



Research Paper

The Fifteen-Second Citizen: How Social Media Undermines the Cognitive Foundations of Self-Government

Helen Haibei Gao

School: The Masters School, Dobbs Ferry, New York, USA

Received 14 Sep., 2026; Revised 22 Sep., 2026; Accepted 24 Sep., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Abstract:

Democratic theorists have long argued that self-government depends not only on institutional design but also on citizens capable of reasoned deliberation, sustained attention, and independent judgment. However, as social media becomes the dominant medium through which citizens interact with political information, it is important to evaluate whether these qualities remain present in the new medium. Current scholarship has documented specific consequences of social media in various aspects, such as the spread of misinformation or rising affective polarization. However, current scholars often focus on online consequences in isolation and do not examine how the medium can reshape cognitive capabilities holistically. This paper addresses this research gap by arguing that the threat social media poses to democracy is architectural, not reducible to any single factor. Synthesizing political philosophy from Habermas, Kant, and Madison, media theories from Postman and McLuhan, and contemporary research on digital media from Barba-Kay and Pariser, this paper presents a theoretical analysis these works, examining how social media's features erode all three capacities simultaneously: (1) disembodied, anonymous, and frictionless interactions weaken the conditions for deliberation, (2) fragmented contents degrade sustained attention, and (3) filter bubbles and personalization constrain independent judgment by enclosing citizens within a partisan realities and reinforcing in-group identity. This paper concludes that these three cognitive capacities on which self-government depends are systematically undermined by the personalization, fragmentation, and disembodied interactions that define contemporary social media.

More than half of news website visits last less than fifteen seconds.¹ Yet citizens can remain on social media for minutes at a time, from one post, clip, or reel to the next.² Political information has shifted from a coherent textual whole to personalized, emotionally charged fragments. This paper argues that democratic self-government rests on three civic capacities, which are deliberation, sustained attention, and independent judgment, which are not innate but require continuous cultivation. Contemporary social media, through algorithmic personalization, fragmented content, and disembodied interaction, systematically undermines the conditions under which all three can develop and persist.

The Prerequisite Ability of Self-Government

Deliberation

The term self-government, ruled by the people rather than a tyrant or external power, requires cognitive and social capacities among citizens. The first requirement of self-government is an ability to deliberate. From Aristotle to Hobbes, this concept has deep philosophical roots and persists through centuries of political thought. In modern dictionaries, this process often involves a group discussing a measure for or against it.³ By

¹ Tony Haile, "What You Think You Know About the Web Is Wrong," *Time*, March 9, 2014, <https://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong/Kemp>

² Simon Kemp, "Digital 2025: Global Overview Report," *DataReportal*, February 5, 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report>

³ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "deliberation," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deliberation>

overlooking power status, deliberation is inherently democratic, since its participants are considered free and equal, with equal dialogic rights. Citizens should be able to evaluate arguments based on their substance rather than the authority of the figure presenting them.⁴ Democracy relies on this process. According to political philosopher Bernard Manin, deliberation makes the voting process legitimate. Manin explains that, as citizens rarely enter the political process with fully formed preferences, deliberation is the mechanism through which they examine, refine, and ultimately determine their own will. Without it, voting becomes an aggregation of impulses instead of an expression of true will.⁵

When institutional structures facilitate this kind of conversation, the institution becomes what is called deliberative democracy. John Rawls defined the concept as a political order in which citizens “exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public political questions.”⁶ Central to this vision is the expectation that participants bring divergent, even opposing, perspectives to the table, and prepare for their views to be revised in light of better arguments. In its essence, deliberation is thus an inherently pluralistic conversation.

Political philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that the quality of a democracy's decisions depends on the quality of its discourse. For Habermas, all political power derives from citizens' communicative power. Therefore, healthy communication ensures that political power is checked and kept on the right track. He presents citizens as reasoning together in what he calls the “public sphere.”⁷ A well-functioning public sphere features respect, openness, and the inclusion of diverse views. Within it, citizens engage in “rational discourse,” presenting arguments clearly and fairly and aimed at conclusions that can be justified to everyone affected. Being rational means those engaged in this discussion are governed by reason rather than emotional volatility, coercion, or prejudice.

In addition to being rational, citizens should have “communicative rationality,” meaning that they orient their reasons toward a mutual understanding and seek conclusions that all participants can reasonably accept.⁸ Because communicative rationality demands that arguments be generalizable to everyone, it resists people's temptation to serve only their own narrow interests and instead think of the public good. This ensures that the decision ultimately serves the broader public rather than representing only the majority who voted and reached consensus. Thus, citizens are required to be rational in a way that extends beyond self-interest.

Organized by political scientist James Fishkin, the American In One Room (AIOR) experiment epitomizes deliberative democracy in a modern context. This study assembled over 500 Americans, ensuring political, cultural, and demographic diversity, and organized face-to-face discussions across five major policy domains. By exposing them to different perspectives and encouraging them to reconsider their assumptions, the experiment produced significant depolarization among participants.⁹ Deliberation can mitigate polarization and reshape how citizens reason and how they act at the ballot box.

Attention

Thus, in this discourse, Habermas imagined citizens attending to and engaging with rigorous analysis of empirical evidence and facts to form sound arguments. This democracy slows decision-making and lets citizens participate throughout the process. As political scientist William Scheuerman argues, the liberal democracy was “deliberative and reflective and thus dependent on slow rather than fast passage of time.”¹⁰ Under this slow framework, sustained attention is its engine. Deliberative democracy rejects the idea that everyone enters politics already knowing exactly what they want. Citizens often begin with incomplete information, uncertain preferences, or conflicting values. Only by remaining attentive can they compare

⁴ Simone Chambers, “Deliberation,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Constitutional Theory*, ed. Richard Bellamy and Jeff King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 246–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108868143.018>

⁵ Bernard Manin, Elly Stein, and Jane Mansbridge, “On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation,” *Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (1987): 338–68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/191208>.

⁶ John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 93–130, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2324.003.0007>

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996)

⁸ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.

⁹ James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn, “Is Deliberation an Antidote to Extreme Partisan Polarization? Reflections on ‘America in One Room,’” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1464–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000642>

¹⁰ William E. Scheuerman, *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004)

alternatives, learn about consequences, and sometimes revise not only their preferred policy but also their understanding of their own goals. This discourse assumes a kind of civic patience and willingness to take time for the deliberative process.

