

The Plight of Social Media:  
An Analysis of the Effects Social Media  
has on Political Discourse

By

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis demonstrates how social media has affected political discourse. It builds on an analysis of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers to show how social media contributes to the formation of insulated groups and perpetuates belief polarization. Two case studies are used to display how social media has been weaponized by political actors through the manipulation of algorithms, bot accounts, anonymity, normalization, and trend-setting tactics. The first case study focuses on how private companies can profit from the unauthorized collection of social media users' personal data. This allows them to manipulate these data points to target each user with political propaganda to achieve a political goal. The second case study shows how white supremacist groups have weaponized social media to disseminate their extremist ideology. Social media fosters an environment where users can be politically polarized through the creation and perpetuation of echo chambers. To combat the harms social media has caused, the electorate should look towards focusing on political epistemology and group discourse through engaging in minipublics. Diverse, face-to-face, group discussions about politics are optimal for breaking out of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Ultimately, valuing where knowledge comes from along with truth preservation will enhance the public sphere and democracy.

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## **Introduction**

Following the attempted insurrection of the United States Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, former President Donald Trump's social media accounts were suspended on Facebook and Twitter. Prior to the suspension, Twitter had been in the practice of adding "warning" labels on Trump's post, saying "this claim about election fraud is disputed." A social media user would be able to 'click' on the warning and be taken to a page that is full of articles to act as a form of fact-checking. However, this fact-checking did little to change the minds of Trump supporters, as can be seen by the attempted insurrection. The suspension, however, was a result of Trump's exclamation to his supporters via social media that the election was stolen from him. In retaliation to the suspension of Trump's accounts, the GOP claimed Twitter was infringing upon the President's freedom of speech. On January 6th, Trump's supporters attempted to stop Congress from completing the count of electoral ballots that would confirm current President Joe Biden's victory. Those who attacked the U.S. Capitol genuinely believed that the election was illegally won by Biden. These beliefs arose out of Trump's rhetoric that he disseminated through his various social media posts. The January 6th attack was a moment of recognition that something is horribly wrong with how social media is being used, especially in the terms of politics. The suspension raised questions about not only the role that social media played in the initiation of these horrific events, but also in regard to freedom of speech. Debates occurred about whether or not social media companies should play a role in determining who gets to say what online as well as how social media companies contribute to the spread of misinformation.

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the contemporary conversation about the harms of social media. There has been an obvious increase in social media use over the past decade. This has had a direct effect on how individuals are choosing to engage politically. Social

media makes it easier for individuals to share their political opinions online with peers and strangers alike. While social media has provided a platform for individuals to be heard and to voice their opinions to a large audience, it does not mean that this type of political engagement is productive. I explore how social media has perpetuated belief polarization and has opened the door for the electorate to be manipulated through various weaponization tactics.

This thesis focuses on the questions: is social media, and the internet, a productive source for increasing participation in a democracy, or do they present new challenges? Why does social media contribute to the creation of insulated groups where people constantly are reinforced with their preexisting beliefs and ideas? What are these challenges and how are we able to combat them in the New Age of social media? To answer these questions, I will be discussing how social media perpetuates belief polarization in individuals. This occurs not only through the algorithms that social media incorporates, but also how individuals inadvertently choose to interact with those who hold similar ideologies to their own—following the social media accounts that they agree with which negatively reinforces their own beliefs, and unfollowing those who challenge their ideologies.

I argue that social media does not provide an adequate platform for individuals to debate and discuss politics in a productive way. Instead, social media serves as a tool to shape political views through weaponization tactics and thus negatively reinforces pre-existing ideas, especially when individuals are placed in insulated groups.

Chapter one of this thesis focuses on how social media contributes to the formation of insulated groups, which ultimately escalates political division. This discussion is substantiated by an account of why and how social media exacerbates group polarization by way of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Such polarization manifests through the increased usage of social

media, causing individuals to become entrapped in a virtual echo chamber. Algorithms on social media applications contribute to belief polarization and the furthering of insulated groups on social media. These algorithms negatively reinforce beliefs by effectively increasing political polarization in individuals.

Chapter two focuses on the weaponization of social media by the private company Cambridge Analytica. I present a case study of the company to display how private companies are able to influence politics through social media. This case study analyzes Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the 2016 Brexit Referendum and the United States Presidential Election. The company collected Facebook user's personal data under the false pretenses of a survey that was said to use the research purely for academic purposes. Instead, they used this data to target users with political propaganda with the goal of advancing their own populist agenda. Such propaganda spread misinformation through social media and made use of the insulated groups that are worsened by social media. I emphasize the economic aspect of this weaponization, asserting that it was profitable for Cambridge Analytica to collect this personal data. This case study exemplifies how social media can be weaponized to further political polarization. As a result, polarization furthers the intolerance of differing opinions as well as fostering an environment where there is less of a focus on truth preservation due to the constant spread of misinformation.

Chapter three focuses on how white supremacists weaponize social media to disseminate their extremist ideologies into the mainstream. Social media perpetuates extremist ideologies to be formed through the polarization of beliefs. In this chapter, I discuss how exactly white supremacists have proliferated their extremist ideologies through normalization. Additionally, the utilization of automated bot accounts and anonymity play a crucial role in the spread of such

extremism on social media. Social media continues to place users into a virtual echo chamber by acting as a breeding ground for extremist ideologies to be formed. Virtual isolation contributes to the reinforcement of pre-established beliefs which promotes the intolerance of opposing views.

The fourth chapter presents a solution to the question of how can we have meaningful political engagement in the public sphere if social media is so damaging? I discuss epistemic arrogance and how social media perpetuates such ignorance in the public sphere. To combat epistemic arrogance, I suggest that we should put an emphasis on truth preservation and political epistemology. In a democracy, it is crucial to know why we hold certain beliefs, and how we have come to know them. In order to exhibit such political deliberation and to foster an environment of political toleration, we should turn to minipublics. To perpetuate productive deliberation and belief formation, face-to-face deliberation is necessary. This deliberation can take place through minipublics. I make an argument for why group discussions are more impactful than conversations that take place on social media. An individual is more likely to defend their beliefs when engaging in political discourse in-person, whereas social media does not provide a platform for an adequate rebuttal to an argument.

Ultimately, I conclude that social media does not provide a sufficient platform for political deliberation. Rather, social media perpetuates belief polarization and exacerbates extremism. Social media is not going away; there needs to be an emphasis on deliberation and objective truths in order to remedy the extreme polarization and intolerance of opposing opinions that social media has bred over the years.

## **Chapter 1: Analysis of how Social Media Perpetuates Belief Polarization in its' Users**

Social media usage has massively increased over the last few years (Shearer 2018). Because of this increase, online political engagement has also increased. On the surface, social media is a monumental development that has allowed for the connection of family members, friends, and even strangers; social media is a place for people to engage with others and have a platform to discuss their ideas. The utilization of social media has democratic potential in regard to how we are able to communicate about politics and share ideas with one another, helping us all to stay connected, as well as giving individuals access to a wider audience with whom they can share ideas. And yet, the hopes regarding the democratic potential of social media have dwindled over the last couple of years. Today, most commentators agree that social media serves as a tool to shape political views and negatively reinforce already formed ideas especially when individuals are placed in insulated groups. Rather than connecting people, social media ends up further dividing us; this is especially true in politics. Why and how does social media do this? In order to address this question, I turn to two thinkers: Cass R. Sunstein and C. Thi Nguyen. Sunstein shows us how group polarization works and how it is a consequence of deliberating in groups (Sunstein 1999). Nguyen shows how social media exacerbates this problem through the use of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles (Nguyen 2018). I am bringing together these two accounts in order to show how the group deliberations that take place through social media applications perpetuate belief polarization and ultimately acts as an echo chamber of the user's beliefs.

The chapter is composed of three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the idea of belief polarization as presented by Cass R. Sunstein. According to Sunstein, group polarization I discuss how group-based discussions are important to arriving at truth-based conclusions. A



truth-based conclusion is one based on facts and arrived at through logical reasoning. Then, I will be explaining Sunstein's argument that social influences on an individual's behavior and argument pools are two of the main mechanisms in perpetuating group polarization. Another mechanism for group polarization that I will discuss is social comparison. This is the idea that an individual will adapt to the most popular view of their peers in order to be seen as more favorable (Sunstein 1999). Drawing on these insights, this section will show that group polarization, even when it is not perpetuated through social media, leads to the creation of these insulated groups. Sunstein does not specifically discuss social media, however, I am going to be applying his account of group polarization to further help us understand how social media increases polarization. I will show how all of this evidence suggests that group polarization reinforces pre-established beliefs, and that group discourse with those that have differing opinions is optimal for breaking out of an echo chamber. I will also be using this evidence to support my claim that social media is in itself an echo chamber that perpetuates belief polarization in individuals. I will be drawing on the claims from Sunstein to show that social media perpetuates belief polarization in individuals.

Scholars argue that the ability to constantly and instantly share private or personal political information on social media has affected the way in which we socialize politically (Swigger 2012; Boulianne 2009). It is tempting to engage online politically because you are likely to be inadvertently placed into a group with those who share your pre-existing ideas then causing an increase in political engagement (Boulianne 2009). On the contrary, this increase in political engagement through social media is conclusively unproductive, as posting online or carrying out online discussions does not activate the argumentative mechanisms used during in-person discussions (Mercier and Sperber 2011). Despite the common argument that social media

allows for individuals to have increased knowledge about politics (Boulianne 2009), the entrapment of these individuals into groups of peers who share the same beliefs is ultimately damaging to the public sphere of information. While individuals are more engaged politically online through sharing political ideas, this activity does not correlate to political engagement that is in any way productive or meaningful. What I mean by “productive” is that online political discussion does not force an individual to defend their beliefs in a meaningful way. Engaging with those who have similar beliefs to you negatively reinforces your own, thus perpetuating belief polarization in groups.

I also draw on the core arguments presented by C. Thi Nguyen in “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” in order to support how social media perpetuates the formation of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. An epistemic bubble is a less threatening version of an echo chamber and it has been described as “a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been left out, perhaps accidentally” (Nguyen 2018, 1). An echo chamber is defined by Nguyen as “a social epistemic structure from which other relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited” (Nguyen 2018, 1). While social media inherently perpetuates epistemic bubbles, it has reached a point in which individuals are being trapped inside echo chambers of their own thoughts. Echo chambers are particularly dangerous, as the constant reinforcement of one’s own beliefs involves the active dismissal of other points of view. To become entrapped in an echo chamber is more dangerous due to the individual actively disregarding opposing points of view. In this chapter, I will be focusing on why social media contributes to the formation of insulated groups through a discussion on why and how epistemic bubbles become echo chambers. Then, I will go into how social media applications are

polarizing individuals through their algorithms. My third and final section will display how social media increased political polarization in individuals by negatively reinforcing their beliefs.

