actors.<sup>4</sup> Cristina Lafont has suggested that the ills of social media cannot be cured by law-makers, but need to be countered through institution-building in the form of deliberative citizens' assemblies.<sup>5</sup>

However, neither Habermas's book nor the responses have addressed the prior question of social media's place in democracy.<sup>6</sup> This reflects a more general problem of current political theory debates about digital platforms. The literature is characterized by a proliferation of ideas for restructuring social media. Models range from platforms as private agents of democracy to platform socialism. These models share with Habermas the implicit assumption that social media have a constructive role to fulfill in democratic processes. Digital platforms are not simply seen as external disruptive factors, but as integral to the way in which contemporary societies govern themselves. Accordingly, proposals for social media reform do not merely aim at mitigating negative effects, but at putting the platforms at the service of democracy. The problem is that the models' proponents put the cart before the horse. To know how to restructure social media, we first need to determine their proper place in our democratic systems—which is far from obvi-

<sup>2</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 59.

<sup>3</sup>Thorsten Thiel, "A Polarizing Multiverse? Assessing Habermas' Digital Update of his Public Sphere Theory," *Constellations* 30, no. 1 (2023): 75.

<sup>4</sup>Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere: Asymmetrical Fragmentation as a Political Not a Technological Problem," *Constellations* 30, no. 1 (2023): 67.

<sup>5</sup>Cristina Lafont, "A Democracy, If We Can Keep It. Remarks on J. Habermas' *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*," *Constellations* 30, no. 1 (2023): 79–81.

<sup>6</sup>Other responses have focused on the differences and commonalities with his classic 1962 study. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Seignani, "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? An Introduction," *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): 3–16; William E. Scheurman, "A Not-Very-New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," *Constellations* 30, no. 1 (2023): 42–47.

ous. The goal of this article is to develop a systematic normative understanding of the role of social media in democracy. I seek to provide some guidance to the ongoing discussion about social media reforms.

As a first step, I offer an overview of the current debate on how we should restructure social media. I systematize the competing ideas as three models, which can all be read as possible responses to Habermas's proclaimed constitutional imperative. In the second step, I examine social media's democratic affordances to show that their (potential) role in democracy can be defined in different ways, not all of which are necessarily compatible. I provide a selective mapping of democratic affordances, focusing on information, deliberation, activism, voting, and representation. I explain how our idea of the appropriate form of social media depends on which one of these affordances is emphasized. In the third step, I argue that to settle on a particular view of social media's adequate role in democracy, we need to move beyond Habermas's evaluative analysis of new pathologies of the public sphere and engage in theory construction. Here, my goal is to locate social media in Habermas's own center-periphery model of political communication in media society. This is both a diagnostic and a normative endeavor. I argue that the primary goal of social media regulation should be to reboot what Habermas calls democracy's "extraordinary mode of problem solving,"<sup>7</sup> that is, to empower agents of the periphery to trigger and influence decision-making in the center of the political system. This generates a novel understanding of social media's place in democracy.

## Making Social Media Fit for Democracy? In Search of a New Model

Social media are notoriously difficult to define. For the purposes of this article, I use the term to refer to online platforms that enable users to engage in public many-to-many communication. Paradigmatic examples are X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube, but others fit the definition, too.<sup>8</sup>

Habermas is by no means alone in his worries about social media's effects on democracy, nor the first to voice them. Social media are increasingly seen as a threat, leading Nathaniel Persily to ask whether democracy can "survive the internet."<sup>9</sup> According to Chambers, a major concern is that social media enable the easy and effective circulation of disinformation ("fake news"),

<sup>7</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 357.

<sup>8</sup>For a systematic discussion of the difficulties involved in defining social media, see Caleb T. Carr and Rebecca A. Hayes, "Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 23, no. 1 (2015): 46–65.

<sup>9</sup>Nathaniel Persily, "Can Democracy Survive the Internet?," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 64–76.

which implies a decreasing epistemic quality of public deliberation—and opens up opportunities for manipulation.<sup>10</sup> As social media allow for fake accounts, trolls, and bots to be sent into political conversations, the platforms have become spaces of “computational propaganda.”<sup>11</sup> As Pablo Barberá points out, certain built-in features of social media, such as the possibility to seclude oneself into echo chambers, seem to drive political polarization and to lead to a fragmentation of the public sphere.<sup>12</sup> This includes the proliferation of hate speech, to which social media seem particularly prone, partly due to the fact that—unlike traditional media—they allow individuals and groups to disseminate their own content.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the platforms’ business model—to commercially exploit user data—results in a commodification of political communication. The providers have strong incentives to structure user interactions to generate the most profitable behavioral patterns.<sup>14</sup> As Ugur Aytac argues, the relation between social media companies and users can be described as one of domination—both with regard to the design and the management of digital services, which many citizens have no choice but to continue using, not least for purposes of political action.<sup>15</sup>

Thus a sense of urgency has developed that social media need to be reimagined and ultimately restructured. The underlying assumption is that digital innovations are not uncontrollable drivers of political change, but can to some extent be shaped through democratic intervention.<sup>16</sup> Even more importantly, social media are not only seen as a threat, but also as harboring yet-untapped democratic potential. As the “technological mediation of public communication” is, according to James Bohman, “an essential condition for the existence of a public sphere in large and highly differentiated modern

<sup>10</sup>Simone Chambers, “Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 1 (2021): 147–63.

<sup>11</sup>Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, eds, *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup>Pablo Barberá, “Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization,” in *Social Media and Democracy*, ed. Persily and Tucker, 34–55.

<sup>13</sup>Alexandra A. Siegel, “Online Hate Speech,” in *Social Media and Democracy*, ed. Persily and Tucker, 56–88.

<sup>14</sup>Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019); Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel, “Social Media and the Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): 129–43.

<sup>15</sup>Ugur Aytac, “Digital Domination: Social Media and Contestatory Democracy,” *Political Studies* 72, no. 1 (2024): 6–25. see also Andreas Oldenbourg, “Digital Freedom and Corporate Power in Social Media,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2024): 383–404.