On a more rudimentary level, paying attention is an act that demonstrates care and a willingness to put ineffect. Politically, paying attention translates to carefully scrutinizing legislation, tracking economic indicators, and discerning the implications of court decisions. Thus, attentional stamina over a prolonged duration is what transforms a crowd into a discerning public. A 2014 study shows that a lack of knowledge about policy positions significantly hinders citizens' ability to translate their preferences into vote choices.¹¹

Reading trains the attention required for making informed judgments. Nevertheless, beyond cultivating attentive citizens, reading also constructs the social world in which democratic politics takes place. Democratic societies are, in Benedict Anderson's terms, "imagined communities," meaning political communities whose members will never meet most of their fellow citizens in person, yet understand themselves as belonging to a shared collective.¹² Anderson attributes the emergence of such communities to "print capitalism," which is the mass production of books and newspapers in vernacular languages that allowed disparate groups to communicate in a unified discourse. Democratic societies, in this account, are entities sustained only by constant readership. Anderson notes that the popularization of reading and the written word cultivates a dense culture of reading, pamphleteering, newspapers, political writing, and a good media environment. Thus, this environment facilitates the creation of democracy. By attending to common texts, citizens become a part of the construction of a shared reality. The relationship between reading and attention is mutually reinforcing. Reading demands an excruciating period of fumbling out the meaning and the suspension of immediate gratification, thus cultivating an attentional discipline.¹³ The decline of reading, therefore, matters as it may alter the forms of attention on which deliberative democratic life depends.

Independent Judgment

While democracy relies on a shared imagined identity, it also requires diverse, independent judgments that resist external interference. Independent judgment serves as a structural safeguard, preventing the democratic framework from being skewed. Intellectual independence means evaluating information on its intrinsic merits rather than uncritically conforming to others' views. This capacity allows individuals to discern truth from falsehood, thereby upholding democratic principles. Without these skills, society becomes vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation, and authoritarianism.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant views independent judgment as the capacity to use one's own reason rather than be dictated by external authority. Kant defined immaturity as the "inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another."¹⁴ Independence requires the courage to exercise one's own judgment, particularly through what he calls the "public use of one's reason." Kant defines the "public use of reason" as subjecting ideas to open scrutiny and remaining absolutely free from institutional constraints.¹⁵ In contrast, the private use of reason operates within a prescribed social role, such as a soldier obeying orders or a pastor preaching doctrine. Thus, deliberation can degenerate into groupthink, while public attention can be manipulated by those who control visibility. This public use sustains democratic discourse because it demands that arguments be tested and challenged rather than circulated among the like-minded. If individuals remain confined to the private use of reason, they risk becoming intellectually bound by their prescribed roles and group identities. Democracy needs voters to step outside their partisan affiliations and think about things more holistically, providing nuances and complexities to the discussion. As Habermas, the theorist discussed earlier, argued, democracy needs people to exercise communicative rationality and to suspend their biases, thus maintaining a public discourse that benefits everyone. When individuals exercise only the private use of reason, they may fall into factions. Madison warns of the danger of faction, stating that when a faction occupies more

¹¹ Anthony Fowler and Michele Margolis, "The Political Consequences of Uninformed Voters," *Electoral Studies* 34 (2014): 100–110, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.09.009>

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016)

¹³ Courtney L. Gallen, Simon Schaerlaeken, Jessica W. Younger, Project iLEAD Consortium, Joaquin A. Anguera, and Adam Gazzaley, "Contribution of Sustained Attention Abilities to Real-World Academic Skills in Children," *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 2673, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-29427-w>

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813306.005>

¹⁵ Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?," 15.

than half of the votes, it can become the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority and exercise its power over the minority, thus creating a tyranny of the majority.¹⁶

In addition, once citizens exercise only the private use of reason, they outsource their thinking process to “guardians,” whether demagogues, ecclesiastical authorities, or dogmas, and thus remain restricted to a state of intellectual infancy. Kant described this immaturity as “self-imposed” because it often stems from a lack of courage to confront and challenge authority.¹⁷ The social pressure from these ideological authorities offers comfortable guidance that many are reluctant to renounce. A populace without the courage to challenge authority is unqualified for self-rule. Democracy requires citizens to constantly challenge authority, question it, and consider whether their rights are being infringed, rather than quietly remaining complicit in rights infringements. As Thomas Jefferson famously stated, “eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty.”¹⁸ He argues that public watchfulness and this constant readiness to challenge authority, along with the duty to disobey it if necessary, safeguard our democratic system. Only through this daring act of independent thought can a society transition from being a collection of subjects to a community of self-governing individuals. Therefore, independent judgment protects democracy from the rise of demagogic figures and authoritarian regimes. Hannah Arendt reflected, “At the moment of crisis, when all the others are swept away by what everybody else believes, those who think are the only ones who can be counted on.”¹⁹ Arendt framed independent thinkers as reliable and stabilizing antidotes because they consistently question legitimacy. Framing the demagogue as a “wave” that sweeps away the “thoughtless,” thinking becomes the primary weapon against authoritarianism, which can be alluring when considering superficially. Thus, only a public that does not blindly conform can prevent authoritarian power from rising. Overall, self-government is a vulnerable structure, necessitating careful maintenance from autonomous citizens.

The Architecture of Modern Media

The media always have a transformative impact on the formation of thoughts that citizens understand politics. Every dominant medium cultivates a distinctive style of thinking. Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously defined medium as not neutral containers of information. Instead, the media train different habits of mind by shaping and controlling the scale and form of human connection.²⁰

The advent of the printing age corresponds to a typographic mind, a term coined by Neil Postman to describe the 19th-century populace’s mind shaped by widespread print and writing culture.²¹ Print text unfolds in sequence, which means readers’ minds must track the line of reasoning linearly, arriving at the point cumulatively rather than instantly. This method of consistently tracking cultivates sustained attention. The cognitive discipline to stay attentive is not innate, but forged through years of practiced behavior, typically through literacy education. The printed word has a semantic, paraphraseable, propositional content. Thus, reading can be comprehended as a serious challenge of facing the cold abstractions of collaged sentences. Under this epistemic environment, discourse was “characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas”, which Postman called “the age of Exposition.”²² Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas’s debate exemplified the typographic minds of 19th-century political audiences. This back-and-forth oratory speech lasted seven hours, demonstrating the incredible attention span of their contemporaries. Audiences were motivated because political discourse was an integral part of their social and entertaining lives, yet it was not without the seriousness it deserved. Douglas addressed his audiences: “I desire to address myself to your judgment, your understanding, and your consciences, and not to your passions or your enthusiasms.”²³ Their diction was charged with legal jargon and contexts that demanded familiarity with contemporary judicial decisions like *Dred Scott*. Their rhetoric was complicated, saturated with techniques like sarcasm, irony, paradox, elaborated metaphors, fine distinctions, and the exposure of contradiction that demonstrated the complexity of the minds of audiences.