### **Belief Polarization**

Specifically looking at Cass R. Sunstein's arguments for group discussions in his essay "The Law of Group Polarization," it becomes clear that group-based discussions are suboptimal in order for individuals to arrive at truth conclusions when discussing topics. His essay does not touch upon social media, rather he focuses his attention on group polarization and how an individual comes to be polarized within a group. Sunstein highlights two main mechanisms which aid in perpetuating group polarization: social influences on an individual's behavior and argument pools which persuade an individual to form an opinion (Sunstein 1999). The guiding force when it comes to the presence of belief polarization in individuals is social influences on their behavior. When an individual solely surrounds themselves with those that have similar beliefs as them, this only falsely reinforces their preexisting beliefs. It is only when people are surrounded by and engaged with those who hold different beliefs from their own that they will engage in discussions and therefore find it necessary to find legitimate support for their claims. This is especially true if they are in an environment where small group discussion is taking place (Sunstein 1999). Individuals do not typically want to be seen as an outsider by their peers. In a small group, if three of the four individuals have the view that cheese pizza is the best pizza and that is the type they want to order, then the fourth person in that group will also agree and say that they like cheese pizza in order to avoid conflict. Group polarization happens more often than not through a variety of modes, and definitely has more severe effects for other situations besides pizza choice. Sunstein suggests that the internet polarizes people into groups that can result in the

formation of extremist views (Sunstein 1999). This point on how social media perpetuates extremism is something that I will be discussing in my third chapter.

According to Sunstein, we can explain polarization through the notion of social comparison. Social comparison is the idea that humans wish to be seen in a favorable light by their peers, making them more likely to choose a point of view that those around them have, in order to be accepted or be seen as favorable to their peers (Sunstein 1999). From this idea provided by Sunstein, I am able to conclude that social comparison is furthered through social media because of the fact that users see their peers' posts. Each individual takes into consideration how their peers will perceive them when sharing their political beliefs on their platform. They have to be careful to not upset anyone. The user is then subconsciously adapting to the most favorable view that is seen among those that they follow on the application. Every time a social media user sees a view similar to their own, it negatively reinforces their own preconceived ideologies because they think that everyone is agreeing with them, when in reality they are just stuck inside of an echo chamber with their peers. I believe that on social media, agreement is being mistaken for complacency. This is because it is simple to surround yourself with those who hold the same beliefs, what is challenging, yet important, is surrounding yourself with those who hold differing opinions as it forces you to defend your own beliefs with reasoning. Such deliberation is not a goal of social media, social media serves to connect a user with those who are similar to them. Social media reinforces the user's views because viewpoints are so often repeated online and constantly being perpetuated through social media applications' algorithms. Being in an echo chamber through the mode of social media promoted group and belief polarization, falsely reinforcing one's own core set of beliefs.

## **Social Media's Exacerbation of Belief Polarization**

Many have argued that social media perpetuates the formation of epistemic bubbles through the use of algorithms that constantly push recently viewed or searched information to the user rather than posts that embody different points of view (An, Quercia and Crowcroft 2014). Nguyen highlights problems associated with social media's algorithms. He suggests that by tailoring to the user's specific interests the algorithms seclude individuals from opposing opinions, thus encouraging the user to continue using the app at a higher and more frequent rate. The use of such algorithms is what inherently traps users inside an echo chamber.

Nguyen suggests that there are two modes for belief polarization in individuals: epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Epistemic bubbles can be described as leaving out information on accident, merely by way of you not being exposed to other relevant ideas (Nguyen 2018). Something that plays a crucial role in the placement of individuals into these epistemic bubbles is political socialization. Political socialization is the way in which individuals form beliefs and values about politics, as they are influenced by the environment that they grew up in (Neundorff and Smets 2017). An individual can come to be politically socialized through a variety of components in their life, such as family members, the education that they received, and, most prominently, social media. Looking at the arguments presented by Nguyen surrounding epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, it becomes clear that the increased use of social media has a direct relationship and effect on individuals isolating themselves within their own beliefs, and effectively entering into their own echo chamber.

As an example, the following provides a case to show how someone becomes politically socialized and how they break out of an epistemic bubble. Consider an individual who has grown up in a rural community where its members are predominantly made up of conservative

Republicans. This individual is more likely to form conservative beliefs just based on those with whom they are engaging in their community. The only time that this individual could hear differing political views is when he or she watches the nightly news. If, however, FOX News is the main source of news media that the individual watches with their family and it speaks against mainstream Democratic ideas, then that individual is more likely to regard those ideas as false. Then they go onto Twitter, where they only follow those who they know from their town. These individuals are likely to be tweeting about what they just heard on the news which negatively reinforces the individual's already preconceived notions about the ideologies they had just discussed at the dinner table with their family. Therefore, that individual is more likely to develop the notion that Democratic views are untrustworthy or wrong. Once this individual goes to college and interacts with others that come from different communities and therefore hold differing views, however, they may change their political ideology to Independent, or even Democrat. How can such a change take place? The answer is simple; meeting diverse people and being expected to engage with different ideas and views make it possible for people to break out of their epistemic bubble. The classroom setting on a college campus is a perfect example of an optimal way to break individuals out of their epistemic bubbles.

Leaving for college is a prime example of breaking out of an epistemic bubble, as the college environment generally introduces individuals to diverse groups that come from a variety of backgrounds with differing ideologies. In college, the aforementioned conservative individual will likely interact with their peers via social media, therefore exposing them to different opinions. Although this does not always correlate to a change in political opinion, the ability to hold proper discourse and conversations about differing beliefs breaks the individual out of their epistemic bubble. Prior to college, the individual was in an epistemic bubble not because they

were purposely undermining the views of Democrats, but because they were simply not exposed to different opinions in a fair light. This opposes the Republican views which were always shown in a positive light through their social politicization growing up. Within an epistemic bubble, the individual is merely just leaving out information by accident, or omission, not actively discrediting the information (Nguyen 2018). The moment when an individual is exposed to relevant information about a topic and then they knowingly discredit it, they enter into an echo chamber.

As previously defined, an echo chamber can be described as an epistemological social structure where other information is being ignored and discredited on purpose (Nguyen 2018). Consider that the individual had decided that they did not want to take part in discussing their views with others. Or, if they were to take part in such a discussion, they would automatically regard the differing ideologies as false or wrong. In such a circumstance the individual will only want to interact with those who share the same beliefs as their own. When that decision is made, the individual has entered an echo chamber. This is because the individual was provided with other relevant information about the opposing beliefs from their own and they actively partook in undermining the information that does not agree with their preexisting personal beliefs. Or, if they actively chose to not partake in such deliberation, they would be in an echo chamber as well. When in such an echo chamber, an individual only wants to be presented with arguments that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs. Social media creates a platform for users to stay within these echo chambers, only exposing themselves to their own beliefs, or beliefs that align with their own and filtering out others.

From all of this evidence, I conclude that social media does not perpetuate meaningful group discussions. Instead, it makes the user stay on the app as long as possible, presenting the

same, like-minded information to the user so that they engage with the app even longer. Nguyen writes, “Internet search engines, for example, will track personal information for each particular user, and adapt their search results to suit each user’s interest... internet technologies create hyper-individualized secret filters” (Nguyen 2018, 6). This substantiates my point that social media is a personalized virtual echo chamber. A problem associated with the use of such algorithms is that individuals are beginning to not trust media sources due to a large amount of misinformation that has been circulating, the fact that there is less of a focus on truth preservation, and the increased attention being paid towards user engagement over factual stories (Nguyen 2018). It has become increasingly difficult for citizens to determine the difference between what is fact and what is false.

Source bias refers to getting all of your information and facts from one source or a few sources that share the same view. If an individual has trust and a relationship with someone, they are more likely to disagree with the same views as that person; this is simply because they hold the same core sets of beliefs which negatively reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Along with social media, the news media also perpetuates the systematic isolation of individuals from those that hold opposing beliefs. Social media inherently places a filter on the individual's uptake of information (Nguyen 2018). While this is not the case for all news media, it is the case for a good amount of them and those are the ones that have the most impact of an individual’s polarization and disbelief of opposing facts. Nguyen cites news anchor Rush Limbaugh from Fox news, to show how Limbaugh knowingly isolates his viewers from other sources which would show differing opinions, also he knowingly discredits such information (Nguyen 2018). This is an example of source bias, and a strategy used by the news media to keep their viewers in echo chambers by discrediting views that do not align with the media outlet's core set of political



values. It is an example of source bias because they are not giving an adequate platform for Democrats to express their political values, and instead, their ideas are persistently undermined. Limbaugh discredits mainstream media sources by providing counter-explanations of contrary views, which would attack the opposing views and undermine the trustworthiness of anyone that holds that opposing view (Nguyen 2018). Once the biased views perpetuated by news sources, such as FOX, are accepted, that individual has reason to believe that anyone that does not support his views is opposed to right-wing ideologies and thus considers them to be “morally unsound and generally untrustworthy” (Nguyen 2018, 10). This inherently makes the person that is using that source as their main mode of news information become dependent and only trusting of that singular source or sources which hold those similar beliefs, and thus engage online with those who also hold those convictions

### **Social Media as a Belief Reinforcer**

From what I have discussed it can be concluded that social media reinforces a user's beliefs and is not a sufficient platform for individuals to have proper discourse. Take the example of someone that identifies as a Democrat as they scroll past a post about making abortion illegal. The way I see it is, this user has one of three options: continue to scroll past it, dislike/comment on the post and say that they disagree with the person who posted it, or block/unfollow that individual because they do not agree with what they are saying and do not wish to see it on their social media feed anymore. All of these actions reinforce the Democrat's pre-existing beliefs because there is not a sufficient platform for discussion on social media where both parties have the opportunity to be heard in an impactful manner. Even if the person who posted the comment about abortion commented back to the user, it would have little to no effect on that person's beliefs. If anything, the user who agrees with abortion would stand by their opinion even more.

Social media applications serve as an echo chamber where there is no platform to properly change and inform another individual's already pre-existing beliefs. Discussions that occur over the internet do not resonate the same as discussions in person do. The only effective way to break out of an echo chamber and fight against this belief polarization that is perpetuated through social media usage is to engage in small group-based discussions.

Social media leads to increased political polarization in individuals. One of the ways in which social media is a breeding ground for echo chambers is through the individual's own self-selection of whom they choose to interact with on these sites. If they are choosing to only follow people with views that are like their own, then they are trapping themselves into their own personalized echo chamber, whether they are aware of it or not. Nathaniel Swigger brings up the fact that "discussion networks can often become one-sided which leads to less tolerance. Individuals may even have a tendency to organize their discussion networks to avoid this dissent...social networks that individuals form online are often politically homogeneous, which may limit the effect of the network on tolerance and engagement" (Swigger 2012, 591). This adds to the idea discussed earlier, that users choose who is in their network, often following those who share similar political ideologies. Therefore, all the user is seeing is information that is reinforcing their views, and since they are not choosing to interact with those who have differing opinions, the individual will never be challenged about their ideologies. Every time the user logs in online they are being negatively reinforced with their own beliefs, pushing them further into political polarization.