<sup>16</sup>Jeanette Hofmann, “Mediated Democracy: Linking Digital Technology to Political Agency,” *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 2 (2019).

societies,”<sup>17</sup> adequate social media regulation might indeed prove crucial for the future of democracy. As Jennifer Forestal points out, the built environment of social media has a crucial effect on how users behave on a given platform—e.g. by shaping how they perceive their relations and by enabling, or promoting, certain types of interaction. In principle, social media can be designed to “support democratic politics.”<sup>18</sup> Against this background, a new literature asks how we might bring out the positive potentials of social media, through political intervention and conscious design, and put them to good (democratic) use.

I systematize these existing ideas as three alternative models. All can be read as possible responses to Habermas’s proclaimed constitutional imperative. They offer a menu of forms of social media that play a constructive role in democracy. Each model can point to empirical developments that can be interpreted as the beginnings of the envisaged social media reality.

### *Private Agents of Democracy*

The first model assumes continued private ownership of social media, but calls for legislation that turns the platforms—at least to some extent—into agents of democracy. The underlying assumption is that ethical self-regulation of platforms—favored, for example, by Nicolas Suzor<sup>19</sup>—will not be sufficient to achieve the required change.<sup>20</sup> What is needed, according to this view, is stronger government regulation and increased oversight by public agencies. As the European Parliament put it regarding the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act: “we need laws, not platform guidelines.”<sup>21</sup> Especially in the context of the European Union (EU), but also at the theoretical level, this model has connections to the idea of digital sovereignty, according to which states should more proactively assert authority over the internet. In terms of the content of new social media laws, it has been argued that Germany’s post-war regulation of public and private

<sup>17</sup>James Bohman, “Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy,” *Sociological Review* 52, S1 (2004): 133.

<sup>18</sup>Jennifer Forestal, “Constructing Digital Democracies: Facebook, Arendt, and the Politics of Design,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 1 (2021): 28.

<sup>19</sup>Nicolas Suzor, “Digital Constitutionalism: Using the Rule of Law to Evaluate the Legitimacy of Governance by Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>20</sup>Linnet Taylor, “Public Actors without Public Values: Legitimacy, Domination and the Regulation of the Technology Sector,” *Philosophy and Technology* 34, no. 4 (2021): 897–922.

<sup>21</sup>European Parliament, “Social Media and Democracy: We Need Laws, Not Platform Guidelines,” <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20210204STO97129/social-media-and-democracy-we-need-laws-not-platform-guidelines>. See also Renate Fischer and Otfried Jarren, “The Platformization of the Public Sphere and its Challenge to Democracy,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 50, no. 1 (2024): 200–15.

broadcasting could serve as an example, as it was supposedly “ambitious and comprehensive” in its “commitment to the principles of democracy, pluralism and diversity.”<sup>22</sup> One direction this could take is giving citizens greater control over the data that is a by-product of their social media use. Roberta Fischli envisages a “data-owning democracy” where user data can be pooled for collective purposes, for example to improve public services.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, the right to data portability in the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation can be seen as a first step.

### *Public Service Social Media*

The second model takes inspiration from the example of traditional public broadcasting, aiming at state-funded social media to complement the realm of private platforms. Public service social media could be designed with the interests of democratic citizens at heart because they would be independent from market imperatives.<sup>24</sup> One such proposal is H  l  ne Landemore’s Citizenbook, which is to be imagined as a variant of Facebook run by a non-profit foundation and “repurposed as a deliberative platform for democracy.”<sup>25</sup> All citizens would be automatically registered at birth and be provided with spaces and mechanisms for online deliberation, including digital mini-publics connected to decision-making processes. New democratic jobs would be created to maintain the platform and to facilitate its use, for example by providing information on topics to be deliberated.<sup>26</sup> As tentative beginnings of such a structure one can interpret public platforms such as Decidim and vTaiwan, which enable citizens to participate in local and national policy-making.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Wischmeyer, “Making Social Media an Instrument of Democracy,” *European Law Journal* 25, no. 2 (2019): 181; for a US perspective on social media regulation, see Harold Feld, “The Case for the Digital Platform Act: Market Structure and Regulation of Digital Platforms” (New York, Roosevelt Institute 2019).

<sup>23</sup>Roberta Fischli, “Data-Owning Democracy: Citizen Empowerment Through Data Ownership,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 23, no. 2 (2024): 204–23.

<sup>24</sup>Derek Hrynyshyn, “Toward Platform Democracy: Imagining an Open-Source Public Service Social Media Platform,” in *The Algorithmic Distribution of News: Policy Responses*, ed. James Meese and Sara Bannerman (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 253–67.

<sup>25</sup>H  l  ne Landemore, “Open Democracy and Digital Technologies,” in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*, ed. Lucy Bernholz, H  l  ne Landemore, and Rob Reich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 62–89.

<sup>26</sup>Landemore, “Open Democracy,” 81–83.

<sup>27</sup>Rosa Borge, Joan Balcells, and Albert Padr  -Solana, “Democratic Disruption or Continuity? Analysis of the Decidim Platform in Catalan Municipalities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 7 (2023): 926–39; Chris Horton, “The Simple But Ingenious System Taiwan Uses to Crowdfund its Laws,” <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/21/240284/the-simple-but-ingenious-system-taiwan-uses-to-crowdfund-its-laws>.

