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On the importance of disagreement

For democracy to survive, we need in-depth engagements with different perspectives and arguments — and not black and white thinking

'Increasing polarisation represents a threat to democracy'. In Western democracies, we hear such statements more and more frequently. Here, the term polarisation refers to the widening gap between differing political standpoints. At the same time, wasn't it precisely the programmatic convergence between different political parties in, for instance, Germany during the years of the Grand Coalition that was frequently criticised? Weren't the two mainstream parties in particular accused of hardly differing from each other on many policy issues?

Democracy, as a discursive form of rule, as a 'competition of ideas' so to speak, lives on diversity of opinion. The fact that differing and even opposing standpoints exist within a society is not necessarily a cause for concern. However, the manner in which these differences of opinion have been expressed, and in some cases the subject matter concerned, certainly is.

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Evidently, even a democracy must have its red lines. As a system of majority decision-making, democracy only works if there is what the lawyer and social-democratic legislator Adolf Arndt called 'agreement on the non-negotiable'. There can be no tolerance for hate speech. 'The best possible means of abolishing democracy is democracy', comments Peter Sloterdijk, neatly summing up the system's vulnerability. It's important, therefore, that attempts to undermine liberal democratic principles meet with resistance.

The destructive role of social media

When social media began to take hold in the mid-2000s, many saw it as a great opportunity to strengthen democracy around the world, while others thought it heralded the beginning of the end of democracy. Today, we can see that both camps were partly right. Social media has dramatically broadened and simplified access to knowledge and debates, while doing the same for the potential means of participation. It has brought about a revolution in political mobilisation – both in the positive and negative sense. While social networks have proven to be an important platform for citizen engagement, particularly among younger generations, they have also been used to spread hate speech and conspiracy theories. Views that would once have been the stuff of bar-room rants can now be heard and shared across the globe.

Fuelled by anonymity online, public debate has become harsher in recent years – and not just on social media. Those who think differently are no longer recognised and respected; instead, they are enemies to be fought. Personal attacks and insults have replaced reasoned argument and debate. In a 2021 survey conducted by *More in Common*, more than two thirds of respondents described public debate as increasingly hate-filled. And some 42 per cent felt they were unable to freely express their own opinion.

Aggression in public discourse is far from new; however, it was a source of complaints even in antiquity. The reach of today's social media and the ability to post anonymously, however, have poured fuel on the fire, helping such behaviour to grow exponentially. Studies have shown that posts containing moral or emotional messages tend to get a bigger response; conversely, this means those who rely on sober reasoning find it harder to be heard. Yet the manner in which we negotiate differences of opinion and conflicts of interest is a key factor in the quality of our political culture.

We are increasingly choosing to surround ourselves with people who think as we do.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that social networks deliberately foster selective perception. To capture attention and ensure loyalty, algorithms serve us content that is related to our identifiable interests and views. This makes it even more likely that we will only notice posts that align with our existing social media environment, with our 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble', resulting in ideological and political parallel universes that pose a danger to public discourse. But it

could so easily be different: online, divergent opinions that might challenge and enrich our own are never more than a click away. The trend towards living in ideological filter bubbles is, though, not limited to social media; it's also a growing phenomenon in 'analogue' life. We are increasingly choosing to surround ourselves with people who think as we do. In the US, this is known as '*self-sorting*' – we are arranging ourselves into ever more homogeneous groups.

The need to tolerate other opinions

In its advice on healthy social media use, the American think tank the *Center for Humane Technology* thus recommends deliberately paying attention to voices you disagree with and keeping an open mind. After all, the growing tendency to shutting ourselves off in groups of like-minded people poses a serious threat to democracy. Dwindling acceptance of those who think differently is toxic for democratic debate. An ability to 'tolerate' other opinions – those that lie within the democratic spectrum at least – is essential if democracy is to survive.

Few of the political challenges we currently face have clear-cut solutions. The complex issues of our day – how to shape a climate policy that is supported by as many people as possible, how to deal with China and Russia, how to achieve social justice, to name but a few – cannot be resolved via black-and-white modes of thinking. Instead, they require in-depth engagement with different perspectives and arguments.

So let us argue. Let us deliberately seek out and engage with different opinions. Let us celebrate democratic discourse. Robust, high-quality media outlets – be it at local or national level – are a vital part of this. The fact that news can now travel the globe within seconds is clearly progress. Instant availability, however, is no substitute for context and analysis.

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