Another way in which social media has become a breeding ground for echo chambers is through the algorithms utilized by social media companies. Nguyen cites a Facebook and Twitter analysis which displays that users of these particular apps completely filter the user's input,

meaning that they pick and choose what sorts of information gets put onto each user's timeline depending on a variety of factors (Nguyen 2018). Such as, who they follow, what types of posts they like the most, what websites they are visiting, what links they are clicking on, etc. Filtering inputs inherently separates individuals into their own personalized echo chambers with arguments and ideas which they already agree with. The use of algorithms "just feeds into our human tendency to over-inflate what we know by reinforcing what we already believe" (Lynch 2019, 29). Social media companies create such algorithms to present content that is appealing to users based on their recent searches as well as who they are following in order to increase the user's engagement with the app (Kosinski et al., 2013). The user is being presented with the information that they want to see, based on what they have already been exposed to and engaged with online.

Lastly, the rapid spread of disinformation attributes to social media being a breeding ground for echo chambers. Not all, but enough to make a significant impact, news organizations participate in this sort of spread of disinformation and misinformation. The news sources that do participate in the spread of disinformation are making it so that individuals become extremely polarized in their beliefs and end up ultimately despising the alternative point of view. Political information that reinforces an individual's belief will cause them to engage more in online political participation, but this also means that people are less likely to fact-check the information they are being exposed to on social media. If you are exposed to multiple points of view, it enhances the public sphere, while exposure to points of view that are similar to yours restricts the public sphere and limits the knowledge of the citizen (Feezell 2016). In the United States, an increasing number of individuals are becoming politically polarized; this polarization is harmful because it inhibits the ability of the public to check elected officials. It is important for

the public to be able to check elected officials because otherwise, they would be able to do whatever they wanted without the public's consent (Graham and Svobik 2020). The lack of political knowledge is further perpetuated by social media through putting individuals in insulated groups where echo chambers are formed. The age of social media has transformed the way in which individuals are consuming information. Baris Kirdemir discusses how the spread of misinformation on these platforms harms our democratic structure. He writes, "Spreaders of disinformation, knowingly or not, often utilize this tendency by imitating legitimacy, impersonating known credible sources, or by using misleading facts and statistics" (Kirdemir 2019, 2). The tendency Kirdemir is talking about is the "mental shortcuts" that humans take. This tendency affects the way that humans receive information, which the 'spreaders of disinformation' use to their advantage (Kirdemir 2019). Social media serves as a platform where spreaders of disinformation are able to reach a wider audience, making it harder for individuals to form their own truth conclusions. All of these things harm the public sphere and the political participation of citizens. Individuals interacting on social media encourage there to be an increase in media bias. Social media amplifies media bias, as it provides a platform to expand information and disinformation to more citizens. The behaviors of those in an individuals' social media network do influence what information the reader is uptaking (Siegal 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Epistemic bubbles will leave out relevant information on accident with no ill intention, whereas echo chambers pose a larger threat to proper reasoning and arriving at truth conclusions because individuals in echo chambers are actively undermining information for the reason that it does not agree with their own personal political ideologies. Social media serves as a personalized echo chamber for individuals where they become politically polarized. On social media, there is

no sufficient platform where individuals can have proper group discussions where relevant information is heard and shared because of the filters imposed and the non-personal level of communication. The isolation of individuals is due to the filter that is put on their uptake of information. Echo chambers promote group polarization and give individuals false confidence when it comes to their beliefs. The only effective way for an individual to break out of their echo chamber is to engage in small group discussions that force individuals to become argumentative. Argumentative reasoning in a small group setting with others that share differing beliefs from their own where the individual is forced to participate provides for optimal results when reasoning and allows them to break out of their echo chamber.

The increased use of social media has caused individuals to become isolated within their own beliefs in the form of virtual echo chambers. One of the main reasons for this is because the individuals' beliefs are frequently validated and not always challenged. Without the challenge of ideas, it pushes individuals further away from logical reasoning to come to valid truth conclusions and closer to becoming politically polarized in their beliefs. This creates an inadequate platform for people to discuss political issues and express their ideologies on social media which further isolates these ideas. Social media has increased political engagement, but that does not mean that this engagement is productive. What I mean by "productive" is that online political discussion does not force an individual to defend their beliefs in a meaningful way. There is no platform for adequate debate and rebuttal. It is not productive because any user can post what they want, without being challenged to think differently, or even critically think about why they believe what they believe. Most of the time, views are held because they are the ones that are the most seen. Even though social media allows for those that would not otherwise have a voice and a platform to speak their opinions, social media still reinforces an individual

with their already pre-existing beliefs. Since social media users are being presented with information which they are likely to already agree with, it reinforces the echo chamber.

## **Chapter 2: The Weaponization of Social Media by Private Companies:**

### *A Case Study of Cambridge Analytica's Involvement in Democratic Processes*

In 2016 the United Kingdom unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union by 51.9% with a 72% turnout rate (“EU Referendum Results” n.d.). This razor-thin margin emphasizes how significant each vote was in the referendum. Brexit, the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, won by a slim majority, but still stands to reshape the EU in years to come. The UK was a member of the European Union for over 40 years, thus making the choice to leave a tremendous shock. The world later found out that the “Vote Leave” Brexit campaign was closely tied to the company Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting firm that could “analyse huge amounts of consumer data and combine that with behavioural science to identify people who organizations can target with marketing material. It collects data from a wide range of sources, including social media platforms such as Facebook, and its own polling” (Osborne 2018). Cambridge Analytica also had a significant impact on the 2016 United States Presidential Election. The company was able to collect data points on a substantial number of voters in the United States. In turn, this data was used to target voters with specific political propaganda, typically in the form of advertisements, to persuade them into voting a particular way. The Trump campaign hired Cambridge Analytica to provide them with this form of “data management and survey research” (Overby 2018).

As we have seen, social media has a significant impact on the democratic political process as it has a tendency to create echo chambers. These echo chambers exacerbate already existing belief polarization that characterize the political public sphere. But, social media's potential harm to democracy is not limited to the problem of polarizing individuals. In what follows, I demonstrate how political actors who work with private companies can also weaponize

social media to impact political outcomes. How did Cambridge Analytica turn social media data into a profitable source? How did they get the data? In what ways did they use it? How were they involved in the political process and to what extent? Private companies, like Cambridge Analytica, were able to recognize the power of social media and use it to their advantage for the purposes of financial gain. Since they sold the information to political campaigns, they also had an outsized political impact.

In this chapter, I argue that through the use of data collection private companies are able to weaponize social media with the end goal of advancing their own political agendas by using political propaganda to target users based on the data points. This weaponization exacerbates the political polarization that social media tends to increase. Social media was weaponized through the use of data collection through surveys where the user had to log in to their Facebook account thus manipulating Facebook to Cambridge Analytica's own advantage. People on social media can be manipulated to give up their private data in a multitude of ways including surveys: where the user is unaware that their *personal* data is being collected to be used beyond a survey, it is being weaponized so that private companies can target them with political propaganda. These companies use the personal data for purposes of agenda-setting which manipulates viewers through the strategic selection of what news they are seeing online. Additionally, the manipulation of trend lists is oftentimes used to make a certain topic appear more frequently on an individual's social media feed. And lastly, automated bot accounts are used with the purpose of spreading information, and mainly misinformation, rapidly, and to make users believe that a particular issue is agreed/disagreed upon by many individuals, when in fact most of those users are fake "bot" accounts used to perpetuate the manipulation of user's belief formation. Multiple issues arise out of the ability of private companies to collect personal data through social media



applications and use those applications to manipulate the information that they receive. These issues include: furthering the political polarization of its users; perpetuating less of a focus on truth preservation online; the absence of toleration to opposing political views; and users having virtually no personal privacy online. Information warfare was used to manipulate the results of both the 2016 United States Presidential Election and the European Union Referendum in the United Kingdom.

To explain how Cambridge Analytica collected personal data and used this data to manipulate the people, undermining the democratic process, I turn to the testimony of Britney Kaiser, a former employee of Cambridge Analytica. This testimony will add details regarding how the company was able to weaponize Facebook to collect the data points on a significant number of US voters who used Facebook. I then explore how the collected data is used through turning to Jared Prier's account of how private companies are able to use social media applications and manipulate the algorithms used on social media sites. This manipulation is done with the purpose of creating and disrupting trends. These companies, who sell their services to political campaigns, are able to create personalized advertisements in hopes of influencing viewers' political behavior.

### **Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 Brexit Referendum**

It is undeniable that Cambridge Analytica had a massive influence on the outcome of the 2016 European Union Referendum in which the United Kingdom ultimately voted to leave the EU. There were two campaigns that were in support of the UK leaving the EU. Both of these campaigns were funded by Robert Mercer, the principal investor of Cambridge Analytica. Robert Mercer is a hedge fund manager who supports right-wing policies. Supporting the UK in leaving the EU was in his personal best interest because Brexit would allow for the UK to freely

negotiate free trade deals with the United States. These campaigns were called “Vote Leave” and “Leave.EU” (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). Cambridge Analytica’s digital partner, AIQ, was in charge of the “Vote Leave” campaign and Cambridge Analytica was running the “Leave.EU” campaign (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). “Vote Leave” was centered around the economic arguments and “Leave.EU” centered around the immigration arguments for why the UK should leave the EU. These campaigns utilized information warfare through propaganda to perpetuate false information surrounding what staying in the European Union would actually mean for the UK. Brittany Kaiser, the Cambridge Analytica “whistleblower,” explains that, “AIQ was based in Canada and was a partner that had access to Cambridge Analytica data the entire time that they were running the “Vote Leave “campaign, which was the designated and main campaign in Brexit” (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). All of this evidence suggests that Cambridge Analytica was closely involved with both of the Leave campaigns, funneling not only money but also valuable and illegally obtained data to help support the campaign’s agenda. Data was able to be obtained through the use of artificial intelligence (AI). With AI, Cambridge Analytica was able to create a database of “detailed profiles of their lives through open-source data it harvested via Facebook. The campaign then sent thousands of different versions of advertisements to people depending on what it had learned of their personalities” (Cadwalladr 2017).

### **Data Collection: Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 Presidential Election**

To substantiate the involvement of Cambridge Analytica in the Brexit Referendum I turn to an account of how the private company was able to impact the 2016 United States Presidential Election. In 2015, the company Global Science Research (GSR), working alongside Strategic Communications Laboratories, the parent company of Cambridge Analytica, designed a

“Facebook database” (Boldyreva et al., 2018). The founder of GSR, Aleksandr Kogan, also happened to be the CEO of Cambridge Analytica at the time (Federal Trade Commission 2019). To gather the data from Facebook users, Kogan came up with a “personality survey” and offered to pay each participant of the survey one to four dollars, depending on how likely the participant was to take the personality survey based on their demographics (Boldyreva et al., 2018; Hern 2018). The project found that African American men were the least likely to take part in the test, therefore they would pay them the most because they wanted to incentivize their participation (Hern 2018). This is significant because it expands the reach of the survey to a wider demographic of individuals. If Cambridge Analytica was able to target the specific community of African American men, then they would be able to flood their Facebook feeds with propaganda that would sway them to support a Republican candidate. This made it crucial for Cambridge Analytica to incentivize the groups that are less likely to take the survey compared to those who are more likely to take part. Diversifying the survey would optimize the results of their propaganda tactics, leading to Cambridge Analytica having the capability to more accurately target individual users.