Other proposals aim at a less top-down and more decentralized ecosystem of “alternative social media platforms designed to meet the needs of local geographic communities and communities of interest,” complemented by a web interface that ensures a single sign-on and interoperability of the different sites.<sup>28</sup>

### *Platform Socialism*

The third model, which is the most radical vision, calls for social ownership of digital platforms. While this often involves ideas for public service social media,<sup>29</sup> the proponents of platform socialism do not merely seek to place new players in the public sphere but aim for a more general transformation of the digital economy, which includes “the breakup of capitalist monopolies in the communication, media, and digital sector.”<sup>30</sup> The goal is to reorganize social media as digital commons that are collectively owned and controlled, in order to empower both the platforms’ employees and their users. The institutional arrangements envisaged for this purpose range from “top-down nationalization schemes” to “direct forms of workers’ control” from below.<sup>31</sup> Depending on the proposal, the notion of digital commons can go as far to include “common control of the mines where natural resources are extracted that form the physical foundations of digital technologies.”<sup>32</sup> Generally, social media (and other platforms) are meant to be characterized by social ownership, workplace democracy, and participatory rights that allow users to co-determine the development of digital infrastructures.<sup>33</sup> While this model is the one most distanced from current realities, alternative social media such as Mastodon can give an idea of how the envisaged platform co-operatives might be structured.

The question of which of these models Habermas should adopt—as the most promising approach for maintaining a media structure conducive to

<sup>28</sup>Ethan Zuckerman, *The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure* (New York: Knight First Amendment Institute, 2020), 34; see also Saurabh Dhawan et al., “Re-Start Social Media, But How?,” *Telematics and Informatics Reports* 8 (2022), 100017.

<sup>29</sup>Dan Hind, *The British Digital Cooperative: A New Model Public Sector Institution* (London: Common Wealth, 2019).

<sup>30</sup>Christian Fuchs, “The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2021): 23; cf. Evgeny Morozov, “Digital Socialism? The Calculation Debate in the Age of Big Data,” *New Left Review*, 116/117 (2019): 33–67; James Muldoon, *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

<sup>31</sup>James Muldoon, “Data-Owning Democracy or Digital Socialism?,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Latest Articles, September 5, 2022, DOI: [10.1080/13698230.2022.2120737](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2120737), 9.

<sup>32</sup>Fuchs, “Digital Commons,” 19.

<sup>33</sup>Muldoon, “Data-Owning Democracy,” 8.

democratic opinion and will formation—is not easy to answer. Democratic societies aiming to regulate social media need to make choices at two levels. At a first level, there is the decision between the three organizational models, i.e., between private agents of democracy, public service social media, and platform socialism. At a second level, within each model, there is the choice between various possible ways of implementation, i.e., decisions on the concrete content of new rules for existing platforms or, depending on the model, on the goals, rules, and structure of new platforms. The right choices depend on what we expect social media to contribute to a democratic society. The proponents of the different models take the second step before the first—they advocate structural reforms of social media without having determined their adequate function(s). They suggest that the platforms are to play a constructive role in democracy and, in doing so, apparently assume that we already know what we want from them. But, as I argue in the next section, this is hardly the case.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Multifaceted Nature of Social Media: A Plurality of Democratic Affordances**

The inherent potentials of new technologies can be described as their affordances. This term, primarily used in communication research, refers to the “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object.”<sup>35</sup> Affordances enable and constrain certain types of behavior, while agents’ choices influence which affordances become practically relevant. The affordances of social media strongly depend on platform design. Democratic theorists have given the concept of affordances a political twist, with Lincoln Dahlberg describing as democratic affordances features of technologies “that enable (afford) particular democratic uses and outcomes.”<sup>36</sup> Adopting this concept, I turn

<sup>34</sup>Certain negative effects of social media that need addressing can be identified without developing a positive idea of their role in democracy. For example, preventing the distribution of disinformation that incites violence, as in the case of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol or cases of vigilantism in India, is a plausible goal. However, practically all of the mentioned proposals for social media reforms aim at more than just the mitigation of harms. On the mentioned cases, see Jeffrey K. Riley, “Angry Enough to Riot: An Analysis of In-Group Membership, Misinformation, and Violent Rhetoric on TheDonald.win between Election Day and Inauguration.” *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 2 (2022); Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, *WhatsApp Vigilantes: An Exploration of Citizen Reception and Circulation of WhatsApp Misinformation Linked to Mob Violence in India* (London: LSE Department of Media and Communications, 2019).

<sup>35</sup>Ian Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts and Affordances,” *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2001): 444.

<sup>36</sup>Lincoln Dahlberg, “Re-Constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four ‘Positions’,” *New Media and Society* 13, no. 6 (2011): 857; see also Marco Deseriis,

to a mapping of the democratic affordances of social media. My goal is to show that there are various constructive roles that digital platforms could play in democratic processes. I do not aim to compile an exhaustive list nor take a normative stance as to which is the “best” democratic use of social media. The point is to show that, due to their multifaceted nature, the platforms’ place in democracy is an open question. I outline democratic affordances in relation to information, deliberation, activism, voting, and representation.

### *Information*

A first way to look at social media is as a new information technology. A functioning public sphere depends on a media system that provides citizens with political news, analysis, and commentary in a way that enables them to engage in political debates. While not originally created for this purpose, social media “function as transmitters of important facts about what is going on in the world.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast to traditional media, they do not produce information but provide platforms for third-party content. This implies specific democratic affordances. In particular, social media offer new possibilities to access and circulate political news. For many citizens, social media have become a key source of information,<sup>38</sup> providing a sphere in which they are presented with a wide range of potentially relevant content, from private blogs to quality newspapers. At the same time, the networked form of communication characterizing social media puts all users in a position to curate content, for example by promoting political information they deem important among their contacts. In some places, social media also serve as an important substitute for traditional sources of information, which are increasingly disappearing. For example, in areas where local newspapers close down—or at least lose significance—social media often “replace or augment local information, as people connect directly with their children’s schools or with community organizations.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Deliberation*

There is a long-standing tradition of seeing the democratic value of the internet, and, with the rise of the so-called Web 2.0, of social media, in

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“Rethinking the Digital Democratic Affordance and its Impact on Political Representation: Toward a New Framework,” *New Media and Society* 23, no. 8 (2021): 2452–73.

<sup>37</sup>Chambers, “Truth, Deliberative Democracy,” 151.

<sup>38</sup>Nic Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022).

