Europe needs a public service internet

Europe shouldn't try to imitate Silicon Valley. Instead, it must use its strengths to counter the threat Big Tech poses to democracy: public service

Covid-19 is at once a health crisis, an economic crisis, a political crisis, a cultural crisis, a moral crisis, and a global crisis – with no end to the crises in sight.

Since the 1980s, the hegemony of neoliberalism has generated a social crisis characterised by strong inequalities, in particular the growing inequality between capital and labour. More and more areas of society have been subjected to the logic of commodification and profit. The 9/11 attacks set in motion a political crisis characterised by a vicious circle of terror and war. In 2008, the financialisation of the economy resulted in a global economic crisis.

In the years that followed, authoritarian and nationalist movements, parties, and politicians became increasingly successful, leading to a crisis of democracy and the spread of post-factual politics. It comes as no surprise that in the wake of all these crises, a significant number of people have become susceptible to conspiracy theories, populism, demagoguery, and fake news.

The Bill Gates theory

The correct and important antidote to these developments is a renewal of social democracy in the 21st century – and the liberation of society from neoliberalism. Today's societies urgently need a restoration of the welfare state, higher taxation of capital, and a politics of redistribution that benefits primarily working people with low and middle incomes. Of course, even in post-neoliberal societies with a strong welfare state and few inequalities and injustices, there will be conspiracy theories. But these will most likely be less strong and less militant.

In my study on the spread of Covid-19 conspiracy theories on social media, I analysed materials and comments from the internet. The study

underlines that Covid-19 conspiracy theories often rely on a clear distinction between friend and foe – and present Bill Gates in particular as an enemy. A crude economism is used in the discourse: Every possible action of individuals like Bill Gates is reduced to the profit motive, a personalising critique of capitalism.

We lack time for deep political debates on the internet, further fuelling echo chambers, polarisation, and the colonisation of the public sphere by commerce and ideology.

However, billionaires like Bill Gates are so rich they can afford – and want – philanthropy that actually reduces their wealth. What follows is therefore an ineffectual attempt at rationalisation by claiming that everything Bill Gates does is necessarily evil. His actions are necessarily always motivated by the interest and plan to accumulate capital and power because he is a billionaire and the founder of a monopoly corporation. There are no coincidences in this worldview; everything is considered the result of a secret plan by an elite.

A fast-food media culture

There is no panacea against conspiracy theories: neither moral appeals nor legislation will suffice. The fundamental problem is that today's societies are highly polarised politically and the public sphere is fragmented by echo chambers and post-factual politics where people are not guided by facts but by ideology and emotions. The distinction between friend and foe, which turns individuals into scapegoats, is not only found in conspiracy theories, but in everyday media and political discourse.

The tabloidisation of media and politics plays a significant role here. Tabloids, conspiracy theories, and demagogy are driven by the logic of resentment, one-sidedness, and gut feelings.

The internet platforms through which conspiracy theories and ideologies are primarily disseminated belong to global corporations that are beholden to their owners' profit interests. They have contributed to a kind of digital fast-food media culture that thrives on fast, short-lived, superficial, and advertising-saturated snippets of opinion and information. We lack time for deep political debates on the internet, further fuelling echo chambers, polarisation, and the colonisation of the public sphere by commerce and ideology.

A manifesto for public media and internet

The challenge, then, is to strengthen democracy and the democratic public sphere while expanding and developing the welfare state as part of a post-neoliberal turn. Public media have, on the one hand, been very popular in the pandemic as sources of information and education. On the other hand, their existence and the admissibility of broadcasting fees are repeatedly questioned by their opponents, especially by the right. For instance, in order to steer attention away from his own scandals ('Partygate'), British Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently announced that he would abolish the licence fee, which would inevitably lead to the break-up of the BBC.

In the media landscape, Europe's greatest strength is the tradition of public broadcasters.

To strengthen the public sphere and save democracy, we need more public service media – not less. The 'Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto' calls for securing the existence, funding, and independence of public service media and the creation of a public service internet. This includes internet platforms as well as associated formats and services operated by public service media. This manifesto is already supported by over 1,000 individuals and organisations, including Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, and the International Federation of Journalists.

For instance, the public broadcasters ARD, ZDF, BBC, and *France Télévisions* have jointly organised a public service internet platform modelled on YouTube, where new debate, information, education, culture and entertainment formats are realised with user participation. Public service media, unlike the digital giants such as YouTube, Amazon, Netflix, and many more, have a public mandate that promotes high-quality services and formats.

Europe's strength is public media

Scandals like the Cambridge Analytica controversy have shown that the Big Tech giants' focus on profit maximisation poses a real threat to democracy. Donald Trump, Facebook, and Twitter have all profited from each other: one politically and ideologically, the other financially. European media and digital policy has tried for too long to imitate the innovations of Silicon Valley. This strategy has failed. There is no

European Google, Facebook, Twitter, or Amazon.

In the media landscape, Europe's greatest strength is the tradition of public broadcasters. These should not be undermined, but strengthened, expanded, and made fit for the digital age. Saving democracy needs public service media and a public service internet.

Conspiracy theories, fake news, online hatred, post-factuality, and political polarisation are expressions of the overflow of economic, social, political, and cultural crises and social contradictions. There are no simple recipes against these developments. To strengthen democracy, we need a paradigm shift away from the tabloidisation, commercialisation, and acceleration of media and communication towards the creation of a new (digital) public sphere. This requires a media and digital policy transformation and a digital-democratic structural change of the public sphere.



Christian Fuchs
London

Dr Christian Fuchs is Professor of Media, Communication and Society at the University of Westminster in London, where he heads the Communication and Media Research Institute.