GSR claimed that the purpose of the survey was for academic research purposes, however, that ended up not being the case. The survey asked 120 questions. The survey included statements such as “I don’t talk a lot,” “I am the life of the party,” and “I get upset easily” (Brodwin 2018). The survey taker would respond to these statements with one of the five options: “very inaccurate, moderately inaccurate, neither inaccurate nor accurate, moderately accurate, or very accurate” (Brodwin 2018). For participants “to complete the survey, the users were asked to connect their Facebook accounts to the website. This automatically led to the unintentionally connecting Facebook ‘friends’ of a user – the information of these ‘friends’

became available for data collectors as well” (Boldyreva et al., 2018, 95). The data collected includes: who you follow, your browsing history, location data, as well as what kinds of posts you like.

While this clandestine data collection seems like an illegal breach of privacy, Facebook defended the company’s actions by arguing that no data was ascertained illegally since all of the participants voluntarily gave their information during the survey (Boldyreva et al., 2018). Brittany Kaiser rebuked this stating, “data was collected under the auspices of being for academic research and was used for political and commercial purposes” instead (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). Consequently, the unlawful part about the data lies in the company’s deceptive intentions. Propaganda Researcher, Dr. Emma Briant, explained in a Democracy Now show that GSR mapped data onto the personality tests and gave access to this information to Cambridge Analytica so that they could scale it up to profile people for the target states in the US (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020).

Brittany Kaiser explained in an interview with Democracy Now that, “Your behavior can be predicted to a high degree of accuracy, they can tell what will motivate you or demotivate you” (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). Through the data collected in the survey and the access that Cambridge Analytica had to all of Facebook’s data, they were able to predict user’s behavior online. They were able to do this by analyzing a user’s pattern of behavior through analyzing information such as the user’s search history, ‘liked’ posts, who they follow, and how much time is spent, or not spent, looking at certain advertisements and posts. This tactic used by Cambridge Analytica is called “psychographic profiling” (Isaak and Hanna 2018). A psychographic profile “contains information around a person’s interests, hobbies, emotional triggers, and lifestyle choices, among other data. This could provide insight into *why* someone

might buy a specific product, support a given cause, vote a certain way, and much more” (CB Insights 2020). Cambridge Analytica was then able to group every eligible voter into one of 32 different personality groups and target each group with a different set of political propaganda on their social media feed. Collectively, the data points were used for political purposes in the form of political propaganda that was specifically individualized and targeted at certain users to persuade their political behavior or further reinforce their already existing political attitudes. All of this influences how an individual will vote. The more positive or negative propaganda that is seen by individuals, the more likely they will vote a certain way. In other words, if a user is being exposed to more propaganda, such as that against immigration, they are more likely to vote a certain way, such as being sympathetic to Republican ideologies and thus voting right-wing. But, those who make propaganda are not entirely concerned with everyone who sees it believing it, “they just have to get you confused enough that you don’t know what is true” (Lynch 2019, 33). Leo Zaibert furthers this point by stating, “...merely by inserting the bit of misinformation into public consciousness...the cumulative effect of the move is to muddy the waters so that truth itself vanishes from view” (Zaibert 2021, 12-13). If the propagandists are making an individual question what they previously believed, then they have done their job since their primary objective is to make one doubt their previous knowledge in an attempt to deceive.

Cambridge Analytica found a way to collect and store a significant number of social media users’ data. The collection of private data showed the company what type of propaganda to present towards each individual's feed as determined by algorithms. Once “Cambridge Analytica realized they could integrate this information with a range of data from social media platforms, browsers, online purchases, voting results, and more” they were able to collect ““5,000+ data points on 230 million US adults”” (Isaak and Hanna 2018, 57). Even those that did

not have any social media platforms still had data points collected on them through their browser history and essentially anything where they input their name. This information was able to be accessed through the connection of Facebook accounts to the survey. Cambridge Analytica was able to then gain access to those who took the survey's Friends lists as well, and from there they were able to access millions of accounts.

Project Alamo, a database containing voter information that was started under the Trump Campaign, oversaw the advertising and campaigning for the 2016 election. Cambridge Analytica worked closely on this project, but claimed that their only role was to provide technical help with data management and research (Overby 2018). According to the Federal Election Commission, the Trump campaign paid Cambridge Analytica \$5.9 million dollars for this "management" help (Overby 2018). Cambridge Analytica remained firm on the fact that they did not give or sell the Trump campaign any data. Admitting this would put the company in violation of the law, as it is illegal for "private corporations and foreign nationals" to contribute to campaigns financially (Overby 2018). In 2019, the Federal Trade Commission ruled that Cambridge Analytica did in fact violate "the FTC Act through...deceptive conduct" (Federal Trade Commission 2019). However, by the time FTC announced its decision, Cambridge Analytica's data collection and perpetuation of propaganda had already affected a large number of Facebook users who were also voters in the US general election. The guilty ruling by the FTC was too late to have any real-time effects on the actual problem at hand: influencing the results of the election.

It is estimated that Project Alamo spent one million dollars a day on Facebook ads (Amer and Noujaim 2019). This propaganda targeted specific individuals to sway them to vote for Donald Trump and against Hillary Clinton. Specific slogans like "crooked Hillary" with handcuffs in the image, were used to portray the story that she was a criminal, therefore

influencing voters to view her in a negative way. Project Alamo and Cambridge Analytica used the results from the survey as the basis for which they would target advertisements to all Americans that could vote and use the internet. Through looking at an individual's 'liked' posts, how much time they spend on certain posts, and who they are friends with, Cambridge Analytica was able to combine this information with the results of the personality survey-takers to determine how someone would vote based on what type of propaganda they are shown. For example, if someone follows more moderate sources, but they notice that they spent time reading about Donald Trump's campaign ideas, they will target that individual with propaganda that will display Trump in a positive way and Hillary Clinton in a negative light. For example, this moderate individual would likely have a social media feed that is flooded with a plethora of "crooked Hillary" memes. This was done to undermine Clinton's campaign ideas and messages, ultimately increasing discussion about scandals she was alleged to have been involved in. Project Alamo was "an ambitious digital database that aided in online and offline targeting, strategic decisions and voter mobilization—as well as a dose of voter demobilization, attempting to limit the Hillary Clinton vote" (Trish 2018). The targeting was able to occur due to the data collected through the personality survey. As a result, individuals the campaign determined to be swing voters had a social media feed that was overflowed with negative advertisements about Hillary Clinton, and positive advertisements about Donald Trump. For example, a lot of the propaganda would emphasize "giving power back to the American people" and taking it away from "people who don't have your good in mind" (Trump Presidential Campaign Ad 2016). When Trump is expressing that he wants to take it from those who do not have the electorate's best interest in mind, the video displays clips of Hillary Clinton. This is done so that the voters will associate the government not having their best interests in mind with his opponent, therefore undermining her

campaign. Even Christopher Wiley, a data scientist who helped set up Cambridge Analytica, said that this company “is a full-service propaganda machine” (Amer and Noujaim 2019). Essentially Cambridge Analytica was hiding behind a facade that they were a data and algorithm company, when in reality, they were a major actor in the political sphere that pushed propaganda and weaponized social media to manipulate the public to further their own populist agenda.

### **Russian Influence in the 2016 Presidential Election**

Not only has democracy been tampered with through involvement by private companies, but the weaponization of social media to further political agendas has also become an issue of foreign intervention by state actors. Knowing that social media negatively affects individuals’ political socialization, and the way that they behave politically, the Russian government was able to use behavior patterns based on the data collection from Cambridge Analytica to their advantage. The Russian government played a large role in the 2016 Presidential election by way of weaponizing social media.

Russia was able to utilize Facebook advertisements and turn them into propaganda in the form of information warfare to further divide the American people. Black Lives Matter memes created by the Russian government prompted users to click for more information. Once the user clicked on the meme, they were redirected to a page that invited the user to go to a protest organized by the Russian government, not the legitimate Black Lives Matter organization. At the same time, the Russian government was also setting up Facebook pages to target adversary groups, specifically Blue Lives Matter (Amer and Noujaim 2019; Prier 2017). To further elaborate this, Black Lives Matter posts would be circulated by the Russian government that were not actually set up by BLM. Once the user clicked on the post, they were directed to a site that was hosted by the Russian government, prompting the user to take part in a protest at a



specified location. Simultaneously, the same exact thing was being done with Blue Lives Matter. They would make a post about how police lives were important and if the user clicked on it they were redirected to a site with information about protests that the user could attend, a lot of the time being at the same exact time and place that the Black Lives Matter protests they prompted would be occurring. This was done to further divide the people, using tactics such as hatred and fear. The weaponization of Facebook was done by a Russian company who “had reached the newsfeeds of 126 million users on Facebook during the 2016 US election and hundreds of thousands of bots posted political messages during the election on Twitter alone” (Gounari 2018).

### **Analysis of how Cambridge Analytica Weaponized Social Media**

It is still unknown how and exactly what data points of information Cambridge Analytica collected. This is due to a lack of research regarding what specifically Cambridge Analytica did to gain access into a user’s Facebook account and their peer’s accounts as well (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). The lack of regulation in this area of personal information is a serious problem as we do not have control over our own personal data and it is available to be manipulated by private companies. We know that Cambridge Analytica was able to gain access to individuals’ Facebook accounts through the survey they conducted. After the respondent linked their Facebook to the survey, Cambridge Analytica was able to infiltrate the respondents’ friends’ accounts as well. They were able to obtain the same data information that Facebook is able to access. This includes, who you follow, who follows you, your browsing history, location data, what kinds of posts you like, how long you engage with a post, and more. As I mentioned before, it is hard to say exactly what information was taken. Still, personal data information was stolen and weaponized against each user to target them with specific propaganda posts.

The Trump campaign used the data collected to spread misinformation through advertisements that were tailored to specific groups. Money influences politics, and in the new age of social media, it is even more prevalent. The Trump campaign's digital campaign director "claimed to have run 5.9 million visual ads on Facebook, in contrast to Hillary Clinton's 66,000" (Amer and Noujaim 2019). Since social media acts as its own echo chamber, it is very easy for users to slip into a dark hole of their own thoughts. The campaign was able to push propaganda through Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc, through the use of algorithms to find support for Trump. For example, one of the prominent pieces of propaganda used was to attack what immigration would look like if Hillary Clinton was elected as President: "In Hillary Clinton's America, the system stays rigged. Syrian refugees flood in. Illegal immigrants convicted of committing crimes get to stay, collecting social security benefits skipping the line. Border open. It's more of the same, but worse" (Two Americas 2016). In the end, it contrasts the previous with what America would look like if Donald Trump were elected as President: "Donald Trump's America is secure. Terrorists and dangerous criminals kept out. The border secured. Families safe. Change that makes America safe again" (Two Americas 2016). The visualization that occurs as the advertisement plays is dark and dismal when discussing Hillary Clinton and upbeat and patriotic when discussing Donald Trump. This is significant because this type of propaganda seeks to influence the way the viewer perceives both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Thus, the manipulation of visual advertisements has an adverse effect on the way the electorate will choose to vote. The more negative propaganda an individual sees about a candidate the less likely they will support them at the polling booth. Seeing these types of advertisements when you are scrolling through Facebook, or before you watch a Youtube video, has an effect on the way that an individual thinks about who they are going to vote for in the election.