<sup>39</sup>Ethan Zuckerman, “Six or Seven Things Social Media Can Do for Democracy,” <https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/six-or-seven-things-social-media-can-do-for-democracy-66cee083b91a>.

creating spaces for deliberation.<sup>40</sup> This approach comes in two versions. According to the first, digital platforms offer new spaces for the kind of “anarchic” political communication that Habermas traditionally locates in the arena of civil society. Social media are seen as having the potential to approximate the function of eighteenth-century coffee houses in Western Europe, that is, enable citizens to gather informally to debate political issues.<sup>41</sup> The second view assumes that, in order to actually promote rational discourse, social media need to provide more formal spaces of deliberation than they do at present, such as digital mini-publics established to discuss specific issues. The idea is that “guided” political communication could “break the silos, filter-bubbles, and echo-chambers in which individuals currently prefer and are in fact encouraged to segregate themselves by platform designs created to maximize ad revenue rather than quality deliberation.”<sup>42</sup> Both versions assume that social media offer opportunities to mitigate problems of limited space and time that face-to-face deliberation in large societies is always confronted with. Digital platforms are more easily accessible than offline forums and, if they combine synchronous and asynchronous communication, can potentially include larger numbers of participants in deliberation.

### *Activism*

Here the emphasis is on the platform's potential to provide a stage for disruptive practices. Proponents of this view assume that “dissent plays an important role for initiating and sustaining social progress and learning processes” in democracies—and point out how social media provide new opportunities to engage in political contestation.<sup>43</sup> Digital platforms allow for a new type of large-scale “connective action” that differs from traditional social movements in that it is characterized by loose coordination among (often) physically dispersed actors rather than classical organizational struc-

<sup>40</sup>Lincoln Dahlberg, “The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere,” *Information, Communication and Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 615–33; Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung, “Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere,” in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*, ed. Lucy Bernholz, H el ene Landemore, and Rob Reich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 23–61.

<sup>41</sup>Katharine Dommett and Peter J. Verov sek, “Promoting Democracy in the Digital Public Sphere: Applying Theoretical Ideals to Online Political Communication,” *Javnost: The Public* 28, no. 4 (2021): 358–74; cf. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.

<sup>42</sup>Landemore, “Open Democracy,” 83.

<sup>43</sup>Robin Celikates, “Digital Publics, Digital Contestation: A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?,” in *Transformations of Democracy: Crisis, Protest and Legitimation*, ed. Robin Celikates, Regina Kreide, and Tilo Wesche (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 163.

tures including leadership.<sup>44</sup> Prominent examples from recent years are hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. As these cases indicate, it is important not to reduce social media to an online stage, but to see that they can play a critical role in initiating, coordinating, and sustaining offline protests and movements, as could be observed in the Arab Spring.<sup>45</sup> If one emphasizes these affordances, the democratic value of social media primarily lies in its potential to enable citizens—especially marginalized groups and even non-citizens—to form counter-publics, to effectively voice dissent, to mobilize and coordinate collective action, and to challenge existing institutions. Social media appear as instrumental for political activism that can, as Robin Celikates puts it, “function as a corrective to democratic deficits that seem to be a structural part of actually existing liberal states.”<sup>46</sup>

### *Voting*

Social media have the potential to facilitate voting processes. As Landemore has argued, they could be used to organize online referendums and to enable liquid democracy—vote delegation on a case-by-case basis.<sup>47</sup> Social media can also be understood as a sphere of “reactive democracy,” where online crowds “vote” in informal plebiscites.<sup>48</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo argues that political communication on social media follows a logic that is best understood as a plebeian public sphere—in contrast to the notion of a bourgeois public sphere outlined in Habermas’s early work.<sup>49</sup> Due to the logic of reactions (likes, follows, etc.), social media enable the formation of “online crowds,” i.e. “non-organized collectives ... that, while lacking the element of physical proximity characteristic of traditional crowds, nevertheless seem engaged in an experience of gathering or ‘crowding’.”<sup>50</sup> This enables a plebeian public sphere whose protagonists follow an affective rather than cognitive and informational logic of intervention and which is generally characterized by “emotional mobilization rather than reasoned argumentation.”<sup>51</sup> While reactions on social media can have a qualitative character (e.g., comments), they are primarily quantitative in nature. As such, they can serve as a measure of

<sup>44</sup>W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup>Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup>Celikates, “Digital Publics,” 165.

<sup>47</sup>Landemore, “Open Democracy,” 81–82.

<sup>48</sup>Paolo Gerbaudo, “Theorizing Reactive Democracy: The Social Media Public Sphere, Online Crowds and the Plebiscitary Logic of Online Reactions,” *Democratic Theory* 9, no. 2 (2022): 120–38.

<sup>49</sup>Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.

<sup>50</sup>Gerbaudo, “Theorizing Reactive Democracy,” 129.

<sup>51</sup>Gerbaudo, “Theorizing Reactive Democracy,” 122.

popularity for political ideas, policy proposals, and so on. In Gerbaudo's view, "reactions can be understood as a vote."<sup>52</sup> Online crowds forming on social media in response to offers made by political elites resemble preference aggregation in plebiscites. From this perspective, digital platforms serve as "the stage of a permanent referendum in which people constantly judge everything that is on offer."<sup>53</sup>

### *Representation*

Yet another perspective suggests that the democratic value of social media could lie in enabling improved political representation based on techniques of web scraping. The practice of "demos scraping" has been described in an illuminating way by Lena Ulbricht—although she sees it rather critically.<sup>54</sup> According to Ulbricht, demos scraping is a way of generating politically relevant knowledge through the automated analysis of trace data. It consists in a repurposing of data generated as a by-product of individuals' (not necessarily political) online activities.<sup>55</sup> "Data available on the Internet and in social networks" is meant to provide precise, comprehensive, and real-time aggregate information about what citizens want—and thus an effective way of tracking the "will of the people."<sup>56</sup> Demos scraping is meant to provide an alternative to opinion polls that is unaffected by the biases of survey situations. According to proponents, it "generates a superior form of knowing the demos that surpasses the insights gained from traditional disciplinary data about citizens, such as administrative data and censuses."<sup>57</sup> Demos scraping can take the form of sentiment analyses aiming to identify social media users' attitudes towards particular policies—and thus an indication of which positions could win majorities. In these processes of data

<sup>52</sup>Gerbaudo, "Theorizing Reactive Democracy," 132.

