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Defending Democracy: Prioritizing the Study of Epistemic Inequalities

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ABSTRACT

Digital media have fundamentally altered how knowledge is produced and distributed, often being blamed for contemporary democratic problems. This short essay examines recent contributions to normative democratic theory, focusing on three questions: 1) characterization of media-related threats, 2) media and communication aspects supportive of democracy, and 3) diagnosis of democracy's core challenges. Our reading reveals that while digital media is seen to contribute to the epistemic crisis, the core problem can be traced back to the profound impact of communicative capitalism on our epistemic infrastructures. We call for political communication scholars to prioritize the study of epistemic inequalities by critically examining and addressing the pervasive influence of market logic in both our work and the subject of study. In doing so, we can make an empirically informed contribution to democratic theory's quest to defend democracy.

KEYWORDS

Epistemic crises; digital media; digital threats; social epistemology; normative theory

In her recent introductory book to contemporary normative democratic theory, Simone Chambers (2024) observes that political theorists have pivoted from discussing democratic principles to focusing on ways of defending democracy. The (mis)use of media technologies and the complications they bring for the production and use of knowledge appear as key culprits. As political theorists work hard to fend off challenges against the core of democracy – from fake news, misinformation, distrust, polarization, and resistance to expertise – expectations and demands are also reevaluated, both concerning institutions and actors. These matters currently unite philosophers and epistemologists in normative political theory, focusing on whether various stakeholders in democracies (e.g., policymakers and citizens) know *enough* to be able to fulfill their role, and how power and interests shape their knowledge. This area of inquiry is commonly referred to as political epistemology (Edenberg & Hannon, 2021; Hannon & de Ridder, 2021).

In the interest of strengthening the interdisciplinarity of political communication research (e.g., Strömbäck, 2022), this essay explores the insights available to political communication scholars and our potential contributions to political theory discourse. In discussing the recent work in normative democratic theory, we are guided by three themes: 1) characterization of media-related threats, 2) identification of media and communication aspects supportive of democracy, and 3) diagnosis of democracy's core

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contemporary challenges. Prior to diving into these, though, we need to contextualize the ongoing discussion within a broader shift in democratic theory.

A Social Turn in Epistemology

The reinvigorated interest in political epistemology can be traced to several factors, a key one being epistemology's shift toward the social – a transition from an exclusive focus on individual epistemic attributes to recognizing the impact of social interactions and structures on the formation of knowledge (Frega, 2018; Herzog, 2024). This shift unmistakably calls for investigations into political communication.

For political theorists, the shift to the social means, for example, that

[i]t is crucial not to start from an overly optimistic picture of the epistemic competences of individuals, but rather to take seriously the fact that epistemic processes in complex societies always presuppose a division of labor, in which individuals outsource a great many epistemic tasks to other individuals or institutions. Individuals have their lives to live, and there is only so much energy they can spend on the epistemic tasks that are relevant for democracy (Herzog, 2024, p. 222).

Even Habermas (2022) latest publication acknowledges “the slim budget of time, motivation, attention and cognitive effort that ordinary citizens, preoccupied with their professional and personal lives, expend on their role as citizens” (p. 4, 3). This understanding also forms the very starting point for Kevin Elliot's book on citizenship in busy everyday lives (Elliot, 2023). Elliot strives to conceptualize a citizen ideal that aligns with real-world conditions. Echoing Schudson's (1998) idea of the monitorial citizen, Elliot draws from the neighboring concept of “stand-by” citizens (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), and illustrates his argument by spotlighting individuals like his own hard-working single mother, who navigate demanding daily routines. Through this lens, Elliot advocates for reevaluating conventional notions of engagement. As he contends, most individuals are neither avid political enthusiasts nor news junkies, and disparities in busyness are unequally distributed, with some facing greater constraints on their time and attention available for political involvement. The real-world conditions require a reorientation of political theory to account for these dynamics.

The central argument made by these authors is that while we may be moral equals in our role as democratic citizens, we are crucially different in terms of the depth of political knowledge (Herzog, 2024; also; Christiano, 2021), as well as the distribution of trust and expectations directed toward journalists, political institutions, and oneself within democratic processes (Habermas, 2022). Once one starts looking at social and political processes through the lens of epistemic justice, it becomes impossible to “unsee” the many ways in which our epistemic world is riddled with enduring inequities rooted in factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status. For example, women's complaints of mistreatment and disadvantage went unanswered for a long time because, prior to the concept of sexual harassment being widely recognized, women's discomfort with unwanted advances was frequently misinterpreted as hysteria or overreaction (Fricker, 2007, p. 158–159). Anderson explains that this kind of epistemic injustice was structural because the advantaged (men in this case) were not personally at fault for not understanding the issue; rather, from their point of view, what the disadvantaged

were saying might not have made sense because men lacked the interpretive tools necessary to understand the experiences of those they are epistemically isolated from. In turn, on the one hand, this may hinder disadvantaged groups in understanding their own experiences (Fricker, 2007). On the other hand, even if socially disadvantaged groups manage to create cohesive narratives, epistemic injustice lessens not only their ability to influence public discourse effectively but also their self-efficacy and trust in institutions (e.g., Mason, 2011; Nemer, 2022). Thus, the profound impact of social categories on our epistemic position and everyday experiences as knowledge-seekers seems hard to deny (Herzog, 2024, p. 27).

Media (Use) and Contemporary Epistemic Problems

In addition to epistemology's shift toward the social, the proliferation of digital media holds a prominent role in fueling the interest in political epistemology. Digital media have fundamentally altered the terrain of knowledge creation and distribution, producing problems in the construction, validation, and dissemination of politically pertinent knowledge among the public (Hannon & de Ridder, 2021). This creates epistemic problems central to citizens' democratic agency since "[k]nowledge is directly connected to one's capacity to navigate the world around oneself and to live a life according to one's plans" (Herzog, 2024, p. 36). Here, knowledge serves a dual purpose: when action is required, there is a corresponding duty to acquire relevant knowledge, and knowledge itself can instigate responsibility to act (Herzog, 2024, pp. 38, 48–49).

For a scholar like Habermas, who is working within the scope of deliberative democratic theory, the main concern is with changes in media use and the quality of media discourse. In his most recent book, he relies on media-specific time-spent survey measures to gauge the former and on "informed conjectures" (p. 5, 4) about the latter. This prompts Habermas to highlight the steep decline in print newspaper reading and the growth of time spent reading on screens. He finds this worrying since he assumes that digital texts do not "demand the same level of intensive attention and analytical processing as reading printed texts" (Habermas, 2022, p. 5, 3). Similar short excursions to the empirical state of (social) media use can also be found in other contributions (e.g., Edenberg, 2021, but see; Herzog, 2024 for a more detailed discussion). While political communication scholars might very well share the worry, we could also bring up more differentiated takes on these topics, such as, say, incidental exposure to news among "news avoiders" (Palmer & Toff, 2022) or critiques of time spent as a measure of attention and learning (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2020).

Taking a step further from critiquing the media's role in creating epistemic problems, these contributions also offer suggestions about how media and communication might help defend democracy. To be sure, the overarching goal is to enhance "epistemic infrastructures" (Herzog, 2024), encompassing educational institutions, media systems, online content regulation (Habermas, 2022; Herzog, 2024), and democratic processes (Elliott, 2023; Herzog, 2024). Specifically, Habermas (2022) underscores the importance of *traditional media fulfilling their role* by presenting information in an accessible manner while framing it in a way that increases its salience among relevant groups, while Elliott (2023) suggests reforming institutions and simplifying participation processes. Lastly, *regulation* is deemed necessary to

establish a framework for enabling information and deliberation free from the influence of capitalist interests (Habermas, 2022; Herzog, 2024). In stark contrast to the definition of the problems, these solutions are comparably scarce and perhaps even commonplace. How come?

Beyond Media: The Foundational Problems of Social Inequality

While problems of the media and communication environment are central in these discussions, the authors ultimately converge on the understanding that the crux of the matter lies beyond the media itself. Specifically, the primary concerns pertain to rampant capitalism and the resultant social inequalities. In this setting, media are but one aspect of the “epistemic infrastructure” of democracy – embedded in a greater global network of actors, technologies, and processes that contribute to the construction and circulation of knowledge (Herzog, 2024). The role of media is situated in a space between expanded possibilities for voice and information acquisition *and* decreased political efficacy. This in-betweenness can be traced back to an overreach of market logics into democratic processes and unequal power dynamics among actors in democratic systems (Herzog, 2024), which often *materialize* through new media and communication technologies (Brown, 2005; Fenton & Titley, 2015, p. 559). Habermas especially blames the elites for making it hard for citizens to recognize their will in the everyday business of liberal democracies. When right-wing populism and conspiracy theorists are added to the mix (he focuses on the US under President Trump), the political system dissolves from within (Habermas, 2022).

The intertwining of capitalism and democratic principles gives rise to epistemic problems, bearing twofold consequences for citizens. Firstly, maintaining a “background consensus on democratic principles” is imperative for sustaining public discourse. Yet, this consensus is increasingly eroding due to the fragmentation of the public sphere, exemplified by what is described as phenomena like echo chambers and affective polarization (Habermas, 2022).¹ Secondly, and more than ever, knowledge itself is subject to manipulation by values or interests, rendering the generation and presentation of facts inherently political (Herzog, 2024, pp. 42, 142–143). This complicates the identification of common ground, often derailing decision-making processes to the advantage of those vested in preserving the status quo (Habermas, 2022; Herzog, 2024). More so, since linguistic and affective relations have been co-opted for capitalist ends, communicative action no longer offers a critical alternative to instrumental reason, as once theorized by Habermas. Thus, there is a compelling argument for the need to adequately account for the material conditions of how increasing inequalities in societies lead to vastly impoverished democracies (Fenton & Titley, 2015, p. 565).

Addressing Democracy’s Epistemic Problems with Political Communication Research

In line with Chambers’ observation that contemporary democratic theory increasingly focuses on remedies to safeguard democracy, the presented ongoing discussions highlight the imperative to defend democracy from the corrosive influences of capitalist logics that have undermined its integrity. As scholars of political communication – with a particular emphasis on communication – we are well-positioned to contribute to the mapping, understanding, and fortification of epistemic infrastructures of democracy. To this end, we need to make defending democracy against the hollowing effects of

communicative capitalism our primary normative concern. In doing so, it is imperative to develop a habit of explicitly accounting for the role of market logics in our field of research and recognize the role of our own work in self-entrapment and perpetuation of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2014).

Defending democracy in this sense means researching political media use in an integrated manner that accounts for the division of epistemic labor in contemporary societies. On a very basic empirical level, and in the light of social epistemology and reformulated expectations of citizens' knowledge, we should re-think individualistic knowledge test measures, such as political knowledge recall survey questions (cf. Graber, 2006). Centrally, though, this implies taking the *social* aspect of epistemology seriously (Frega, 2018; Gagrčin & Porten-Cheé, 2023) and examining how epistemic resources are unevenly distributed within a society, resulting in certain groups being better equipped to interpret and articulate their experiences and critique social practices their experiences than others (see also Fricker, 2007; Moe, 2023). Here, we need more empirical work and methodological developments to account for the role of communicative capital (e.g., Rojas et al., 2011), individuals' capacities to distribute knowledge across their networks, but also the role of epistemic properties of groups or social systems within which individuals are embedded (Frega, 2018; Herzog, 2024). While we write this with disadvantaged groups and individuals in mind, defending democracy means also examining the epistemic shortcomings of elites who profit from the status quo; as Anderson (2012) argues, we might be able to trace some of these shortcomings to structural problems of epistemic infrastructures – and not merely to the bad faith and disinterest of the rich (though these should not be ruled out, e.g., Mason, 2011; Nemer, 2022).

In doing so, we can help develop a new democratic vocabulary that supersedes the “capitalist impoverishment of democratic life” (Fenton & Titley, 2015, p. 557) and effectively contribute to democratic theory.

Note

1. Political communication scholars acknowledge the conceptual criticism of the idea of echo chambers – which Axel Bruns refers to as the “dumbest metaphor on the internet” (Bruns, 2021, p. 43) – as well as the empirical evidence that refutes the existence of these phenomena to the extent frequently discussed in the public discourse (Borgesius et al., 2016). Habermas, however, does not (Bruns, 2023).

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