¹⁶ James Madison, “The Federalist No. 10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 77–84.

¹⁷ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,”¹⁸.

¹⁸ Anna Berkes, “Eternal Vigilance Is the Price of Liberty (Spurious Quotation),” *Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello*, August 11, 2010, <https://www.monticello.org/encyclopedia/eternal-vigilance-price-liberty-spurious-quotation>

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Mariner Books, 1981)

²⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994)

²¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin Books, 2005)

²² Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

²³ Stephen A. Douglas, “First Debate: Ottawa, Illinois,” *Lincoln Home National Historic Site*, National Park Service, accessed June 8, 2026, <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate1.html>

The Age of Exposition did not vanish overnight. Instead, it was gradually overwhelmed by modern media that made information abundant and fast. Social media has expanded to an unprecedented scale. Pew Research Center statistics from 2025 found that half of adults say they use Instagram.²⁴ Social media has also come to dominate the political sphere. During the 2024 U.S. presidential election year, 3.14 million election-related TikTok videos were produced.²⁵

Social media is first decontextualized. Social media is composed mainly of alluring visual imagery. Postman criticizes the way modern mediadissemminate information through repeating images. He argues that the repetition of images will create a mediated world that keeps everything brief, does not strain anyone's attention, but instead provides constant stimulation. Postman argues that photographs "are isolated from context" and are "deprived of what was said before and after," namely, that they can be separated from and discontinuous with anything else, and thus decontextualized.²⁶ A context, according to Postman, connects a new fact to a larger network of meaning, including your prior knowledge, other events, consequences, purposes, or future actions. Instead, according to Postman, photographs create an illusion of context, as a photograph with a caption may provide the appearance of context and look coherent enough to understand, producing the feeling: "Ah, now I understand." However, this knowledge is superficial, devoid of any relationship to past knowledge.

Aside from being decontextualized, social media also fragments and snippetizes information by creating short segments. Upon the arrival of TV, speeches became fragmented through the emergence of sound-bite culture. When becoming soundbites, public speeches were condensed into quotable phrases. As early as the 1990s, media critics critiqued sound-bite culture, as it fractures oratorical texts, once considered homogeneous, whole, finished, and complete.²⁷ Due to public demand for quotability and brevity, social media has facilitated even greater brevity through short-form clips and reels. These short videos mean more rapid switching between different clips, which supports more rapid context-switching among different types of content.

Besides being short and snippetized, social media also overwhelms users with vast quantities of content. Users upload an estimated 34 million TikTok videos every day. Roughly 272 videos are published every single second.²⁸ Comparatively, only 11,000 books are published per day.²⁹ Social media feeds expose users to a continuous stream of new information at an unprecedented speed. This rate of information consumption continues to accelerate with the growing popularity of TikTok and other short-form video platforms. British journalist James Marriott criticized the triviality of much of the information we consume, writing, "I consume vast quantities of trivia and nonsense: gaffes, pseudo-scandals, meaningless PR 'wins.'"³⁰ From random viral content to recreational gossip, Marriott's comment illustrates how irrelevant information can consume a significant share of audiences' limited attention.

Together, being snippetized, decontextualized, and great in volume means that social media changes the perception of time. According to Anton Barba-Kay, every unique medium "has its own tenses."³¹ For social media, it compresses our sense of what matters into the immediate present, seemingly freeing us from traditional constraints of time and space. This is due to digital words reaching us at once, and always responding to the heat of the moment. Its constant cycle of acceleration, refreshing, and updating intensifies this focus on the "now," encouraging people to organize their lives around what they want in the present.

The primary factor that drives the creation of these types of content on social media lies in its economic logic, "the attention economy," coined by Herbert Simon in 1971. Simon contends that an abundance of information produces a shortage, creating a "dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that

²⁴ Jeffrey Gottfried and Eugenie Park, "Americans' Social Media Use 2025," *Pew Research Center*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/11/20/americans-social-media-use-2025/>

²⁵ Gabriela Pinto, Charles Bickham, Tanishq Salkar, Joyston Menezes, Luca Luceri, and Emilio Ferrara, "Tracking the 2024 US Presidential Election Chatter on TikTok: A Public Multimodal Dataset," arXiv preprint arXiv:2412.15583 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2412.15583>.

²⁶ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

²⁷ Kiku Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968 and 1988," Shorenstein Center Research Paper Series, Research Paper R-2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, June 1990), 4, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37370896>.

²⁸ Jack Shepherd, "31 Essential TikTok Statistics You Need to Know in 2026," *The Social Shepherd*, updated March 23, 2026, <https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>.

²⁹ Jim Milliot, "Book Output Topped Four Million in 2025," *Publishers Weekly*, March 17, 2026, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/>

³⁰ James Marriott, "Apathy in the UK Isn't So Bad for Democracy," *The Times*, June 12, 2024.

³¹ Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023)

information consumes.”³² Because information consumes attention, a “wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources.” In today’s digital environment, human attention has become an economic resource that platforms seek to capture and monetize. This system is described as the “attention economy.” Within the system, platforms provide seemingly free services by feeding users highly engaging short-form content while generating revenue through targeted advertising. Advertisers pay platforms to reach users who are most likely to purchase their products. Platform revenue therefore depends heavily on the accuracy of their predictions of users’ interests.³³ This precision is directly correlated with the attention spent on the platform. The longer users remain engaged, the more data platforms can collect, allowing them to refine these predictions. Columbia University law professor Tim Wu observes, “We’re not paying for these services with money, we’re paying with our attention.”³⁴

Thus, to maximize the amount of attention acquired from their audience, social media platforms increase the engagement of their content. To make their content engaging, they are incentivized to amplify emotionally charged and polarizing content. Often, these emotions are negatively charged, consisting of anger or other emotions associated with volatility. Research also shows that content with high levels of negative emotion has a structural advantage in social media diffusion, partially attributed to weak social ties between people and different communities, thereby increasing both the speed and reach of emotional contagion.³⁵ According to Facebook’s research team, which warned the company in 2018 in findings later released by *The Wall Street Journal*, its platforms “exploited human brains’ attraction to divisiveness.”³⁶ The effects of emotional language are even stronger when combined with political content. In the realm of political posts, angry content tends to translate into political out-group hostility and animosity. Posts that mention political out-group words are more likely to be shared or reposted. Each additional out-group-related word increases the probability of sharing by approximately 67%. This effect of political out-group language is approximately 4.8 times greater than that of negative-emotion words alone.³⁷ Thus, platforms are driven to reward content that is extreme because it outperforms moderate, factual, or nuanced materials.