<sup>53</sup>Gerbaudo, "Theorizing Reactive Democracy," 133. In the article cited here, Gerbaudo's view of reactive democracy is considerably more positive than in his earlier book on digital parties, in which he criticized it for its "strengthening [of] personalised leadership." Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 185. While noting such dangers, he now emphasizes that "it would be wrong to assume that ... reactive democracy can just be morally condemned" and that we need "a different normative framework" than Habermas's theory of the public sphere to appreciate its democratic potential. Gerbaudo, "Theorizing Reactive Democracy," 123.

<sup>54</sup>Lena Ulbricht, "Scraping the Demos: Digitalization, Web Scraping and the Democratic Project," *Democratization* 27, no. 3 (2020): 426–42.

<sup>55</sup>On the various forms of trace data and how they can be collected and analysed, see Florian Keusch and Frauke Kreuter, "Digital Trace Data: Modes of Data Collection, Applications, and Errors at a Glance," in *Handbook of Computational Social Science*, vol. 1: *Theory, Case Studies and Ethics*, ed. Uwe Engel et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 100–18.

<sup>56</sup>Ulbricht, "Scraping the Demos," 429.

<sup>57</sup>Ulbricht, "Scraping the Demos," 429.

collection, in which online behavior is treated as “an expression of political preferences and intentions,” citizens “are unconscious of their role.”<sup>58</sup> However, political actors collecting the relevant information can then use it to make “representative claims.”<sup>59</sup> To what extent these are successful depends on how voters respond to the offers made, that is, what political choices they make. From the perspective of demos scraping, then, social media—or, more specifically, the data generated through user activity on the platforms—appear as a tool of governments and other political actors whose democratic value consists in improving representation. Web scraping enables political elites to gain more knowledge about “what the people want” than elections alone can provide and thus enables more responsive legislation.

Given that social media have such a variety of affordances, their adequate role in democracy can be interpreted in different ways. Not all of these options call for the same regulatory approach, nor can they necessarily all be promoted at once. For example, if social media are to provide citizens with an information technology, the model of private agents of democracy might be sufficient. Public regulation could require that platform companies take measures to ensure that information circulating on their services is reliable and that there is no arbitrary interference with content provision. By contrast, if social media are to provide civil society with an infrastructure for deliberation, a more ambitious restructuring appears necessary. To promote a deliberative function of social media, it needs to be made sure, for example, that the built environment promotes this particular mode of exchange and that the flows of communication are not distorted by algorithms designed to serve the platform companies’ economic interests.<sup>60</sup> As this might be difficult to achieve through legislation without undermining the platforms’ business model, public service social media appear more promising. However, state-run platforms might in turn conflict with the goal of empowering activism. If the point is, for example, to enable citizens to push for institutional change, publicly managed social media are probably not the right approach. Instead, platform socialism, especially the idea of new platforms built “from below,” seems more adequate. The general point here is that we need to decide what should be social media’s contribution to democracy. As long as this is undetermined, reform debates are futile.

<sup>58</sup>Ulbricht, “Scraping the Demos,” 432.

<sup>59</sup>Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>60</sup>The problem is not simply that social media platforms are profit-driven companies. This has been true for most of the “old media” as well. Rather, social media companies have economic incentives to structure (one might say directly interfere in) the communication among those who traditionally formed the audience in a way that is inimical to the idea of free democratic exchange. On this point, see Staab and Thiel, “Social Media,” 134–6; Aytac, “Digital Domination,” 16–17.

## Placing Social Media: Empowering the Periphery

In addressing social media's place in democracy, we need to avoid two kinds of shortcuts: first, to simply deduce the desired function of social media from a normative theory of democracy; second, to simply affirm the (superficially) democratic roles that social media de facto play at present. On the one hand, we need to consider how digitalization plays out in democratic societies—especially, which affordances of new technologies are being realized and for what reasons. Our idea of social media's democratic role needs to be sufficiently grounded in empirical realities. On the other hand, our idea of social media's place in democracy needs critical bite. We need to avoid tailoring theoretical justifications to the empirical realities of social media, which they might not deserve—for example, individual features that seem democratic at first glance but prove problematic when seen in a larger frame. We must be able to identify the inadequacies of existing platforms and forms of (online) politics. The way to achieve this is to locate social media in Habermas's center–periphery model of political communication in media society.

Habermas's model combines a political-sociological analysis of democratic processes with a theory of legitimacy that explains how the interplay of public sphere and political institutions ought to work. Thus, placing social media in it is both a diagnostic and a normative endeavor, which, as I explain below, should be approached in line with Habermas's reconstructive mode of theorizing. I first outline the center–periphery model and argue that Habermas's work lacks a clear idea of the role of social media. In the next step, I show that, when seen exclusively from a standpoint of political sociology, social media's place in Habermas's model necessarily remains underdetermined. Due to their various democratic affordances, many of which are at least to some extent realized, social media cut across the boundaries of Habermas's categories of center and periphery. In the final step, I argue, from a normative standpoint, that particular democratic affordances should be prioritized over others—with the goal of strengthening civil society. If democratic societies want to live up to Habermas's proclaimed constitutional imperative, they should engage in social media regulation that promotes the periphery-empowering functions of platforms.

