



Nick Couldry

Jeremy Gilbert

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Building solidarity without Big Tech? Moving beyond the problems of today's digital platforms

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*Today we spend much of our lives on digital platforms. But what has been the impact for political exchange and mobilisation? Algorithms that seek to polarise by amplifying inflammatory rhetoric and extreme views are undermining public debate and consensus-building. **Nick Couldry and Jeremy Gilbert** ask: Can we imagine a different model, where digital spaces and media enhance solidarity rather than eroding it?*

Any society today – Britain included – needs more, not less, political solidarity. Complex global problems, from climate change and population movements down, require new alliances, radical new forms of cooperation that won't happen unless more people feel confident in working together with those whose detailed opinions they may not share. Fractious local problems, like the Brexit aftermath, require more solidarity too. But what if the social landscape built by digital

platforms is toxic for solidarity? Then we have a problem with the very preconditions of positive politics that needs fixing urgently.

For a brief period, social spaces like Facebook seemed to open up new opportunities for progressive politics. But some years ago, **we** and **other writers** were already concluding that social media platforms worked to mobilise those who already had an issue to gather around, but not to sustain broader programmes of political change. The factors that enabled faster mobilisation online – instant messaging, flexible communications across scales from the most local to the global – probably made it harder to build the exchanges of ideas and position-building that positive politics requires.

A flawed model

In the past five years, a wave of scandals, leaks, and academic research have darkened people's view of digital platforms further. Let's leave aside evidence that time spent on social media may be negative for people's **mental health**, just in the years when they *might* be becoming politically engaged. Immediate concerns are already enough to raise concerns. First, populations in the age of social media are strikingly more polarised in terms of their **emotions**, though not necessarily their factual opinions. Second, **disinformation (especially if inflammatory)** is more likely to spread effectively on platforms like Twitter, than calm factual claims, so fuelling more polarisation. Third, **far-right online media** is reaching young children in the UK, in ways not known before, with social media a key gateway.



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communication that undermines those positive political goals.



The full explanation for such disturbing trends is inevitably complex, but a key factor is the business models of social media platforms, because they are designed to maximise advertising income by incentivising what platforms call “engagement”. Without regard for public goals like solidarity or political cooperation, those profit-driven models do not just allow, they **incentivise**, a toxic space of communication that undermines those positive political goals.

Our communications ecology, like our rivers and land, is a fundamental public resource, as US writer **Ben Tarnoff** insists, and yet in the social media age, we have allowed it to be built *and* managed for private profit, not public good. It’s time to think about how we change that.

Moving in a different direction

One thing we can’t do is just unlearn all the habits of online interaction that have emerged over the past two decades, Nor should we discount the possibility that social media, run according to **different principles**, might be positive for political solidarity. So the key questions are: what *are* those different principles? And how do we get to them from where we are now? A **recent event at LSE** set out to discuss these questions.

The event featured speakers who have thought about these issues from a range of different perspectives in recent years. We ourselves, in our respective recent publications, have considered digital platforms as initiating a whole new historical epoch, while we share a historic and ongoing interest in questions of **solidarity** and **democracy**. Nick’s **book** with Ulises A. Meijas argues that the intrusive data-harvesting of massive online platforms amounts to a new form of “data colonialism” that is penetrating the everyday life of individuals and communities around the world. Jeremy’s **book** with Alex Williams (who will participate in the event) considers the political and cultural implications of living in a world in which platforms have become a leading-edge mechanism for the

exercise of power, and Silicon Valley corporations have become arguably the most powerful institutions on Earth.

Amongst the other invited speakers, [Myria Georgiou](#) has written extensively on the politics of migration and experiences of cosmopolitanism in the context of globally-networked media environments, while Ben Little and Alison Wynch have written an [authoritative study](#) of the sexism and misogyny in Silicon Valley. James Muldoon has written recently published an innovative exploration of the potential for “[platform socialism](#)” in the 21st century, while Miranda Hall has been involved in researching the use of digital platforms in [the delivery of care to vulnerable service-users](#).

Starting from solidarity

Each of these speakers has tried in their recent work to steer a course between the naïve optimism of the tech industry and a fatalistic pessimism about the possibilities for future progress. By focussing on the key question of solidarity, we hope that the conversation will have a useful anchoring point and a benchmark against which to judge the progressive potential or threats represented by various possible applications of platform technologies.

But of course, “solidarity” itself is not a simple or innocent concept. The term has been used quite differently over the years. It was a central idea for the father of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim, who used it to designate the minimal degree of social bond required by any society to function. On the other hand, the term has a particular and crucial valency in the history of workers’ and other social and political movements, implying as it does both a sense of mutual support and an experience of common opposition to an external foe. In many philosophical and political contexts, the idea of solidarity is primarily associated with a feeling of moral obligation to distant others with whom we share some sense of moral kinship; but in other traditions, solidarity is assumed to imply communal and face-to-face relationships.

Each of these understandings of solidarity has a particular relevance to the question of how we might deploy, or resist the deployment of, new technologies of communication and surveillance. Is the best use of digital platforms to allow us to share experiences with allies across the world, or simply to help us get to know our neighbours? Could they actually be used as mechanisms for effective

democratic deliberation, or are they inherently atomising and trivialising in their basic modes of operation? While a single event can never hope to explore all these permutations, we hope at least to contribute to a crucial conversation on the future of democracy and human sociability.

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About the author



Nick Couldry

Nick Couldry is Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. As a sociologist of media and culture, he approaches media and communications from the perspective of the symbolic power that has been historically concentrated in media institutions. He is the co-author of *The Costs of Connection*.



Jeremy Gilbert

Jeremy Gilbert is Professor of Cultural and Political Theory at the University of East London and author of *21st Century Socialism* and co-author of *Hegemony Now*.

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