Another method for maximizing attention retention and engagement is algorithmic personalization. As the volume of content has grown exponentially, social media platforms have increasingly shifted toward personalized algorithms. This approach tends to increase user engagement by tailoring feeds that closely align with users’ preferences and interests. It relies on analyzing patterns in users’ behavior to identify and recommend content that is most likely to appeal to each individual. To achieve this, algorithms track users’ clicks, likes, and shares while also drawing on demographics, online habits and preferences, the activities of friends and connections, and a number of other unknown factors.³⁸ Research shows that social media personalization therefore makes platform content appear more personally relevant and engaging to users.³⁹

Social interactions on social media are also structured to facilitate greater retention, thereby increasing overall activity on the platform. Digital interactions are disembodied, in which people have no direct sensory experience of one another. As Barba-Kay describes, one’s public appearance online is detached from corporeal presence.⁴⁰ Their online presence itself has no fixed geographical location. According to Caltech professor Dean Mobbs, online communication largely takes place within the mind because users lack physical cues in face-to-

³² Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 37–72.

³³ BBC Ideas, “How Social Media Makes Money From Your Attention,” YouTube video, August 10, 2021, <https://youtu.be/z1OfXOh5t58>

³⁴ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016)

³⁵ Rui Fan, Ke Xu, and Jichang Zhao, “Weak Ties Strengthen Anger Contagion in Social Media,” arXiv preprint arXiv:2005.01924 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2005.01924>

³⁶ Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>

³⁷ Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, “Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 26 (2021): e2024292118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024292118>

³⁸ Itipon Rassameeroj and S. Felix Wu, “Reverse Engineering of Content Delivery Algorithms for Social Media Systems,” in 2019 *Sixth International Conference on Social Networks Analysis, Management and Security (SNAMS)* (IEEE, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1109/SNAMS.2019.8931859>

³⁹ Gökhan Aydin, “Role of Personalization in Shaping Attitudes Towards Social Media Ads,” *International Journal of E-Business Research* 14, no. 3 (2018): 54–76, <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJEER.2018070104>

⁴⁰ Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 120.

face interaction, such as expressions, gestures, and body position.⁴¹ As a result, although digital interactions may feel socially external, much of their meaning is constructed internally.

Besides being disembodied, digital interaction is also characterized by anonymity or, more precisely, pseudonymity. Most social media platforms are not anonymous. Facebook often requires real identities, as do Instagram, TikTok, and X, which typically use persistent usernames and profile photos. What these platforms more commonly provide is a form of perceived anonymity, in which other users may recognize an account but remain unaware of the person's offline identity.⁴² This unlinkability between the offline self and the online self can make online actions feel detached from one's offline reputation. Due to a sense of anonymity, users may also hardly perceive the full human presence behind a digital interaction. As Barba-Kay suggests, anonymity can render us "private and opaque to others."⁴³ However, this anonymity is based on perception. Scholars distinguish between anonymity from other users and identifiability by the platform itself. A user can feel anonymous while still being traceable through account histories, behavioral data, and records maintained by the platform.⁴⁴ Social media anonymity is therefore interface-level rather than infrastructural.

Furthermore, Social media makes experiences more enjoyable by facilitating an immediate digital experience. This sense of immediacy is reinforced by the extreme convenience of online experiences. Barba-Kay describes digital experiences as providing a "perception that I have direct access to everyone, that I can skip the line, that I can circumvent tedious or fruitless offline procedures, that I can always get a hearing."⁴⁵ This rapidly satisfiable environment transforms our expectations of the time required to receive a service. It habituates us to a world where everything is served and provided efficiently and immediately. In contrast, in earlier forms of life, prevalent activities, such as learning an instrument or establishing relationships, required persistent effort with delayed rewards. Thus, digital media satisfies users through its pursuit of simplification and speed.

To further eliminate impediments for its users, social media also constructs a frictionless environment. The law of attentional inertia states that a viewer always tends to remain a viewer as long as they are not acted upon by an external impediment.⁴⁶ Thus, social media is designed to provide a seamless experience. Platforms employ techniques such as infinite scroll and autoplay, which remove stopping cues for the brain. Personalized recommendations also reduce the decision-making effort required from users.⁴⁷

Social Media and the Erosion of Democratic Capacities

Deliberation

Due to the personalization mechanism of social media, platforms create echo chambers. Online, people tend to interact with others who share similar interests and viewpoints. Over time, they create differing virtual communities where users only reflect their existing beliefs and preferences. These spaces are often called echo chambers because similar perspectives are repeatedly reinforced within the same community.⁴⁸ This is detrimental to deliberative discourse because Rawls assumes the presence of pluralistic views within a democratic discourse. A healthy discourse requires citizens to be exposed to different and diverse ideas, from all locations of the political spectrum, even uncomfortable perspectives. However, a filter bubble closes off the possibility of pluralistic discourse because it surrounds people with others who hold monistic and identical views, facilitating merely unhealthy deliberations.

Besides, social interactions on these media platforms are unsuitable for democratic deliberation because they are disembodied, asynchronous, and psychologically separable from users' offline identities. First, online interactions are largely disembodied. Suler notes that embodied cues can regulate expression, as "seeing a

⁴¹ California Institute of Technology, "Understanding Online Toxicity," August 25, 2024, <https://www.caltech.edu/about/news/understanding-online-toxicity>

⁴² Lorenzo Ancona, Gabriel Karl, Arnau Martí, and Wiktor Samek, "Has the Time Come to End Anonymity on Social Media?," student policy brief, Comparative Approach to Big Tech Regulation, Sciences Po, April 2023, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/public/chaire-numerique/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VO-Anonymity.pdf>

⁴³ Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 99.

⁴⁴ Ancona et al., "Has the Time Come to End Anonymity."