### *The Center–Periphery Model*

Habermas's model of political communication in media society provides a “map” that outlines flows of communication in democratic systems.<sup>61</sup> The

<sup>61</sup>Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Jürgen Habermas, “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Have an Epistemic Dimension?”, in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 138–283.

model draws on the political sociology of Bernhard Peters. According to Peters, processes of opinion and will formation in modern societies take place along an axis of center and periphery of the political system. The center is characterized by its competences to make collectively binding decisions, which the periphery lacks.<sup>62</sup> Habermas gives this sociological model a normative twist, arguing that democratic processes ideally take their starting point at the periphery of the political system, in civil society, where citizens publicly articulate their concerns and—through media-based mass communication, intermediaries such as political parties, and ultimately elections—feed them into the political system.<sup>63</sup> The institutions of the center subject these issues to formal processes of deliberation and, where appropriate, follow up with collectively binding decisions. Crucially, this process is to work as a “feedback loop.”<sup>64</sup> Political elites, especially strong publics, publics with decision powers, should process citizen inputs and formulate them as considered public opinions that can serve, along with relevant information and arguments, as the basis for further debate in weak publics, with possible rounds of repetition, until the process eventually culminates in decisions.<sup>65</sup>

According to Habermas, these feedback loops involve three levels of political communication, each constituting a different arena characterized by a specific mode of communication. The first arena is the political system, where state institutions such as the government, administration, parliaments, and courts are engaged in institutionalized discourses and negotiations. The second is the public sphere, which is populated by elite actors, for example politicians, lobbyists, experts, advocates of general interests, and intellectuals, who engage in media-based mass communication. The third arena is civil society, where everyday communication among citizens takes place in both arranged and informal relations. This is the realm of various kinds of networks, social movements, and the like.<sup>66</sup> What Habermas outlines here is a deliberative system, that is, a set of interconnected elements that together enable “a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving,”<sup>67</sup> where “persuasion that raises

<sup>62</sup>Bernhard Peters, “Law, State and the Political Public Sphere as Forms of Social Self-Organisation,” in *Public Deliberation and Public Culture: The Writings of Bernhard Peters, 1993-2005*, ed. Hartmut Wessler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 17–32.

<sup>63</sup>Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 356.

<sup>64</sup>Simone Chambers, “Balancing Epistemic Quality and Equal Participation in a System Approach to Deliberative Democracy,” *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 3 (2017): 272.

<sup>65</sup>Habermas, “Political Communication,” 166.

<sup>66</sup>Habermas, “Political Communication,” 158–62.

<sup>67</sup>Jane J. Mansbridge et al., “A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy,” in *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane J. Mansbridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4–5.

relevant considerations" leads the way.<sup>68</sup> Crucially, not every element of a deliberative system needs to operate in a deliberative mode, or to the same degree. The deliberative quality of political decisions is expected to be produced by the system as a whole. This leaves room, for example, for disruptive acts aiming to make previously excluded voices heard in deliberation.<sup>69</sup> In Habermas's words, there is a division of labor between the different arenas and only "across the full scope of the process of legitimation" can we expect deliberation to fish "the reasonable elements of opinion formation out of the murky streams of political communication."<sup>70</sup>

For Habermas, the public sphere has a key role in this division of labor, as an intermediate system between civil society and the political system. Its task is to ensure that in the feedback loops of opinion and will formation "relevant issues and controversial answers, requisite information and appropriate arguments for and against will be mobilized."<sup>71</sup> Elites in the public sphere need, first, to take up inputs from civil society that need to be incorporated and reflected upon in broader political discussions and, second, to monitor the processes in the political system and provide the audience with critical commentary. In this way, a functioning public sphere ensures that the deliberative system is "both 'plugged in' to the source of legitimate authority, the demos, and to the outlet of binding collective decisions and executive power," as John Parkinson puts it.<sup>72</sup> Two conditions need to be met in order for the public sphere to live up to these expectations. First, there must be a media system sufficiently independent from its social environments, especially from the political institutions of the center but also from economic interests. This presupposes, among other things, a media constitution. Second, there is a need for civil society structures that empower citizens to participate in public discourse. The periphery needs to be able to maintain its own autonomous publics in order to act as a sensor for social problems that need addressing and as a basis for new political impulses.<sup>73</sup>

A striking point in Habermas's recent work on the digital public sphere is that he analyzes the effects of social media without ever explicitly placing them in his model of the deliberative system. In fact, there is considerable ambiguity when it comes to their democratic function. On the one hand, Habermas emphasizes how social media, in contrast to traditional media, empower all users to become authors. Citizens can use the platforms

<sup>68</sup>Mansbridge et al., "Systemic Approach", 5.

<sup>69</sup>Edana Beauvais, "Deliberation and Non-Deliberative Communication," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 16, no. 1 (2020): 7.

<sup>70</sup>Habermas, "Political Communication," 160.

<sup>71</sup>Habermas, "Political Communication," 162.

<sup>72</sup>John Parkinson, "Deliberative Systems," in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. André Bächtiger et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 432.

<sup>73</sup>Habermas, "Political Communication," 173–77.

“like blank slates for their own communicative content.”<sup>74</sup> However, as he points out, social media do not perform the editorial function of classical journalism, which results in a lack of quality control. This perspective on social media suggests that the platforms should be treated as part of the media system—they play a (yet to be defined and regulated) role in the production and circulation of political news and information. On the other hand, Habermas emphasizes that social media have become spaces for conversations “that had previously been reserved for private correspondence.”<sup>75</sup> As a result, when citizens engage in political discussions on social media, which they also do frequently, they often fail to recognize the need to follow standards of public rather than private autonomy. This take on social media as spaces of citizen-to-citizen communication suggests that the platforms need to be placed in civil society, as part of the structures that enable citizens to create autonomous publics. In short, Habermas’s discussion implies two options: social media might be a functional equivalent of quality newspapers or the coffee houses of the digital age.

### *Political-Sociological Indeterminacy*

However, the issue is not simply whether social media should be understood as part of the media system or as spaces for informal debate. To bring out the multiple options of placing them in the center–periphery model, I introduce three categories, derived from recent debates in democratic theory about the conceptual building blocks of systems approaches—democratic practices, sites, and agents.<sup>76</sup> My point is that the center–periphery model, and the feedback loops Habermas envisages, are in principle compatible with different ways of combining these elements and of organizing their relations. This leads to competing options of promoting (different) democratic affordances of social media. I define the three categories as follows.