The way in which social media sites are set up contributes to the harmful weaponization by private companies. One way this is done is through agenda-setting. Former President Donald Trump “was able to set the agenda by tweeting positions that were guaranteed a wide audience in the mainstream media” (Schroeder 2018). Other ways of weaponizing information with the aim of gaining media attention are described by Jared Prier in “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare.” He discusses how easy it is for agents to produce and distribute propaganda. Prier says, “agents can insert propaganda into a social media platform, create a trend, and rapidly disseminate a message faster and cheaper than through any other medium” (Prier 2017). Most social media sites contain a “trend list,” this list is a way for users to easily access information on certain topics that are popular and circulating rapidly online (Prier 2017). If a certain cause has a large number of automated bot accounts, they will be able to quickly make their topic rise to the top of the trending list, therefore making more users see it. This is harmful because it only requires the agents that perpetuate agenda-setting to send out automated tweets. Ultimately, there is no way for this information to be fact-checked.

Prier also discusses how propaganda is spread throughout social media through the use of “bot” accounts that manipulate the algorithm of social media sites. Algorithms utilized on sites such as Twitter and Facebook have the ability to “analyze words, phrases, or hashtags to create a list of topics in order of popularity” (Prier 2017, 52). Such algorithms make it easier for bot accounts to infiltrate trending topics to spread misinformation, or political propaganda. Through these case studies, Prier is able to discuss how social media can be used as a platform for information warfare, and ultimately its effect on political discourse. It has come increasingly easy for individuals to manipulate social media to serve as a platform for political propaganda (Prier 2017). When a topic is trending, more users will be exposed to that particular content. This

is all due to the fact that social media applications' goal is to increase user engagement online by keeping the individual locked in and scrolling for longer. It does not matter to the applications if the information that is being spread is completely true or not, just as long as it keeps the users coming back and staying active online.

Prier sets out three methods used by those who utilize information warfare which determine the trends on social media. These include, “trend distribution, trend hijacking, and trend creation” (Prier 2017, 54). Prier describes trend distribution to be “applying a message to every trending topic” (Prier 2017, 54). An example of trend distribution would be for an account to post a picture of Donald Trump along with a message about him, possibly in the form of a meme, and then include a completely unrelated hashtag such as #WorldSeries or #FinalFour (Prier 2017). The hashtag that is used will depend on what is trending at the time the post is made. The purpose of trend distribution is to input propaganda posts into the trend lists — those clicking on the #WorldSeries trend lists are expecting to see information about baseball, but instead are also seeing information about Donald Trump (Prier 2017). Trend hijacking is explained by Prier as, “requiring more resources in the form of either more followers spreading the message or a network of “bots” (autonomous programs that can interact with computer systems or users) designed to spread the message automatically” (Prier 2017, 54). Prier uses an example of the Islamic State (IS) utilizing trend hijacking during the 2014 World Cup to make their message go viral and for them to recruit more members. #WorldCup2014 was trending globally and the IS hijacked this trend and this “at one point... nearly every tweet under this hashtag had something to do with IS instead of Soccer” (Prier 2017, 64). Twitter reacted by suspending the accounts involved, but as soon as one account would be suspended another one would be activated. This made it seem as though IS had a large and active social media presence

(Prier 2017). Lastly, trend creation “necessitates either money to promote a trend or knowledge of the social media environment around the topic, and most likely, a network of several automatic bot accounts” (Prier 2017, 54). These bot accounts send out messages according to how they are programmed to do so. This makes it seem as though a lot of people are talking about one topic. But, in reality, the reason why the trend began was that the bot accounts continually posted to construct a particular topic as a trend. All three of these methods have proven to be effective in the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and thus the negative reinforcement of false beliefs online. Taken as a whole, this results in the overall decay of quality of beliefs and negatively influences all users political socialization.

For example, after the 2016 election Russia was able to manipulate social media: “More than 10,000 tweets—each laced with hyperlinks containing malware—were sent directly to U.S. Defense Department employees on Twitter. The messages were tailored to appeal to the employees’ individual interests and generated click rates nearing 70 percent” (Bossetta 2018). This is an example of trend hijacking because through the spreading of false tweets, Russia was able to generate user engagement with their propaganda. It can be inferred from this statistic that the ads used to manipulate the public would be even higher, considering that 70 percent of U.S. Defense department employees clicked on the propaganda contained in the link. Prier says cyber operations today target people within a society, influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminishing trust in the government. Through politicians and private companies controlling and exploiting “the trend mechanism on social media [in order] to harm US interests, discredit public and private institutions” social media can easily be weaponized to manipulate the public’s opinions and the way that they form their beliefs about politics (Prier 2017, 51).

The use of campaign propaganda is extremely harmful to our democracy. It further increases the polarization of beliefs through the use of extreme exaggerations and disinformation. Polarization has a massive effect on the way that we interact politically. If we become too far polarized, we will no longer be able to see reason through argumentative discourse. This is because we will only want to hold discourse with those holding similar beliefs to our own. Propaganda is powerful; it misleads people into believing what the person who made it wants them to believe, and oftentimes this has proved to be persuasive. It brings into question whether or not we are going to be able to have a free and fair election ever again; an election that does not contain the influence of private companies trying to persuade the democratic people to vote one way or another an election that does not further polarize us as a country, but one that brings us together for the collective good. One way this is harmful is it lessens the value of each individual vote. It takes away from individuals being able to reason who they want to vote for and why based on facts, rather than political propaganda and feelings. The constant reinforcement of false beliefs that propaganda contributes to leads to extreme polarization, less tolerance and overall a less educated electorate. Considering that there was not a guilty verdict in the Cambridge Analytica case until 2019, and the company had already filed for bankruptcy by then, the private company faced no *real* consequences of their actions (Overby 2018).

Private companies are able to influence political outcomes through the use of social media. This is not an issue of an individual's political affiliation, but how data is collected without the owner's explicit knowledge or approval. Steve Bannon was the head of Donald Trump's 2016 Campaign, was the Vice President of Cambridge Analytica (Cadwalladr 2017; "Facebook is a Crime Scene" 2020). Due to this connection, it was extremely easy for the Trump campaign to get a hold of the 5,000 plus data points that the company had collected on every

eligible American voter; all the campaign had to do was simply pay for the information. Social media weaponization “target[s] people within a society, influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminishing trust in the government. US adversaries now seek to control and exploit the trend mechanism on social media to harm US interests, discredit public and private institutions, and sow domestic strife” (Prier 2017).

The weaponization of the US election was a combined effort of Cambridge Analytica, a UK-based company, and Donald Trump and his team of advisors. But, it is not limited to domestic acts, as the Russian influence on the election was also incredibly harmful to our democratic system. This is a massive domestic and international issue that leaves the democratic sphere to wonder if they will ever be able to truly have a democratic election in the New Age of social media. An issue that we can conclude from the Cambridge Analytica rise and fall is that corporations do not belong in politics. Until we are able to separate politics from money, we will never be able to have a free and fair election. Private companies were able to use their wealth to manipulate the voter. Even where there are laws preventing this type of interference from companies with large sums of money, the democratic processes are still being manipulated. In the UK, there are strict laws that prohibit high-campaign spending to make elections less about money and more about the actual points each side stands for (Feikert 2009). The campaigns have to be extremely transparent with the donations that they receive, as they all have to be out for public record (Feikert 2009). However, as we have seen, even these protections do not prevent SuperPACS from forming.

### **What Has Been Done?**

There are multiple issues that arise out of the personal data collection and weaponization done by Cambridge Analytica. First, there is the issue that personal data can be collected by third

parties with great ease. Second, the use of this data for targeted misinformation campaigns. Allowing false and misleading information to be circulated online with frequency is highly damaging to how individuals are able to participate democratically. This is because it allows for false ideas to be constantly reinforced and validated, leading to a less-educated, more polarized, electorate. While the second issue remains largely untouched, there has been some effort to deal with the first problem.

The people of the United States were granted the right to privacy through *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965. This was the first Supreme Court case to tackle the question of privacy rights. The case established “the explicit right to privacy” (Milne et. al 2016). However, even with Supreme Court decisions as such, millions of people were still manipulated by a private company and had their data collected and weaponized to further political goals. Data rights should be considered a privacy right given the rapid change that technology has gone through since 1965. If we are able to consider data rights as a privacy right, that is a step in the right direction to giving individuals back their personal privacy.

It is obvious that there needs to be more of a focus on data protection laws that protect voters from this type of manipulation. Brittany Kaiser explains that the United Kingdom does have “good national data protection laws and international data protection laws through the European Union to protect voters” (“Facebook is a Crime Scene” 2020). She then goes on to express that the United States, unfortunately, does not have these sorts of protections. The EU also ratified the General Data Protection Regulation in 2018, which “controls all the companies working with personal data of EU citizens. GDPR is applicable to all the companies when they collect and analyze personal data intentionally and consistently to create user’s profile, as well as decides for the user, analyze and forecast user preferences while using this data” (Boldyreva



2018). This regulation is essential to protecting an individual's personal data rights in the era of social media. In 2018, the Data Protection Act was passed by the UK. This act gave rights to the user's so that they can protect their personal data privacy: "under the Data Protection Act 2018, you have the right to find out what information the government and other organisations store about you" (Service 2015). This regulation gave protection to users, they are now able to know explicitly what their data is being used for, what data is being used, allow for or deny the processing of personal data. Most importantly, the user has these rights when a company is using personal data for "profiling, for example to predict your behaviour or interests" (Service 2015).

Will these sorts of laws help to prevent a breach of our privacy rights in the future? I hope so. However, the echo chamber still exists within social media platforms, constantly and negatively reinforcing user's beliefs, and furthering polarization. Even if we could go back and change the results or have a do-over, the damage is done. Individuals are extremely polarized due to the amount of misinformation and propaganda used in the targeted propaganda during Brexit and the Presidential Election, and we are still seeing and feeling those repercussions today. Such propaganda contributed to the personalized echo chamber that social media perpetuates.