⁴⁵ Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 131.

⁴⁶ Lindsay B. Demers, "Infant Attention to Foreground Television and Relationship to Joint Visual Attention" (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2008)

⁴⁷ Nikhila Natarajan, "Do They Stop? How Do They Stop? Why Do They Stop? Whether, How, and Why Teens Insert 'Frictions' into Social Media's Infinite Scroll," *International Journal of Communication* 18 (2024): 1961.

⁴⁸ John Kelly and Camille François, "This Is What Filter Bubbles Actually Look Like," *MIT Technology Review*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/22/140661/this-is-what-filter-bubbles-actually-look-like/>

frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express.”⁴⁹ Without seeing one another’s faces, gestures, or immediate physical reactions, these cues disappear online. Correspondingly, users are less constrained by the physical responses of others, weakening the interpersonal restraint of face-to-face discourse. Second, since social media often produces a sense of anonymity, Suler argues that people can separate their online actions from their in-person lives. Thus, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosure and acting out.⁵⁰ Some may even convince themselves that their online behaviors “aren’t me at all.” Finally, online communication is often asynchronous, meaning that users do not have to confront another person’s reaction immediately. Suler finds that some people experience this form of communication as “running away” after posting something “personal, emotional, or hostile.”⁵¹

Together, disembodiment, dissociation from offline identity, and a-synchronicity produce a lack of responsibility toward others. The invisibility reduces the fear of social judgment and makes it easier to disengage from difficult interactions. Online communication also creates what might be called a low-consequence exit, as users can simply close a tab, mute notifications, leave a conversation, or block another person. This makes it easier to evade the consequences of one’s words and actions.⁵² When individuals feel less responsible for how their speech affects others, they may also develop a weaker sense of public responsibility. Yet deliberative discourse requires a commitment of selfless responsibility. Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality assumes that participants do not speak only to advance their own immediate interests alone, but offer reasons towards a goal of reaching mutual understanding. However, the online deliberation does not carry the communicative rationality pointed out by Habermas due to its casualness and low-cost escapability. Alexis de Tocqueville similarly emphasizes physical presence’s importance for a democratic discourse. He argues that associations allow citizens to witness one another as political actors: “there men see each other, active measures are planned, and opinions are expressed with that force and heat which the written word can never attain.”⁵³ He underscores physical presence and gives opinions social weight by placing speakers before the people to whom they must respond. Association therefore effectively transforms isolated opinions into reciprocal relationships, eventually into active measures. The person who can easily withdraw from criticism has less incentive to engage in this reciprocal process. Decreased responsibility in this sense undermines communicative rationality because it leads participants to treat political discussion as disposable and personal rather than as a shared civic practice for which they are responsible for.

Another consequence of these communication conditions is a tendency named disinhibition, which means saying things online that one would be less likely to express in face-to-face interactions. Psychologists have identified disinhibition as one important source of online toxicity.⁵⁴ Although disinhibition can facilitate audacious and sincere self-disclosure, it can also encourage the expression of hostility, anger, and other toxic emotions at the expense of reasoned exchange. Especially when encountering people holding disagreeing political views, disagreements can easily morph into confrontations with hostile and antagonistic rhetoric. One example of disinhibitive behaviors is trolling, a behavior using provocative claims intended to trigger or antagonize other users for entertainment. Experimental research has found that participants in online discussions were significantly more likely to produce trolling comments than participants who were physically visible to one another.⁵⁵ Behaviors such as trolling are particularly damaging to democratic discourse because they foreground aggression over reason-giving. Deliberation depends on participants offering claims that can be examined and defended through logic, evidence, and argument. As John Stuart Mill argues, “the weakest part of what everybody says in defense of his opinion is what he intends as a reply to an antagonist.”⁵⁶ Antagonistic claims thus contribute no value to deliberation because they are, in essence, meek. When political interaction is dominated by antagonism, insult, and ad hominem attacks, citizens are less willing to evaluate arguments on

⁴⁹ John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26, <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>

⁵⁰ Suler, “Online Disinhibition Effect,” 323.

⁵¹ Suler, “Online Disinhibition Effect,” 324.

⁵² Swati Pandita, Ketika Garg, Jiajin Zhang, and Dean Mobbs, “Three Roots of Online Toxicity: Disembodiment, Accountability, and Disinhibition,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 28, no. 9 (2024): 814–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2024.06.001>

⁵³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 190.

⁵⁴ Pandita et al., “Three Roots of Online Toxicity,” 819.

⁵⁵ Lewis Nitschinsk, Stephanie J. Tobin, and Eric J. Vanman, “The Disinhibiting Effects of Anonymity Increase Online Trolling,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 25, no. 6 (2022): 377–83, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.0005>

⁵⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Edward Alexander (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999)

their merits. Hostility therefore dictates dialogue rather than contributing to it. When aggression crowds out reason-giving, the quality of democratic discourse deteriorates because citizens are no longer primarily engaged in evaluating arguments, revising judgments, or seeking conclusions that can be publicly justified.

This tendency to interact in a disinhibited way is amplified by the anonymity social media provides. Perceived anonymity allows us to “indulge our perennial nastiness with something like impunity,” says Barba-Kay. He elaborates this point through unpacking the relation of invisibility and accountability: “To act unseen is to be able to act beyond the scope of law,” and, therefore, “online anonymity affords us something like this voluptuous irresponsibility.”⁵⁷ Anonymity weakens the social and normative constraints that normally regulate public expression. But a healthy public sphere is based on openness, respect, inclusion and engagement with diverse views. These qualities ask participants to see themselves as responsible to each other and to take responsibility for the claims they bring into public discourse. If the anonymous public sphere only fosters arguments that are impious and untraceable, then political interaction is not able to foster a mutual reasoning public sphere. Thus, under such a sphere, citizens can hardly develop a fully-fledged political judgment required for democratic voting.

