

# What is the Relationship of Digitalisation, Social Media, and the Liberal Script?

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*Two factors stand out in the ongoing contestations of the liberal script: 1) the rapid transformation of democratic media systems, accompanied by new modes of collective will formation, and 2) an increase in digitally facilitated connections among avowedly illiberal actors. To effectively address these challenges, liberal institutions must update the heuristics that guide their responses to these emerging phenomena.*



## DIGITALISATION AND ONGOING CONTESTATIONS OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

Digitalisation's impact on society is too broad and complex to be summarised in a few paragraphs. In this discussion piece, I will therefore only focus on aspects relevant to democratic will formation and how liberal institutions process informational input. Rather than explain "digitalisation", I home in on two key concepts that help to navigate these dynamics. These, in turn, concentrate on the mechanisms that could either enable or hinder challenges to existing institutional orders upholding the liberal script.

First, I present the concept of *the democratic interface*, a term previously used to describe the collective "communication and organisation processes that engage citizens with institutions of collective self-governance" (Bennett et al. 2017: 1657). The core argument here is that emerging communication technologies have reconfigured this interface, creating new avenues for the expression and impact of collective will on liberal institutional structures and output.

Second, I introduce the concept of *the phantom counter-public*: an imagined community galvanised by a *felt* sense of deprivation, which in turn leads to

real-world mobilisation and institutional responsiveness. Digitalisation has afforded new modalities of connectivity that give shape to such networks and facilitate their organisational efforts. Building on one another, these two concepts provide an analytical lens through which to better understand the current connection between digitalisation, social media, and forms of contestation of the liberal script.

## THE DEMOCRATIC INTERFACE

The concept of a “democratic interface” may be understood as the spectrum of democratic institutions that translate collective will into policy. At its most obvious, this may operate via elections, opinion polling, and surveys, which in turn feed political campaigns, party platforms, and the content for electoral runs. Protests, assemblages, grassroots mobilisation, civic participation, or other forms of collective action are other modes by which citizens might influence governance processes. In a more diffuse way, it can also refer to discursive systems, mediated information, and forms of connective action that give shape to communication-based networks. These factors will be given features of any form of democratic governance, where digitalisation and novel modes of communicative pathways have enabled citizens to connect to each other and to institutions in more direct ways. Put differently, digitalisation has facilitated input into the democratic interface.

One of the main features of digital connectivity is a decentralisation of information flow, breaking the monopoly of traditional media, and (theoretically) allowing for a more diverse spectrum of voices to make themselves heard (Benkler 2006; Benkler et al. 2015; Bennett/Seegerberg 2012). While this might not always function on the level of the individual (Hindman 2008, 2018), collective efforts via petitions or coordinated social media campaigns can increase the visibility of otherwise non-salient issues (Karpf 2012). This allows for the spontaneous organisation and mobilisation of social movements, as seen in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, or Black Lives Matter. These adaptive networks can form quickly to address issues and disband just as swiftly, offering a new dynamic tool for democratic expression (Castells 2015).

Digitalisation thereby also enhances the speed at which public opinions can be formed, gauged, and responded to. Through social media platforms, public opinion is not just rapidly formed but also quickly measured.

Institutions, elites, and various forms of organisation therefore use these platforms to “digitally listen” (Karpf 2016) to their constituents, gauge public sentiment, or make policy announcements (Jungherr 2016). The traditional communication boundaries that separated politicians and citizens have been significantly reduced, leading to a more interactive form of politics (Kreiss 2016). These processes may encourage a more participatory culture where citizens do not just consume information but also actively produce and distribute it.

However, despite all this potential to elicit more democratic input, recent years have also witnessed democratic fatigue, disillusionment, and ideological asymmetries when it comes to *whose* voices are heard and which organisations and actor types actually benefit. As my co-authors and I have argued elsewhere (Bennett et al. 2017), the contemporary democratic interface is also characterised by an imbalance: far-right parties and media formats have been significantly more successful than more pluralistically oriented or progressive actor types, both on an electoral level (Rooduijn et al. 2023: 8; Svolik et al. 2023) and in regard to the continued salience of mediated information flows (Benkler 2020; Schradie 2019). In other words, somewhat ironically, illiberal actors have been able to benefit from a more liberal expansion of the democratic interface. Here, the way that these actors are perceived by liberal institutions plays a large role in the affordances they find to push for their preferred policies. This is where my second explanatory concept comes into play.

## THE PHANTOM COUNTER-PUBLIC

The idea of a “phantom counter-public” echoes Walter Lippmann’s observations on the challenges presented by evolving media landscapes on democratic will formation and the rise of mass media in the wake of World War I. In “The Phantom Public,” first published in 1925, Lippmann contended that the idealised public is a product of collective imagination rather than an existing entity. As such, he saw it as ill-equipped to govern in complex modern societies. Instead, he advocates for a representative democracy where the public’s main role is to elect experts and leaders who can make informed decisions on their behalf. Dated and elitist as these notions may seem, Lippmann’s thinking at the time was profoundly shaped by his first-hand experiences with shifting media landscapes and the

increasingly chaotic pathways of pluralistic will formation in the emerging mass societies of the pre-World War II era.

Almost 100 years later, we encounter a vastly different institutional order. Democratic norms have long since shifted to be more responsive to forms of public input. Imperfect as it may arguably still be, the democratic interface we encounter today has evolved to become more effectively translate collective will formation into institutionalised policies. Nevertheless, it is here that the notion of *imagined* forms of the public plays a role in democratic governance: the way that democratic institutions and elites come to conceive of the makeup and will of “the public” is likely to have an impact on how they govern.

In recent years, these same systems have witnessed the rise of new forms of right-wing or even far-right populism, espousing views and ideology that are often in direct antagonism with established norms and liberal institutions (such as public or mainstream media, establishment parties, public education, universities, etc.). As such, they position themselves as a viable “alternative” to the established liberal order. It is the perception of these actor formations as democratically oriented forms of counter-publics (analogous to e.g. Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation, or Environmental Justice movements) that ultimately lets them increase their visibility and legitimises their demands.

I use the term phantom counterpublic to refer to the perception of such collections of far-right (read: illiberal) actor types that self-present and are often identified as belonging to a politically marginalised demographic. Crucially, however, the *phantom* counterpublic is not a “real” counter-public in the sense that social science has typically understood the term. Instead of pointing to democratically motivated movement formations that seek entry into a mainstream political sphere, the phantom counterpublic is merely *perceived* as doing so. Meanwhile, those who present themselves as part of it may employ similar tactics to inclusionary movements of the past. Yet at the same time, these actors may actively seek to undermine the very liberal norms that are supposed to underpin democratic public discourse, such as openness, diversity, and a willingness to engage in reasoned debate (Mudde 2019). They are a “phantom” because, while they might be imagined as such, they do not in fact meet the classical criteria for counterpublics that aim to advance democratic participation (Warner 2002).

Furthermore, the extent to which far-right actors actually are marginalised in democratic societies is typically contingent on the illiberal ideas they *choose* to espouse, not on their material status or individual personhood. Sarah J. Jackson and Daniel Kreiss therefore also refer to such formations on the right as “defensive publics” whose goals lie in the protection of their own privileged status within a society that by and large already affords them these privileges. Such groups have become skilled at adopting the language of liberalism to serve their own ends, thus infiltrating mainstream discourse while at the same time subverting its aims (Knüpfer et al. 2022; Marwick/Lewis 2017). This makes it difficult for liberal institutions to clearly identify them as threats. At the same time, the phantom counterpublic will utilise the tools and protections afforded by liberal democracy, including free speech laws, to disseminate hate speech and misinformation both online and offline. Due to their socio-economic status and access to political power and material resources, these groups are often able to mobilise swiftly in response to sociopolitical events or liberal policies they oppose. Here, connective affordances of digital platforms serve as an accelerator for such reactionary mobilisation, allowing these groups to operate (sometimes anonymously) and still maintain sustained campaigns.

Liberal institutions therefore may come to misrecognise these formations as legitimate counterpublics. This recognition endows the phantom counterpublic with a degree of legitimacy and productive power, enabling them to amplify the reach of their messaging, which in turn may shape public opinion and influence policy decisions. In short, the phantom counterpublic’s ambivalent standing – as a seemingly legitimate counterpublic on the one hand and a force working against liberal democratic norms on the other – often leads to confusion and policy paralysis among liberal institutions. The inability to deal decisively with such groups can result in ceding extra political and discursive space to actor types that have no qualms about taking these very privileges away from others if it serves their own self-interest.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the rapid transformation of the democratic interface along with new modes of mass mobilisation utilised by already well-resourced actor types have resulted in disorientation within the liberal institutional fabric. The hard-won heuristics that shape how institutions interpret

and translate public input also hold the potential to misguide them, at a time when illiberal actor types have learned to exploit these pathways towards increasing their reach and influence. The concept of a phantom counterpublic therefore captures the aspect of misinterpretation on an organisational and societal level, which underlies these dynamics. Viewing forms of (digitally) mobilised networks – whoever these may be – through the lens of democratic struggle holds the potential to equate fundamentally illiberal movements with progressive forces striving for equity, inclusion, and an expansion of civil liberties. Liberal institutions must learn to adapt to these new modalities of mass will formation by actively shaping new heuristics. To separate the *phantoms* from the *real* counterpublics, these need to be grounded in a normative commitment to democratic practice – and learn to better distinguish between those who have a legitimate claim to (more) institutional salience versus those that only seek to further enshrine their already established positionality of power.

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