Since Cambridge Analytica was able to harness the technology that made this type of political effect possible, it could happen again. What there needs to be is more of an emphasis on including data privacy rights as human rights, and enforcing these sorts of breaches of our data privacy as unacceptable and a violation of our human rights. There is little to no transparency from private data companies as well as applications that we download on our phones. For example, in the court case, *ProCD v. Zeidenberg* (1996), it was established that once a user 'clicks' agree to the terms and conditions presented, even if they do not read them, it qualifies as

a binding contract between the user and the company. The court held that the warnings that were clicked through by the user certified as a binding contract and the disregard of the warning was not permissible as an excuse to get out of the contract. This holding is important for technology in protecting software because in this case, the buyer purchased a CD-ROM database that had a license restriction which limited the buyer to non-commercial use (ProCD v. Zeidenberg 1996). When purchasing apps through the app store, or when you are downloading software, it is highly likely that you will encounter a page that pops up with terms and conditions and you must click that you agree to those terms and conditions to use the app. According to Business Insider, 91% of people will consent to the legal terms and conditions without even reading them (Cakebread 2017). This case is important to producers of technology as they can set forth the terms and conditions that they have for a user of their product/software, and once the user clicks agree they have entered into a binding contract; if the user does go against those terms then the company can take legal action against the consumer. This translates to larger companies being able to gain access to information such as a user's contacts in their phone, photos, locations, even messages they have sent and received. Even if a user were to read the terms and conditions it is unlikely that they would be able to understand them as they are not in layman's terms ("Facebook is a Crime Scene" 2020). What is dangerous is that this sort of technology exists and everyday users are presented with false information and propaganda online. It has become increasingly hard to separate between what is true and what is not in the online world.

### **Conclusion: The Impacts and Future Concerns that Emerge from This Story**

Social media perpetuates less of a focus on truth preservation and critical thinking skills, and more of a focus on agenda-setting, trending topics, and herd mentality. Individuals are becoming politically polarized more than ever due to the weaponization of social media. The

spread of propaganda and misinformation has negatively affected the way that we interact politically with one another. There is less toleration of opposing political views because of this weaponization as well. We are already seeing the effects of the weaponization of social media. The negative effects were on display January 6th, 2021 when a mob of Donald Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol building. This event was a direct result of misinformation regarding our political processes spread by politicians in powerful positions. It was clear to the majority of people that Donald Trump did in fact lose the election to Joe Biden; however, Trump had exhibited dangerous rhetoric that led to the insurrection, as well as social media platforms banning his accounts. Many individuals have said that this was a violation of free speech. However, when speech is used in order to incite violence, it is not protected by the First amendment. Cambridge Analytica conspiring to get Donald Trump elected as president by manipulating illegally obtained data has ultimately proved harmful to our democracy. Being trapped inside echo chambers is extremely harmful and damaging not only to our political sphere, but also to how we as individuals can interact peacefully with one another.

Data privacy concerns have increased over the past few years (Shipman and Marshall 2020). Though the right to privacy is something that is continuously being debated, we must accept the fact that social media is here to stay. So, what can we do in order to protect our information and our data rights? To answer this question, I do not believe that it is something we as citizens have the ability to protect. The average person does not read the “Terms and Conditions” before ‘accepting’ them (“Ethics in the Age of Technological Disruption” 2018; Cakebread 2017). However, it is our responsibility as citizens to elect representatives that will protect our data, rather than manipulate it to promote the interests of private companies and wealthy politicians. It is up to the government to then through the law protect its citizens. There

is an urgent need for more data protection so that we are guaranteed privacy rights. As the world has evolved, our laws need to as well. Because technology is constantly changing it has made it increasingly hard for the court system to keep up. In the journal article “The Growing Gap Between Emerging Technologies and the Law” by Gary E. Marchant, he discusses how the legal structure that society relies upon to regulate technologies and protect their data safety is lagging behind technology (Marchant 2011). There is an increasing gap between the rate of technological advancement and the overseeing of new technologies by legal structures. Since the court system is lagging so far behind technology it is hard for them to actually make a large enough impact on technology once it comes out. There needs to be more of a focus on protecting our democratic processes, so it should be of the utmost importance for the data privacy laws to be as up-to-date as possible.

### **Chapter 3: The Weaponization of Social Media by White Supremacists:**

#### *A Case Study of White Supremacy and How Social Media Disseminates Racist Ideologies*

On January 6, 2021, white supremacists, rioted and attacked the United States Capitol (Hsu 2021; Valentino-DeVries et al., 2021). Allegedly organized by members of the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, the attackers demonstrated how white supremacist groups used alt-right social media sites such as, Parler and Gab, to organize the riot. Not only were these alt-right sites used, but mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, were also used to organize the Capitol attack. For months, discussions of violence against Congress were talked about online by these alt-right groups, and on January 6th, online discussion turned into a real-life threat (Frenkel 2021). Parler was founded in 2018 and claims to be a space where free speech is allowed. Gab was founded in 2016 and has a similar claim to that of Parler. The overwhelming majority of users for both of these sites are considered to be alt-right and associated with neo-nazis, white supremacists, QAnon, and more (Hitkul et al., 2021; Fair and Wesslen 2019). The acquisition of sites like Parler and Gab by white supremacists serve as an example of how social media has become a breeding ground for extremist groups while begging the following questions: How did social media sites become such a breeding ground for extremist groups? How exactly do white supremacist groups weaponize social media in order to disseminate their extremist ideologies and reach out to a wider audience? In this chapter, I argue that extremist groups in the United States weaponize social media in three ways. First, white supremacists use social media to amplify their views. By ensuring their frequent appearance on mainstream sites through bots and trolls, they “normalize” the opinions they share. Second, they make use of anonymity to gain traction and attract people. Third, once they lure people into their

extremist websites/chat rooms etc., they further radicalize people through the use of their echo chambers.

White supremacist groups have weaponized online platforms previously used by social justice groups to organize protests. Social media platforms enable white supremacist groups to “connect with the like-minded... to radicalise some audiences while intimidating others, and ultimately to recruit new members, some of whom have engaged in hate crimes and/or terrorism” (Conway et al., 2019, 2). White supremacist groups capitalize off of the polarization and isolation that social media perpetuates. White supremacist groups make use of echo chambers to radicalize people, but first they must attract people into these echo chambers. In order for this to happen, they need to normalize their extremist ideas. One way that this is done is through their language. Rather than saying “the white race is superior to others,” white supremacists say, “all races should have their own existence, we just need to be separate.” This is a racist idea, but their phrasing makes the idea seem less extreme and normalized to push their ideas into the mainstream.

By isolating individual users, social media not only polarizes individuals’ beliefs, but it also perpetuates extremist ideologies. In order to discuss how white supremacist groups weaponize social media, I explain who exactly these white supremacist groups are, and how they have been able to use technology to their advantage in disseminating their extremist ideologies. To do this, I first present a historical account of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to provide a background of how the group has shifted and developed over time. In the second section, I discuss what exactly “normalization” means in the context of these extremist groups, turning to Amy Cooter’s notion of normalization. I will discuss Cooter’s argument, which refers to how ideas and ideologies that have been considered extreme have become mainstream through the

concerted efforts of these groups, and add to her argument by applying her notion of normalization to show how social media further exacerbates the dissemination of extremist ideologies through the process of normalization (Cooter 2006). In the third section, to further the discussion on normalization, I explain how social media accelerates the normalization process through the rapid spread of information. Here, I also turn to Bharath Ganesh who discusses how easy it is for alt-right groups to weaponize social media for propaganda purposes (Ganesh 2018). I argue that this propaganda is what allows for the radicalization of ideas, which results in extremist views, as social media creates and perpetuates an echo chamber. Along with this, I discuss how politicians' use of social media plays a role in normalization through the rhetoric they engage in and display online. In that section, I also discuss how algorithms and bot accounts make white supremacist ideologies increasingly visible in the mainstream of social media. In the fourth section, I describe how anonymity plays a role in mainstreaming white supremacist ideologies through appealing to users as a low-cost way for them to engage online. Anonymity allows for anyone, of any background, to be involved in white supremacist online discussion without the cost of the conversation being tied to their name. Lastly, I end this chapter by using former white supremacist, Derek Black, as a case study to illustrate all factors I have discussed in the chapter.

### **Historical Background of White Supremacists in the United States**

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) served as a point of convergence for white supremacists who upheld the white power and white pride rhetoric that these supremacists spread today. The KKK was founded in 1865 and was one of the first most widely known white supremacist groups (White Supremacy and Terrorism). The first meeting took place on December 24th, 1865 in the Law Office of Judge Thomas M. Jones (Quarles 1999, 29). It was considered to be an “Invisible

Empire” due to the amount of secrecy surrounding the founding and meetings, and the limited amount of records at its initial founding (Quarles 1999, 30). It has been suggested that the Klan turned from a social club into a violent terrorist group (Quarles 1999). Quarles writes, “the fraternal purpose changed from fun and frolic into a deadly serious reactionary movement” (Quarles 1999, 31). Even the founding KKK had a way of skewing their behavior to make it seem as though they were being protective and honorable rather than racist and dangerous. For example, they capitalized off of “the classic Southern ethic of protecting gentlewoman” (Quarles 1999, 33). This is a misrepresentation of what the KKK actually stood for, and by weaponizing this narrative, the group was able to continue to gain acceptance and support.

The Klan’s resurgence in the 1920s and the success of the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) represent the widespread acceptance and normalization of white supremacy. By the mid-1920s, which is largely considered the peak of the Klan’s membership, the KKK gained around 5 million members (Quarles 1999; Daniels 2018). During this time the KKK was flooded with support, both financially and through an increase in membership. The support for the narrative that white supremacists were perpetuating can be seen through the overwhelming number of people who saw the film. Over 50,000,000 Americans were said to have seen this film. In view of this, it can be seen how and why the KKK was able to make a resurgence. The film was directed by D.W. Griffith, who purposely depicted “emancipated slaves as heathens, as unworthy of being free, as uncivilized” (Staff 2015). Griffith wanted to show that Reconstruction was an ultimate failure and show what he believed to be the artistic version of the aftermath of the American Civil War (Chalmers 1987; Quarles 1999; Staff 2015). The film sparked further nationalistic feelings and attitudes, showcasing the Klan’s claims to be honorable, and protective of ‘their’ nation. The film displayed “Southern chivalry, Northern abuses, and Negro violence



The Ku Klux Klan was depicted as the savior of the white race against the ravages and criminality of the black race” (Quarles 1999). The film created a false narrative that inherently criminalized Black individuals and portrayed the KKK to be heroic. The ideologies of the KKK were so far-reaching to the extent that even the President at the time, Woodrow Wilson, held a private screening of *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House (Quarles 1999). Wilson, rather disturbingly, resonated with the message of the film, stating ““It is like writing history with lightning... and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true” (Chalmers 1987, 26-27; Daniels 2018). But this was not the case, as the film was an extreme dramatization and false narrative history of the United States. It was filmed in a manner to represent a documentary, so that it would have the appeal of being a historical fact, therefore people took it as a historical fact (Quarles 1999). The special screening of the film at the White House further indicates how pervasive white supremacy was at this point in history. At this time, white supremacy was not something that had to be kept secret as it was so widely accepted, most disturbingly by high-ranking government officials.