Attention

Social media is notorious for creating short fragments that are constantly shortened and fractured. These short fragments are also switched continuously while scrolling. This rapid context switching degrades attention span. Research has shown that heavy short-form video use is linked to weaker attention, reduced focus, and greater difficulty staying on task.⁵⁸ Changes in teens’ daily lifestyles also demonstrate changes in attention span. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 31% of teens have lost focus in class because they are on their cell phones, while 51% scroll through social media while doing their homework, causing more distractions.⁵⁹

The decrease in attention span means greater demand for brief and short information. Citizens are habituated to consume snippetized and compressed political information. This snippetized information, however, inevitably shortens, simplifies, and compresses political arguments. It reduces complex discourse to a binary: on or off, right or wrong. It often enforces a dichotomy, ignoring society’s nuanced realities, where multiple social issues intersect. Turkenburg defines this type of communication as unsophisticated political communication, which presents a political position without sufficiently explaining it.⁶⁰ “Sophistication” concerns the substance of the message, whether reasons, evidence, or argumentation support a claim. Unsophisticated messages may state what a politician believes while leaving the reasoning behind that position vague, implicit, or blank. They often take the form of slogans, one-line statements, urgent appeals, or calls to action. As these unsophisticated forms of information become a predominant type of communication in an age driven by brevity, they prevent people from adequately grasping the complexity of the political situation to make sound judgments. Turkenburg’s study found that exposure to unsophisticated political communication diminished participants’ self-reported reflective thought, concluding that “simplified, sloganized communication” hinders in-depth reflections.⁶¹ Thus, decreased attention not only means losing the attentional stamina to follow complex reasoning and track political policies. It also means citizens can hardly form reflective thoughts to enrich their understanding, as they can only consume brief and unsophisticated information.

Not only the brevity of the information, but also its quantity, contributes to this problem. The vast quantities of information overload citizens, contributing to a decrease in what is called the information-action ratio. Postman describes citizens as being “overloaded”. He comments that modern people are “glutted with information, drowning in information, have no control over it, don’t know what to do with it.” Since information is “indiscriminately directed at no one in particular, disconnected from usefulness,” he continues, the vast amount of information leaves people confused and perplexed about what to do.⁶² Citizens can

⁵⁷ Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 131.

⁵⁸ Lan Nguyen, Jared Walters, Siddharth Paul, Shay Monreal Ijurco, Georgia E. Rainey, Nupur Parekh, Gabriel Blair, and Miranda Darrah, “Feeds, Feelings, and Focus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Examining the Cognitive and Mental Health Correlates of Short-Form Video Use,” *Psychological Bulletin* 151, no. 9 (2025): 1125–46, <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000498>

⁵⁹ Jingjing Jiang, “How Teens and Parents Navigate Screen Time and Device Distractions,” *Pew Research Center*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/>.

⁶⁰ Emma Turkenburg, “The Separate and Combined Effects of (In)Accessible and (Un)Sophisticated Political Communication on Citizens’ Reasoning and Attitudes toward Politicians,” *Human Communication Research* 51, no. 4 (2025): 262–77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqaf002>

⁶¹ Turkenburg, “Separate and Combined Effects,” 270.

⁶² Neil Postman, “Informing Ourselves to Death,” speech presented at the German Informatics Society (Gesellschaft für Informatik), Stuttgart, October 11, 1990, archived January 15, 2003,

hardly integrate new information with existing expertise or knowledge, so they struggle to determine what it means, why it matters, or how they should respond. Postman contends that the tie between information and action has been severed. In other words, people have become aware of far more events and problems than they can meaningfully act on. Psychologically, research explains that information overload can generate fatigue in the nervous system.⁶³ People may feel overstimulated by constant stimuli. This can contribute to a kind of bystander effect, where users feel detached from the information they encounter and increasingly indifferent to it. However, democracy demands consistent concern and interest in governments' actions from its public. Citizens must scrutinize and track government actions consistently, caring enough to respond by identifying infringements of civic rights and holding leaders accountable for misconduct. Indifference and detachment can be dangerous, as they make fragile democracies more susceptible to those who seek to consolidate power. As citizens become less concerned and less committed to act, public indifference can jeopardize democratic structures.

The logic of the attention economy forces social media platforms to use a dopamine-fueled reward system that resembles slot machines. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with craving and reward, and this uncertainty can trigger its release. The brain can go on an endless quest for instant gratification.⁶⁴ Repeated scrolling activity can lead citizens to a mode of information consumption built around novelty and immediacy. Information that arrives in brief, stimulating bursts becomes familiar, while information that demands greater patience may feel comparatively effortful. This habituation can shape how citizens expect to encounter information more broadly, including political news. People have become more used to getting their news through short video clips. 54% of Americans now receive their news through social media and video networks.⁶⁵ At the same time, more effortful forms of news consumption are losing their centrality. Data shows 63% of adults read only headlines.⁶⁶ However, as Benedict Anderson writes, reading print journalism is crucial to democracy because it does more than inform citizens. Text-based journalism helps citizens imagine themselves as members of a shared political community. But if people supplant reading with fragmented streams of information, they risk losing the ability to read the common texts that build a sense of collective belonging. Historically, reading enabled scattered citizens to perceive themselves as participants in a common public sphere. Thus, as shared readership declines, citizens lose one of the common practices through which collective political identity is formed and sustained. The decline of shared reading therefore threatens democracy on two fronts: it weakens the sustained attention necessary for deliberation while also eroding the sense of collective belonging that makes democratic self-government possible.

Independent Judgment

Social media hinders citizens from making independent judgments because it creates what Eli Pariser calls "filter bubbles." Pariser defines a filter bubble as "a personal ecosystem of information that's been catered by algorithms."⁶⁷ Essentially, a filter bubble forms when a platform repeatedly feeds a user information based on their previous preferences, surrounding them with content that reinforces what they already believe. Unlike echo chambers, which mainly concern how people interact with each other and actively cluster with in-group members, filter bubbles can affect every online user because algorithms drive them. Algorithms present different sets of information, events, and legislation to different users, depending on their geographical location, age, and inferred political affiliation.

One impact of social media filter bubbles is a distorted reality. Filter bubbles narrow the range of information people encounter. When users repeatedly encounter arguments similar to their own, those beliefs can begin to feel more obvious, normal, or widely shared. This can distort perceptions of consensus. Psychologists call this the "illusory consensus effect." When participants repeatedly encountered information, they estimated

⁶³ Gwendolin Gurr and Julia Metag, "Examining Avoidance of Ongoing Political Issues in the News: A Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Audience Issue Fatigue," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 1789–1809.

⁶⁴ B. T. Sharpe and R. A. Spooner, "Dopamine-Scrolling: A Modern Public Health Challenge Requiring Urgent Attention," *Perspectives in Public Health* 145, no. 4 (2025): 190–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17579139251331914>

⁶⁵ Ian Youngs, "Social Media Now Main Source of News in US, Research Suggests," *BBC News*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93lzyxkklpo>

⁶⁶ Naomi Forman-Katz, "Americans Are Following the News Less Closely Than They Used To," *Pew Research Center*, December 3, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/12/03/americans-are-following-the-news-less-closely-than-they-used-to/>

⁶⁷ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

that more people would believe it, disregarding the source and contextual information.⁶⁸ Pariser described social media as enclosing us “in our own bubbles.” Pariser connects the effect of filter bubbles to politics, writing that “However, democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead, we’re being offered parallel but separate universes.”⁶⁹ This distorted reality makes independent judgment unattainable. Independent judgment does not form in isolation, but in a shared factual ground against which citizens can compare competing claims and test their own assumptions. Filter bubbles replace this shared informational ground with personalized realities, thus hindering independent judgment from arising.

Filter bubbles further threaten independent judgment by fueling political polarization. When users repeatedly encounter similar arguments, they may also overestimate how common or reasonable that position is and underestimate the strength or complexity of opposing views. Pariser writes, “Personalization filters serve a kind of invisible auto-propaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas.”⁷⁰ Thus, filter bubbles can distort people’s understanding of opposing viewpoints. Politically, when users are immersed in an information environment that consistently affirms only one side of the political spectrum, they may become more likely to accept distorted or stereotypical portrayals of the opposing party, thereby perceiving partisan divisions as greater than they actually are. Research has found that Americans substantially exaggerate stereotypical characteristics of the opposing party.⁷¹ These misperceptions matter because perceiving the other side as more extreme or fundamentally different can intensify negative feelings toward political opponents while strengthening identification with one’s own party. Research has found a strong correlation between partisanship, a feeling of attachment or positivity toward one’s own party, and exposure to homogeneous conversations.⁷² This relationship creates a feedback loop, where stronger partisan identification encourages individuals to prefer like-minded political environments, while those environments further reinforce their sense of partisan belonging. When people become expressively partisan, they treat alignment as a marker of group membership and thus emphasize closer alignment and clustering within the group. This group-based mode of political thinking directly conflicts with independent judgment. Independent thinking means that people must judge political claims not based on their membership in a particular group, party, or social pressure but based on arguments and evidence. However, if citizens evaluate arguments merely from the perspective of their party membership, that judgment is no longer independent, since they judge things as members of a party. Filter bubbles therefore threaten independent judgment by encouraging citizens to stay within a partisan mode of thinking when democracy demands the public use of reason, which is the ability to transcend the assumptions, loyalties, and judgments of one’s own group.

Conclusion

Self-rule requires citizens who can engage in deliberation, attention, and critical thinking. However, these capabilities must be constantly exercised and developed. As this paper has shown, social media’s platform architecture erodes these abilities. Algorithmic personalization shrinks the pluralist information landscape needed for deliberation; meanwhile, disembodiment and a perceived sense of anonymity weaken the interpersonal responsibility that gives reasoning its weight. The attention economy turns political information into fragmented pieces. As a result, such information deprives people of the attention needed to examine facts, compare alternatives, and revise judgments. Filter bubbles shatter shared political reality, leading people to think and judge increasingly as members of a group rather than through independent reason. These consequences emerge from a media system incentivized by attention, engagement, and emotional reactions rather than thoughtfulness and understanding. The danger is thus that the media subtly shapes how citizens know, deliberate, and judge in the first place. Democracy could retain its elections, institutions, and civil rights while diminishing the kind of citizens needed for self-government to survive and thrive. The digital era forces an imminent question: whether a democracy of fifteen-second citizens can be sustained.

⁶⁸ Madeline Jalbert and Raunak Pillai, “An Illusory Consensus Effect: The Mere Repetition of Information Increases Estimates That Others Would Believe or Already Know It,” *Collabra: Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2024): 124533, <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.124533>

⁶⁹ Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 17.

⁷⁰ Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 59.

⁷¹ Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood, “The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences,” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 964–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697253>

⁷² Sara B. Hobolt, Katharina Lawall, and James Tilley, “The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers,” *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 3 (2024): 1464–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001211>.

Bibliography

- [1]. Adatto, Kiku. "Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968 and 1988." Shorenstein Center Research Paper Series, Research Paper R-2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, June 1990. <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37370896>.
- [2]. Ahler, Douglas J., and Gaurav Sood. "The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences." *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 964–81. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697253>.
- [3]. Ancona, Lorenzo, Gabriel Karl, Arnau Marti, and Wiktor Samek. "Has the Time Come to End Anonymity on Social Media?" Student policy brief, *Comparative Approach to Big Tech Regulation*, Sciences Po, April 2023. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/public/chaire-numerique/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VO-Anonymity.pdf>.
- [4]. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016.
- [5]. Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. Edited by Mary McCarthy. New York: Mariner Books, 1981.
- [6]. Aydin, Gökhan. "Role of Personalization in Shaping Attitudes Towards Social Media Ads." *International Journal of E-Business Research* 14, no. 3 (2018): 54–76. <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJEER.2018070104>.
- [7]. Barba-Kay, Antón. *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- [8]. Berkes, Anna. "Eternal Vigilance Is the Price of Liberty (Spurious Quotation)." *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*. August 11, 2010. <https://www.monticello.org/encyclopedia/eternal-vigilance-price-liberty-spurious-quotation>.
- [9]. BBC Ideas. "How Social Media Makes Money From Your Attention." YouTube video. August 10, 2021. <https://youtu.be/z1OFXOh5t58>.
- [10]. California Institute of Technology. "Understanding Online Toxicity." August 25, 2024. <https://www.caltech.edu/about/news/understanding-online-toxicity>.
- [11]. Chambers, Simone. "Deliberation." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Constitutional Theory*, edited by Richard Bellamy and Jeff King, 246–261. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108868143.018>.
- [12]. Demers, Lindsay B. "Infant Attention to Foreground Television and Relationship to Joint Visual Attention." Master's thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2008.
- [13]. Douglas, Stephen A. "First Debate: Ottawa, Illinois." *Lincoln Home National Historic Site*, National Park Service.
- [14]. Fan, Rui, Ke Xu, and Jichang Zhao. "Weak Ties Strengthen Anger Contagion in Social Media." arXiv preprint arXiv:2005.01924 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2005.01924>.
- [15]. Fishkin, James, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn. "Is Deliberation an Antidote to Extreme Partisan Polarization? Reflections on 'America in One Room.'" *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1464–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000642>.
- [16]. Forman-Katz, Naomi. "Americans Are Following the News Less Closely Than They Used To." *Pew Research Center*. December 3, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/12/03/americans-are-following-the-news-less-closely-than-they-used-to/>.
- [17]. Fowler, Anthony, and Michele Margolis. "The Political Consequences of Uninformed Voters." *Electoral Studies* 34 (2014): 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.09.009>.
- [18]. Gallen, Courtney L., Simon Schaerlaeken, Jessica W. Younger, Project iLEAD Consortium, Joaquin A. Anguera, and Adam Gazzaley. "Contribution of Sustained Attention Abilities to Real-World Academic Skills in Children." *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 2673. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-29427-w>.
- [19]. Gottfried, Jeffrey, and Eugenie Park. "Americans' Social Media Use 2025." *Pew Research Center*. November 20, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/11/20/americans-social-media-use-2025/>.
- [20]. Gurr, Gwendolin, and Julia Metag. "Examining Avoidance of Ongoing Political Issues in the News: A Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Audience Issue Fatigue." *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 1789–1809.
- [21]. Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- [22]. Haile, Tony. "What You Think You Know About the Web Is Wrong." *Time*, March 9, 2014. <https://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong/>.
- [23]. Hobolt, Sara B., Katharina Lawall, and James Tilley. "The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers." *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 3 (2024): 1464–79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001211>.
- [24]. Horwitz, Jeff, and Deepa Seetharaman. "Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive." *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499>.
- [25]. Jalbert, Madeline, and Raunak Pillai. "An Illusory Consensus Effect: The Mere Repetition of Information Increases Estimates That Others Would Believe or Already Know It." *Collabra: Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2024): 124533. <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.124533>.
- [26]. Jiang, Jingjing. "How Teens and Parents Navigate Screen Time and Device Distractions." *Pew Research Center*. August 22, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/>.
- [27]. Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" In *Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary J. Gregor, 11–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813306.005>.

- [28]. Kelly, John, and Camille François. "This Is What Filter Bubbles Actually Look Like." *MIT Technology Review*, August 22, 2018. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/22/140661/this-is-what-filter-bubbles-actually-look-like/>.
- [29]. Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2025: Global Overview Report." *DataReportal*, February 5, 2025. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report>.
- [30]. Madison, James. "The Federalist No. 10." In *The Federalist Papers*, edited by Clinton Rossiter, 77–84. New York: New American Library, 1961.
- [31]. Manin, Bernard, Elly Stein, and Jane Mansbridge. "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation." *Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (1987): 338–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/191208>.
- [32]. Marriott, James. "Apathy in the UK Isn't So Bad for Democracy." *The Times*, June 12, 2024.
- [33]. McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.
- [34]. Merriam-Webster. S.v. "deliberation." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. Accessed August 14, 2026. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deliberation>.
- [35]. Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Edited by Edward Alexander. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999.
- [36]. Milliot, Jim. "Book Output Topped Four Million in 2025." *Publishers Weekly*, March 17, 2026. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/99943-book-output-topped-4-million-in-2025.html>.
- [37]. Natarajan, Nikhila. "Do They Stop? How Do They Stop? Why Do They Stop? Whether, How, and Why Teens Insert 'Frictions' into Social Media's Infinite Scroll." *International Journal of Communication* 18 (2024): 1956–75.
- [38]. Nguyen, Lan, Jared Walters, Siddharth Paul, Shay Monreal Ijurco, Georgia E. Rainey, Nupur Parekh, Gabriel Blair, and Miranda Darrah. "Feeds, Feelings, and Focus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Examining the Cognitive and Mental Health Correlates of Short-Form Video Use." *Psychological Bulletin* 151, no. 9 (2025): 1125–46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000498>.
- [39]. Nitschinsk, Lewis, Stephanie J. Tobin, and Eric J. Vanman. "The Disinhibiting Effects of Anonymity Increase Online Trolling." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 25, no. 6 (2022): 377–83. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.0005>.
- [40]. Pandita, Swati, Ketika Garg, Jiajin Zhang, and Dean Mobbs. "Three Roots of Online Toxicity: Disembodiment, Accountability, and Disinhibition." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 28, no. 9 (2024): 814–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2024.06.001>.
- [41]. Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011.
- [42]. Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- [43]. Postman, Neil. "Informing Ourselves to Death." Speech presented at the German Informatics Society (Gesellschaft für Informatik), Stuttgart, October 11, 1990. Archived January 15, 2003.
- [44]. Pinto, Gabriela, Charles Bickham, Tanishq Salkar, Joyston Menezes, Luca Luceri, and Emilio Ferrara. "Tracking the 2024 US Presidential Election Chatter on TikTok: A Public Multimodal Dataset." <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2412.15583>.
- [45]. Rassameeroj, Ittipon, and S. Felix Wu. "Reverse Engineering of Content Delivery Algorithms for Social Media Systems." In *2019 Sixth International Conference on Social Networks Analysis, Management and Security (SNAMS)*. IEEE, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1109/SNAMS.2019.8931859>.
- [46]. Rathje, Steve, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden. "Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 26 (2021): e2024292118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024292118>.
- [47]. Rawls, John. "The Idea of Public Reason." In *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, edited by James Bohman and William Rehg, 93–130. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2324.003.0007>.
- [48]. Scheuerman, William E. *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- [49]. Sharpe, B. T., and R. A. Spooner. "Dopamine-Scrolling: A Modern Public Health Challenge Requiring Urgent Attention." *Perspectives in Public Health* 145, no. 4 (2025): 190–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17579139251331914>.
- [50]. Shepherd, Jack. "31 Essential TikTok Statistics You Need to Know in 2026." *The Social Shepherd*. Updated March 23, 2026. <https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>.
- [51]. Simon, Herbert A. "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World." In *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, edited by Martin Greenberger, 37–72. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.
- [52]. Suler, John. "The Online Disinhibition Effect." *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26. <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>.
- [53]. Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Edited by J. P. Mayer. Translated by George Lawrence. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969.
- [54]. Turkenburg, Emma. "The Separate and Combined Effects of (In)Accessible and (Un)Sophisticated Political Communication on Citizens' Reasoning and Attitudes toward Politicians." *Human Communication Research* 51, no. 4 (2025): 262–77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqaf002>.
- [55]. Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.
- [56]. Youngs, Ian. "Social Media Now Main Source of News in US, Research Suggests." *BBC News*, June 17, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93lzyxkklpo>.