- Democratic practices include formal and informal political activities such as assembling, associating, campaigning, deliberating, going on strike, news reporting, protesting, representing, and voting.
- Democratic sites are institutionalized and non-institutionalized arenas where such activities can take place, e.g., community centers, the media, mini-publics, parliaments, the public sphere, squares, and town hall meetings.
- Democratic agents are individual and collective actors that engage in democratic practices and populate democratic sites, e.g., citizens, civil society organizations, elected officials, governments, journalists, lobby groups, political parties, and social movements.

<sup>74</sup>Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 36.

<sup>75</sup>Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 54.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Rikki Dean, Jonathan Rinne, and Brigitte Geissel, “Systematizing Democratic Systems Approaches,” *Democratic Theory* 6, no. 2 (2019): 41–57.

These categories bring into view the multifaceted nature of social media. Depending on how they are designed, social media can enable different kinds of democratic practices such as deliberation or political protest. Moreover, while social media can be seen as a democratic site, different kinds of arenas can also be created within their realm (e.g., digital mini-publics). Finally, social media can fulfill different functions for different democratic agents. For example, governments and social movements are likely to use them for different purposes. Even if we follow Habermas in assuming that the point of social media regulation is to maintain a functioning public sphere, the platforms' proper place in the center–periphery model is anything but self-evident. This becomes even clearer if we consider these categories in light of social media's democratic affordances. Depending on which one we aim to promote, different agents will be enabled to engage in different practices; social media will take on a different character as sites of democratic processes.

Let me highlight some of the options, moving from the periphery to the center of the political system. If activism is seen as the main democratic affordance, social media are clearly placed in the periphery, meant to enable citizens to disrupt the center's routines to push for greater responsiveness or even institutional change. Similarly, if one aims to shape social media as sites of non-institutionalized deliberation, they appear as an important infrastructure of civil society, the periphery, although now as spaces for political debate contributing to the formation of considered public opinions. However, if we see social media as an information technology, they take on the role of an intermediary between civil society and political institutions. In this scenario, social media allow various agents—across the center–periphery divide—to access, disseminate, and exchange political information. If we take yet another perspective and regard social media as sites for institutionalized deliberation, connected to decision-making processes (e.g., digital mini-publics), they move closer to the center—with the goal of strengthening the link between citizens and political institutions.<sup>77</sup> Once we pursue the idea of (quasi-)voting in informal plebiscites, social media no longer serve citizens but become governance tools of the center. In this vision, governments, political parties, elected officials, etc. use digital platforms to test the popularity of their political projects among voters. Finally, if we see social media as a way of improving representation by gathering information about the preferences of citizens (who are basically unaware of this process), they become a part of the center, taking on a role similar to political parties.

<sup>77</sup>Referring to Habermas's two-track model of deliberative democracy, Landemore describes such proposals as an "attempt to create a third deliberative track between the formal track of decision-making and the informal track of 'deliberation in the wild'." Hélène Landemore, "Can Artificial Intelligence Bring Deliberation to the Masses?," in *Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics*, ed. Ruth Chang and Amia Srinivasan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 51.

A purely political-sociological perspective does not put us in a position to give a definitive answer to the question of social media's place in democracy. Given social media's various democratic affordances, they cut across the boundaries of Habermas's categories of center and periphery. Social media can and de facto do play a (sometimes more, sometimes less significant) role at various points along this axis. Thus, if we are seeking guidance for democracy-enhancing social media regulation, we need to switch to a normative mode of reasoning and ask what the platforms' contribution *should* be.

### *Rebooting the Extraordinary Mode of Problem-Solving*

Social media do not have a "natural" place in democracy. Thus, their proper role is not just a diagnostic but also a normative question—and one that needs to be answered with a view to the challenges contemporary democracies are facing. I approach this question in a reconstructive manner, in line with Habermas's view that the common distinction between empirical and normative theories is oversimplified.<sup>78</sup> Following his method of rational reconstruction, normative considerations about democracy—for example, assessments of changes in democratic processes and institutions—need to take their cue from "the implicitly assumed normative contents of empirically established practices," which need to be explicated "from the participant perspective, i.e., in a performative attitude."<sup>79</sup>

Seen through this reconstructive lens, a key problem of current politics is that democratic feedback loops increasingly fail to work as intended. The normative expectation that citizens be able to programme the content of collectively binding decisions is frequently frustrated. Habermas himself distinguishes between a (self-referential) routine mode and a (responsive) extraordinary mode of the political system.<sup>80</sup> According to this distinction, the periphery is not always in the driver's seat. Rather, only in exceptional cases, when certain problems attract special public attention and trigger an intensified search for solutions, are citizens able to determine the direction of decision-making in the center.<sup>81</sup> However, there is a growing sense that

<sup>78</sup>Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 4.

<sup>79</sup>Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to my Critics," in *Habermas and Rawls: Disputing the Political*, ed. James G. Finlayson and Fabian Freyenhagen (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 291, n. 16.

<sup>80</sup>Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 357. This mode is originally referred to by Peters as the "problem mode." Peters, "Law, State and Political Public Sphere," 29.

<sup>81</sup>This distinction has been criticized as a too far-reaching concession to "realist" political theory by William E. Scheuerman, *Frankfurt School Perspectives on Globalization, Democracy and the Law* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 98–100. From this point of view, rebooting the extraordinary mode of problem-solving may appear as an under-ambitious goal. However, it is in line with Habermas's cautious way of developing normative claims in a reconstructive manner.

citizens face difficulties to force democracy into the extraordinary mode at all, not just in the day-to-day business, but even in the face of major crises—as the institutional inertia with regard to climate change and the emergence of protest movements such as Extinction Rebellion illustrates. Democratic systems are increasingly disconnected from their demoi.<sup>82</sup>

Using Habermas's metaphors, the question today is how to reboot the extraordinary mode of problem-solving. In light of this, it would be misguided to treat social media as a technology whose democratic affordances should primarily be shaped towards the interests of agents at the "top" of the deliberative system. It may well be the case that governments (and other political actors of the center) can use techniques such as web scraping and informal (online) plebiscites to map citizens' preferences. And it may be that such uses can reasonably be described as democratic—as attempts to improve representation and interest aggregation. However, given that contemporary democracies are plagued by a growing asymmetry between weak and strong publics, social media should not be turned into instruments of political institutions. The priority should be for citizens to regain the capacity to initiate feedback loops. This democratic agency depends at least in part on critical infrastructures that allow civil society to engage in political exchange, coordination, mobilization, and contestation—for which social media today play a crucial role. The goal of platform regulation should be to promote citizens' capacities to interrupt the center's routines and to influence the content of political decisions. If social media are to make a constructive contribution to democratic opinion and will formation, they need to strengthen the periphery.

This view finds support in citizens' normative expectations as users of social media. These come to the surface, for example, when interference with certain practices is scandalized as an encroachment on democracy. Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter (later renamed X) in 2022—and his subsequent interventions in the functioning and culture of the platform, including banning a number of journalists and activists—is an instructive case. The "public reaction to the acquisition goes beyond discontent"—in fact, "it seems to imply a perceived loss," as X is apparently "understood by many to play ... a key role in the public sphere and in many 'subaltern counterpublics,' and thus in democracy."<sup>83</sup> How people have responded, the critique and worries they have articulated, indicate what users presuppose about X's role in

<sup>82</sup>Sheri Berman, "Populism is a Symptom rather than a Cause: Democratic Disconnect, the Decline of the Center-Left, and the Rise of Populism in Western Europe," *Polity* 51, no. 4 (2019): 654–67; Carolyn M. Hendriks, Selen A. Ercan, and John Boswell, *Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>83</sup>Austin Clyde, "Are Social Media Platforms a Legitimate Component of Democracy?," *Tech Policy Press*, <https://techpolicy.press/are-social-media-platforms-a-legitimate-component-of-democracy/>.

democracy. The general assumption underlying the public reaction is that, despite the fact that X is a privately owned company, it should be treated as a collective good, a shared space of citizens. Musk's intention to redesign X to make it more profitable is considered a threat to political equality: "[I]f Musk's plan is to monetise everything, then ultimately, that will mean that access to that public square will be based on ability to pay."<sup>84</sup> What is being claimed is that the platform must be maintained as a "domain of mutual trust in which citizens feel confident that they can debate and criticize freely on the basis of a shared consensus about reality"—in particular, in order to able to "speak truth to power."<sup>85</sup>

These reactions reflect the significance that X and other social media have for the periphery. In the eyes of many citizens, the added value of social media primarily lies in offering a space for the formation of autonomous publics and a realm from where political elites can be challenged. Citizens operate on the idealizing assumption that digital platforms play a key role in the empowerment of civil society. In his analysis of the digital public sphere, Habermas argues that democracy can only function, and be maintained, as long as there is not too large a discrepancy between citizens' presuppositions and political reality:

[T]here must be a *recognizable* connection between the results of government action and the input of the voters' decisions, such that the citizens can recognize it as the confirmation of the rationalizing power of their own democratic opinion and will formation. The citizens must be able to *perceive* their conflict of opinions as both consequential and as a dispute over the better reasons.<sup>86</sup>

Habermas's focus is on how these conditions are undermined by online mis- and disinformation and the emergence of semi-publics that refuse to engage with each other. Here, the rationalizing power of the public sphere is called into question. However, considering the structural failure of feedback loops, the more serious gap between normative expectations and political realities today seems to be that social media do not live up to the role citizens ascribe to them. What is at stake is the power of citizens to engage in consequential (politically effective) debates. What citizens see threatened in the case of the former Twitter, and what is implied in the public reactions to Musk's acquisition of the platform, is social media's potential to provide

<sup>84</sup>Adam Ramsay, "Elon Musk's Twitter is More Dangerous than you Think," *Open Democracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/elon-musk-twitter-dangerous-democracy-fintech-bank/>.

<sup>85</sup>Jason Stanley, "Elon Musk's Not-so-Hidden Agenda," *Project Syndicate*, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/musk-using-twitter-to-undermine-democracy-by-jason-stanley-2022-11>.

<sup>86</sup>Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 19; emphasis original.

a basis for bottom-up politics. This should be the main concern of platform regulation.

## Conclusion

I have taken up a question that Habermas raised with his recent intervention in the debate about the digitalization of the public sphere: what is social media's place in democracy—and how should they be regulated? I have argued that the different models for a restructuring of social media proposed in the literature—private agents of democracy, public service social media, platform socialism—fail to first clarify what democratic societies should expect from social media. Using Habermas's center-periphery model, I have examined the potential ways of locating digital platforms in democracy and have argued that the focus of social media reforms should be on rebooting democracy's extraordinary mode—on (re-)empowering civil society to initiate feedback loops and programme decisions of political institutions.

The current reality of social media in democracy can be described as a tension-ridden combination. On the one hand, we have a digital infrastructure provided by companies that are economically incentivized (and have the capacity) to arbitrarily shape the built environment of their products and thus the interaction of their users. On the other hand are ordinary citizens, political activists, marginalized groups, etc., whose political communication and action relies on the platforms being designed and governed in citizen-empowering ways. While public service social media appear as a promising way of avoiding distortions of democratic opinion and will formation that have their roots in economic incentive structures, one may reasonably doubt that governments are willing to design such platforms as spaces where they themselves can be effectively challenged. By contrast, while self-organized platform co-operatives appear as a more natural way of creating autonomous publics than state-run social media, they seem to be doomed to remain politically insignificant as long as the tech giants' quasi-monopolies are intact.

The most promising approach seems to consist in a modified version of the private-agents-of-democracy model. First, there seems to be the need for public regulation of social media that protects periphery-empowering aspects, where they have already emerged, from arbitrary disruption and that generally promotes platform design and governance that enables the use of private platforms as (democratic) collective goods. Second, democratic societies need to engage in a political debate about the possibilities for new kinds of digital competition policy. The question is how far the dominating position of (private) social media in the public sphere is beneficial to democracy and how the conditions for the emergence of alternative social media "from below" could be improved.