Following the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* where the court ruled “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” the KKK not only gained members, but it also expanded into different groups (Warren 1953, 495). For example, the White Citizen Council, The American States Rights Association and the National Association for the Advancement of White people were founded immediately following this landmark decision. However, these groups did not claim to be of Klan membership. Additionally, these groups met in public, deviating from the secret membership of the Klan. Nonetheless, the group Americans for the Preservation of the White Race had goals that were in alignment “with the primary purposes of the Ku Klux Klan” (Quarles 1999, 88). White supremacists, regardless of formal

association with the Klan, hold the belief that white people are superior to others because of their race.

In 1947, steps were taken by the U.S. Attorney General's office against the KKK. They did so by including "the Klan on its list of subversive, totalitarian, fascist, and Communist organizations (Quarles 1999, 85). It was during the 1960s, at the same time as the Civil Rights movement, when the KKK truly began to lose traction and popularity. But despite them losing popularity, there still was extreme amounts of violence, hatred, and racism displayed by KKK members. This violence was directed towards members of the Black community and their supporters in their fight for equality. Outright violence manifested in the form of gruesome beatings, bombings and shootings during this time. Resultantly, extreme violence made the nation see the KKK for who they truly were, a white supremacist terrorist group who were only trying to incite fear and perpetuate hatred. Subsequently, these acts of violence aided in gaining more supporters for the Civil Rights movement (History.com Editors 2009). There was beginning to be more tolerance in the South, especially from the student generations, making it harder for the KKK to continue to gain members and financial support. One of the moments where it became morally unacceptable to be a part of the KKK was when Lyndon B. Johnson publicly denounced the KKK on national television in response to their murder of a civil rights worker (Ku Klux Klan n.d; History.com Editors 2009). Members of the KKK shot and killed Mrs. Viola Gregg Liuzzo. She was driving carloads of people who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. She was the only white woman to have died in the Civil Rights movement, she died for supporting African Americans in their fight for equality (Britt 2017). Johnson described "the Klan as a 'hooded society of bigots' disloyal to the United States, he declared war on the Invisible Empire" (Chalmers 1987, 390). In doing so, Johnson also "praised Viola Liuzzo's

sacrifice and promised to fight the Klan” (Chalmers 1987, 390). This was a watershed moment in history because it was the first time that the KKK had ever been publicly denounced by the President of the United States. There was always some kind of anonymity to the KKK, but people were always able to be open and proud to show their white supremacy. As we move forward past the Civil Rights movement, it becomes increasingly unacceptable to say you are a member of the KKK. It was at this time that the KKK became as equally morally unacceptable as Nazi groups. While the association with the KKK, in particular, became socially unacceptable, this is not to say that white supremacy declined or disappeared; instead, white supremacy manifested on different platforms, under different names, and still thrives today.

### **Normalization**

Given this, these white supremacist organizations found it necessary to re-enter the mainstream. In order to appeal to people, they had to find a way to appear mainstream. Through normalization tactics, extremist groups are able to hide their true identities. Amy Cooter asserts in “Neo-Nazi Normalization: The Skinhead Movement and Integration into Normative Structures,” that normalization allows extremist groups, in particular, the Skinheads to attract more followers and expand the reach of their ‘movement’ (Cooter 2006). She explains normalization as “the process whereby members of the Skinheads are changing the manner in which they present themselves to mainstream society” (Cooter 2006, 152). The Skinheads are a Neo-Nazi subgroup who are attempting to enter into mainstream society by presenting themselves as average people concerned with upholding the interests of the community (Cooter 2006).

Skinheads do not have to identify themselves by their appearance as they have in the past. Before this normalization into the mainstream, the Skinheads displayed a very rugged look.

Cooter explains that they would have particular tattoos, wear “blue jeans, thin red suspenders, a bomber jacket, and steel-toed combat boots or Doc Martens” and that their hair cut would be either “a shaved head or very closely-cropped hair” (Cooter 2006, 147). Skinheads were easily identifiable just by their appearance. Now, there is less of a focus on members getting a specific haircut, tattoo or clothing to identify themselves with the movement (Cooter 2006). By shifting towards a more clean-cut, and less rugged appearance, the group became more integrated into the mainstream. This enabled them to appeal more to those who “previously have been intimidated or ostracized by the extremity of the Skins’ visual presentation” (Cooter 2006, 153). The Skinheads normalized their group into the mainstream through making their appearance less rugged and more casual than before. As a result, the group was able to gain more members and express their ideologies to a wider audience. Therefore, normalization proves to be an effective way for white supremacist groups and sub-groups to permeate into mainstream society.

It is important to point out my avoidance of the term ‘white nationalism’ considering it is the preferred term used by the modern-day white supremacists. By using the term ‘white nationalism’ we are further normalizing white supremacist ideas to make them seem more mainstream and palatable. White nationalists are white supremacists; there is no difference. To use the phrase ‘white nationalists’ is an attempt to normalize and mainstream the white supremacist movement. This is a major part of the normalization process that I discuss in this section. To say ‘white nationalism’ is an attempt to separate that movement from the KKK, neo-nazi, white supremacist connotation that the alt-right has always carried. But, my point is that there is no difference between these names; the only difference is that using ‘white nationalism’ is normalizing extremist ideologies, and using ‘white supremacy’ is calling the extremists by their proper name. What is normalizing about this name variation is that nationalism is a widely

accepted ideology; it is respected and not viewed as extreme. By referring to themselves as white *nationalists* - a term associated with extreme pride for America - rather than supremacists, extremists strategically disassociate themselves from their predecessors - the KKK - and normalize, or disguise, their platform as simply patriotic.

Eli Saslow, the writer of the book, *The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, provides an example of how white supremacist groups have changed their name overtime to make their group seem more normalized and not as extreme. Saslow explains how each time the name of the original KKK has changed, it has become more subtle (Gross 2018). Changing the name is a tool of deception and normalization tactics. The progression is as such: KKK, white supremacist, white power, white pride, and now, white nationalist. Changing the name of the movement does not mean that the ideologies changed along with it; instead, I am arguing that this was done as an attempt to further normalize the white supremacist movement. The KKK has a deep historical background as does white supremacy, so to change the name to something more palatable by the average person is to make it more intriguing and inviting.

### **How does Social Media Accelerate Normalization?**

In 1998, David Duke, the former grand wizard of the KKK, said “I believe that the internet will begin a chain reaction of racial enlightenment that will shake the world by the speed of its intellectual conquest” (Daniels 2018, 63). Social media spreads information quickly and widely, making it the best tool for white supremacists to utilize in order to spread their beliefs. Due to the nature of social media, extremist ideologies are spread at an accelerated pace furthering the reach of these groups. White supremacist beliefs are more accessible now than ever before due to the internet (Daniels 2009). Social media has enabled white supremacists by firstly providing a platform for extremist ideologies to ingress into the mainstream media. Not

only is normalization concerned with extremist beliefs seeping into the mainstream, but it is also concerned with ideologies, even as extremist as white supremacy beginning to seem more normal the more that someone is exposed to it. White supremacists have normalized their extremist ideologies through weaponizing various social media platforms with the aim of mainstreaming their ideas.

Bharath Ganesh explains in “The Ungovernability of Digital Hate Culture” that social media has been used for good purposes, like organizing peaceful protests. However, social media’s “low barriers to entry have allowed extreme groups to exploit its benefits” (Ganesh 2018, 30). There has been an undeniable benefit of social media in regard to how individuals are able to come together in order to fight injustices such as oppression. However, because of the little regulation that exists on social media platforms it has become a breeding ground for extremist groups to grow. Ganesh also warns about the dangers that social media can pose. The spreading of extremist, alt-right views online is harmful because of the rapid dissemination of “extreme views, bigotry, and propaganda” (Ganesh 2018, 31). White supremacists are weaponizing social media through being able to normalize their ideas into the mainstream of society, and this dangerous information can be spread rapidly to anyone at any given time due to such technological advances (Ganesh 2018). These tactics of normalization that Cooter is discussing can be applied to how social media is weaponized by white supremacists. Through the repetition of posts on social media, individuals are more prone to believe that far-right ideologies are accurate and true.

White supremacists have adopted progressive terminology as a tool to both normalize extremism and disassociate from it. White supremacists firmly believe that what they stand for is what is best for the betterment of society and how they are able to spread such beliefs is through

using more liberal rhetoric. Stormfront is an alt-right website for white supremacists to engage with others that hold the same beliefs as them. The website description of Stormfront claims that the site provides “News and discussion for racial realists and idealists, supporting TRUE diversity and the right of ALL peoples to a homeland, including White people” (Stormfront.org n.d.). Normalization is occurring here in the form of Stormfront utilizing the language of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is known to be a political philosophy that is used, typically by Democrats, to emphasize how all cultures should be acknowledged, appreciated and accepted. White supremacists appropriate such language and use it to normalize their ideologies into the mainstream (Gross 2018).

With the recent rise of social media, white supremacists have been able to weaponize the ability to quickly spread information between different social media applications in order to reach a wider audience; but, this is not just done by the group members alone. Politicians who have refused to condone their ideologies publicly have given more power to the white supremacists. One white supremacist, the alt-right group that has recently gained attention is the Proud Boys. They were founded in 2016 right before the Presidential Election (Kutner 2020). Recently, white supremacist groups have even been nodded to by political figures, like former President Donald Trump. During the first Presidential debate that took place on 29 September, 2020, former President Trump was asked to formally condemn white supremacists (McCammon 2020):

Wallace: But are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacists and militia groups and to say that they need to stand down and not add to the violence in a number of these cities as we saw in Kenosha and as we've seen in Portland? Are you prepared to specifically do that?

Trump: Sure, I'm prepared to do that. But I would say almost everything I see is from the left wing, not from the right wing. If you look, I'm willing to do anything. I want to see peace.

Wallace: Then do it, sir.

Trump: You want to call them? What do you want to call them? Give me a name, give me a name, go ahead — who would you like me to condemn?

Wallace: White supremacists, white supremacists and right-wing militia.

Trump: Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.

I am using this example to show how white supremacist views are normalized. This refusal to condemn white supremacy on a world stage, as the leader of the United States, helped to reinforce everything that extremists stand for. After this avoidance of condemnation by the former President, the white supremacist groups interpreted this as a vote of support and then took to social media so they could further the claim. Making propaganda that said, “Stand back and Stand by” (McCammon 2020). Following the debate, Merriam-Webster’s Twitter account shared definitions of the terms “stand back” and “stand by”. The tweet reads “‘Stand back’: to take a few steps backwards ‘Stand by’: to be or to get ready to act” (@MerriamWebster 2020). Essentially, this phrase told the white supremacist sub-group, the Proud Boys, to wait and be ready to act. After this statement, a plethora of social media posts arose on many different platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Also, white supremacist groups decided to monetize the statement “Stand Back and Standy By” by selling sweatshirts and T-shirts with the statement printed on them. However, it is important to note that to put all of the blame of the rise of white supremacy onto one individual would be mistaken. Racism has existed since the foundation of the United States, it is not something that is new. However, having a President that does not condemn the violence and harmful discourse that is continuously on display for the world to see not only exacerbates the effects but legitimizes the white supremacists.

Here I provide an example of white supremacist ideologies entering into the mainstream and having a direct effect on the world and political sphere. In 2017, white supremacists organized the ‘Unite the Right’ rally largely online (Daniels 2018; Conway et al., 2019).



Recently, extremist groups have carried out a large part of their organizing and recruitment on social media platforms. But the impact of the event did not stop at the rally itself. On the Tuesday that followed, former President Trump reiterated “white nationalist talking points defending the statues of American slaveholders” (Daniels 2018, 61) For example, Trump called Robert E. Lee, a Confederate leader during the Civil War, “a great leader” (Kessler 2020). He also exclaimed that these protesters were well within their rights to protest (Kessler 2020). What was extremely problematic was that he said people on both sides were in the wrong, essentially comparing white supremacists to those who were protesting against their racist ideologies (Kessler 2020). Saying that a confederate leader was a great leader reinforces white supremacist ideas since the confederacy wanted to continue slavery in the South, thus reinforcing white supremacists with their own beliefs and further normalizing them. When phrases of such nature are said by political figures, people start to talk about it on social media. As a result, it becomes easier for white supremacists to be involved in those discussions without blatantly being known that they are white supremacists. Social media exacerbates the spread of white supremacist ideologies making it easier for such ideas to be spread to a wider audience.

Recently, politicians have relied heavily on social media to normalize their often hateful and misleading rhetoric. For example, former President Donald Trump used Twitter as the main platform to reach his supporters, up until he was banned in the last few moments of his presidency. An example of this was after Trump had found out he lost the election, he claimed that it was stolen from him and that the election was fixed. He did not want mail-in ballots, that were submitted on time, to be counted after the official polls were closed, claiming that it was unconstitutional. Because he was the President and representative of the Republican party, other republicans rallied around him despite his misleading rhetoric. From his presidency it can be

seen that his extremism became normalized as being Republican. This is harmful not only to the democratic sphere but also to the Republican party. Not all Republicans have the same type of extremist views or thought that the election was stolen, but his presidency further allowed for his own personal extremist views to become normalized into the mainstream. Twitter has given a way for powerful individuals and groups to weaponize social media and normalize their views “as an instrument of discourse production, reorientation and social control” (Gounari 2018, 209). Social media provides a way for white supremacists to normalize their extremist viewpoints through the constant oversharing that is allowed by these sites.

Social media algorithms also play a role in normalization. These algorithms “deliver search results for those who seek confirmation for racist notions and connect newcomers to like-minded racists” (Daniels 2018, 62). Any user can seek and receive validation for their beliefs online, no matter if their beliefs are biased or wrong. These algorithms have contributed largely to the normalization of white supremacist ideologies because of how quickly information can be posted and shared on social media. The amplification of white supremacist talking points is aided by algorithms that exist within social media applications, moving these ideas rapidly “into the mainstream of political discourse” (Daniels 2018, 62). Picking and choosing what beliefs users are allowed to share online is a dangerous slope for social media platforms to go down. To clarify, the instance in which Twitter and Facebook banned Trump is not an example of social media sites picking and choosing which beliefs can be shared. The difference is, Trump’s tweets and posts were inciting violence, and led to real-world harm. When figureheads such as the President of the United States use extremist rhetoric with little to no consequence, other white supremacists feel free to share similar opinions on the online world. But this “anything-goes approach on platforms like Twitter” provides many more places for white supremacists to have

group discourse and the dissemination of their ideologies online (Daniels 2018, 64). It surpasses just Stormfront and propaganda; they are able to weaponize social media to the same extent that other individuals who are protesting injustices are able to.

Lastly, to explain how social media accelerates the dissemination of the normalization of extremist views into the mainstream, I turn to an account of the massive influx of bot accounts and designated ‘troll’ hate accounts which have allowed for digital hate culture to grow massively. Ganesh describes that one way in which we can understand digital hate culture is through looking at groups that identify themselves as “alt-right” or “white supremacists.” They believe “that Western civilization and culture is facing an existential threat from non-white people and the liberals that appease them, which is summarized by the phrase “white genocide” (Ganesh 2018). Derek Black, a former white supremacist, also emphasizes this point. He says that white supremacists firmly believe that they are being oppressed and that separating themselves from other races is what is the best for society (Gross 2018). This digital hate culture is manifested and continued by white supremacists that engage in online discourse through websites such as Stormfront. It is not only through designated and proclaimed white supremacist accounts and sites that perpetuate this type of hate culture. Ganesh also points out that this culture has grown “out of the swarm tactic of troll but has been co-opted for a political purpose, with automated accounts or ‘bots’” (Ganesh 2018). Due to the increased usage of these sorts of accounts, it is much easier for white supremacist accounts that convey racist ideologies to creep into the mainstream flow of social media, and attempt to congest user’s feeds. It is increasingly easier for identities to be concealed online through usernames, troll (fake) accounts, and automated bot accounts. Because you are able to hide behind a facade online, there is significantly less accountability when it comes to taking ownership of your beliefs and actions.

On the large majority of social media sites, you are able to create an account using whatever username you please; in some circumstances, you must add either a phone number or an email address. This is to the white supremacist groups advantage because they are then able to create a multitude of fake accounts in order to spread extremist information and make it seem as though they have a larger following than they realistically do.

Ever since the rise of social media and the internet in particular, the public has focused less on facts and more on personal opinions (Daniels 2009). For example, Daniels presents two cases: one in which an individual “reads a cloaked white supremacist site that describes American slavery as a ‘sanitary, humane, relaxed institution’” (Daniels 2009, 8). To which the individual reasoned this to mean that “‘there’s two sides to everything’” (Daniels 2009, 8). In the second case an individual who read “a legitimate civil rights site associated with the King Center in Atlanta, questions the site's validity because of the fact that his widow created the site and therefore “‘it could be biased’” (Daniels 2009, 8). Both of these exemplify an attempt from white supremacists to normalize their ideas into the mainstream of society. From these cases, Daniels concludes that “the very ideas of civil rights and racial equality are eroded with a digital media landscape that equalizes all websites” (Daniels 2009, 8). Daniels explains that the internet has made it increasingly difficult to determine what is biased information and what is not (Daniels 2009). Social media and the internet shows us what we want to see, we essentially are using search engines for validation (Lynch 2019). This is harmful because it has caused false belief formation to occur in individuals who are not exposed to an accurate history of race in the United States. The inaccuracy of this magnitude is nocuous to deliberation because it then becomes a matter of interpretation, when instead it should be considered a matter of fact in accordance to what actually happened. White supremacists will also optimize this sort of misinformation by

taking it out to practice in the real world, through holding rallies, engaging in harmful hate speech, as well as enacting violence towards those of a different race.

## **Anonymity**

White supremacist groups have always used anonymity, and continue to do so in the age of social media. From the very foundation of the KKK, members would wear white hoods and cloaks to conceal their identity, and remain silent when encountering a victim of their racism. Maintaining anonymity was important to the stability of the KKK, as it is truly how white supremacists can gain and maintain power (Quarles 1999). Today, we can see how this anonymity has shifted into the realm of social media. Hiding behind the screen of social media allows for white supremacy to have a greater inclusion in society. Social media acts as the modern-day “hood” that KKK members would wear in order to maintain their anonymity. Cooter explains that because of increased anonymity, extremists are more likely to hold professional positions such as doctors and lawyers. These individuals are typically seen as less threatening, gaining the attraction of more members on a larger scale. Social media exacerbates this by helping extremist groups, like the Skinheads, to reach a wider audience. If individuals do not need to identify themselves through certain observable characteristics, more people are likely to join. Also, anonymity allows for the everyday doctor, lawyer or accountant to be able to engage in white supremacist activities without any accountability falling onto their name and affecting their life outside of social media. They virtually are able to be anonymous bots in the grand scheme of things. Amy Cooter explains that “members of the movement are now encouraged to be ‘less visible, [to] have a good education, get a good job . . . get in there where they can do us a lot more good’” (Cooter 2006). Social media helps the Skinheads reach a wider audience through anonymity. This quote highlights the significance of the Skinheads entering into

mainstream society. This is because more individuals are likely to join as long as they are able to keep their identity and membership a secret to the rest of the world. Moreover, engaging in white supremacist activities online is ultimately appealing due to the anonymity that online behavior allows for. Daniels says “the fact that this communication can be encrypted and anonymous is appealing for a position of white supremacists” (Daniels 2009, 7).

Another way that anonymity is used as a tool for weaponizing social media by white supremacists is through the use of “cloak accounts.” Such accounts can take websites, or social media accounts and present themselves as advocating for a particular cause, such as equality, when in actuality it was hosted by Stormfront. In 1999, Don Black created a site called martinlutherking.org (Daniels 2018). This was done “to call into question the hard won moral, cultural, and political victories of the civil rights movement by undermining Dr. King’s personal reputation. Other cloaked sites suggest that slavery ‘wasn’t that bad.’” (Daniels 2018, 64). This weaponization of technology is dangerous because it plays a role in adding a false narrative into the history of the United States. The reinforcement of false beliefs leads to a less-educated populace, extreme polarization, and less tolerance. This site, for example, perpetuates an extremely false narrative of history and it is dangerous for this type of slander, claiming to be factual, to circulate in the public sphere. Those that come to believe this narrative of white supremacy develop a severe distrust for the overwhelming majority of the rest of society, thinking that their peers' ideologies are false and misunderstood, thus furthering the severe polarization that exists between the far-right and far-left. Moreover, this case suggests that due to the ease in which white supremacists can weaponize social media, social media is not a productive source for political discourse and debate. In fact, it further polarizes individuals and leads them to believe false narratives. White supremacist groups are able to lure users to their

sites under false pretenses, because of the anonymity provided by social media. White supremacist ideologies begin to seem less extreme and more mainstream once an individual interacts on these sites with the supremacists. The individual then effectively enters into an echo chamber, which is dangerous because the user constantly hears the viewpoints of the white supremacists, making them appear more mainstream.

Anonymity on social media contributes to the formation of white supremacist groups because individuals are able to conceal their identity through the use of alternate ‘usernames’ when choosing to engage publicly online. White supremacists are able to distance themselves from that grouping and engage online however they would like with the low-risk of anyone knowing who they are. It is less costly for individuals to engage online because of anonymity. They are able to explore white supremacist websites such as Stormfront from the comfort of their homes without anyone knowing their true identity. The same goes for making online profiles on social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit. On these sites, you can go by a fake username and do not need to have anything that is identifiable to you personally on your profile.

Jennifer Forestal and Menaka Phillips set forth anonymity as one aspect of social media that has the potential to be problematic to the public sphere in a deliberative democracy. They mainly claim that “It can, first, generate conditions under which communities form the ties of solidarity and mutuality that foster associative action, and, second, enable novel interactions between these individuals and communities and the larger public of which they are a part” (Forestal and Phillips 2019, 576). However, they also acknowledge the problematic nature of this, in that anonymity on Yik Yak “facilitated... the unveiling of deeply problematic perspectives” (Forestal and Phillips 2019, 576). