

Deliberative democracy could be used to combat fake news – but only if it operates offline

Disinformation, fake news, and online ‘filter bubbles’ all undermine the prospects for shared political reasoning, and increase polarisation. Clara Wikforss argues that the principles of deliberative democracy can offer a means to counter these problems, but inherent flaws in social media mean that this form of participation must be in-person and not just online.



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Why do we believe so-called ‘fake news’? One explanation is our well-documented susceptibility to confirmation bias: the tendency to fasten onto anything that seems to confirm our previously held beliefs. So, someone who dislikes Hillary Clinton might be more inclined to believe the headline, ‘FBI Agent Who Exposed Hillary Clinton’s Corruption Found Dead’, while someone who dislikes Donald Trump might believe that a Trump Tower was opening in Pyongyang (these were two of the [biggest false stories of 2018](#)). If it is true we are so riddled with biases that our ability to reason clearly is undermined, it would be a serious blow to the proponents of deliberative democracy. Deliberative forms of democracy, such as citizens’ assemblies, rely on citizens being able to actively evaluate reasons. [Jürgen Habermas](#) envisioned a deliberative atmosphere as one where the only thing that prevails is the ‘forceless force of the better argument’. If human reasoning really is so biased, this vision seems very distant.

Luckily, though, there has been a substantial amount of work that adds more nuance to our understanding of the frailties of human reasoning and our susceptibility to misinformation. For [Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber](#) (among others), human reasoning actually works well in social environments. It is when we reason alone and in isolation that biases are most likely to occur. Can deliberation, an ultimately social activity, be used to combat ‘fake news’? More specifically, could well-designed online deliberation mitigate the spread of fake news?

The term ‘fake news’ has been given a multitude of definitions. One helpful way to understand it is not as a type of content, but a characteristic of how content circulates online, and how this is situated in mediating infrastructures and participatory cultures. The problem is not simply inaccurate information, but also how social media platforms encourage the production and spread of this type of misinformation. This is also why fake news is novel and distinctive from more traditional forms of misinformation such as political propaganda.

In order to address this growing challenge, the House of Commons' Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee released [a report in July 2018](#) with 42 recommendations for the UK government to combat misinformation online, ranging from a levy on social media companies to fund social media training to a code for advertising through social media during political campaigns. Only [three of the 42 recommendations](#) were accepted by the government. However, the committee's report contained no recommendations taken from the perspective of participatory democracy or the potential of deliberation to counter untruths. Is it a mistake not to include deliberative models when seeking solutions for this specific problem?

In their 2017 book, *The Enigma of Reason*, Mercier and Sperber argue that human reasoning actually works pretty well in social environments, largely because in collective settings, unlike someone sitting alone at their computer, we are frequently made to justify our beliefs and actions to others. We are '[designed](#)' to reason collectively and socially, and it is not mainly '[motivated](#)' reasoning (reasoning that is motivated by, for example, our pre-existing political beliefs) that makes us susceptible to misinformation. Instead, the culprit is simply a lack of any substantial reasoning at all. Or, as [Pennycook](#) and Rand put it, we are 'lazy, not biased'. Herein lies the potential of public deliberation, where we can collectively and effectively reason ourselves away from false and ungrounded information. It is only in our interactions with others in the crucible of social discourse that our arguments are properly tested, developed and improved.

So, how can we harness the 'truth-tracking' power of public deliberation to combat the fake news phenomenon? An online solution for this online problem would seem most natural. Hopeful advocates for online democracy see great potential in the internet, since it opens up a new virtual public sphere that can bring a diverse group of people together with low barriers to entry. Examples such as Wikipedia show how powerful the internet can be for enabling collaboration, and delivering extensive accounts of knowledge. Additionally, the possibility of remaining anonymous online could rid online deliberation of uneven power structures. These circumstances seem to bode well for the deliberative ideal. However, Habermas himself warns that the type of mediated communication of the internet, where there is a lack of reciprocity and face-to-face interaction, undermines the deliberative environment.

Facebook is the online forum that has been most in the spotlight when it comes to fake news, and it is particularly ill-designed for encouraging high-quality deliberation. There is little to no moderation in, for example, the comment sections of a news article posted on Facebook. Discussions often happen in real time, which discourages reflection and encourages personal attacks and short messages without developed arguments.

On Facebook, and in fact all social media based on self-selection in terms of who you follow and interact with, there is a tendency to only have contact with people who hold similar beliefs to yourself. This is amplified by so-called 'filter bubbles' where internet algorithms feed you with content based on your past internet activity. [Cass Sunstein](#) describes a law of group polarisation where members of a deliberating group will move towards a more extreme viewpoint.

Taken together the above factors suggest online spaces are not conducive to deliberation and 'truth-tracking', where fake news seems to be an endemic problem. Though there are numerous examples of online platforms that are designed to accommodate and encourage deliberation, such as the Womenspeak consultation that was set up by the UK government in 2000 to inform policy with women's experiences of domestic violence, the fact remains that these platforms have not integrated into our online way of life in ways that social media platforms such as Facebook have.

We therefore need to look beyond an online model for participatory democracy, to consider whether this online problem needs an offline solution. [John Dewey](#) spoke about democracy as a way of life, where all of our activities should be infused with open and informed communication. If we had more opportunities to use our reasoning as it was designed to be used, in social environments, we might be less susceptible to fake news. This could take the form of deliberative forums or citizens' assemblies. For example, the [Citizens' Initiative Review](#) in Oregon involves panels of citizens who evaluate ballot measures and provide recommendations in preparation for upcoming elections. Similarly, the [Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform](#) in British Columbia invited a group of randomly selected citizens to formulate recommendations on how the electoral system could be improved. Both of these examples include citizens participating directly, and collectively, in the processing of information. Higher engagement in such activities will turn people away from fake news and misinformation, and towards modes of gathering information that are more based on active reasoning and evaluation.

Deliberation in these face-to-face forums can be a powerful tool for instilling the public with knowledge while breaking down boundaries between polarised groups. Policies aimed at improving democracy online and related to combating fake news should, of course, consider online solutions regarding regulations of misinformation, but it is perhaps more interesting to take a wider perspective and see what participatory models can be used to combat polarisation and disrupt some of the forces behind fake news. Democratic reforms could also consider how online behaviour, and susceptibility to certain types of information, fit inside the larger frame of what opportunities for deliberation and participation citizens have. Humans are made for public deliberation, but many of the social media platforms we use are not, and this ultimately strips individuals of an ability to protect themselves against susceptibility to fake news.

About the author

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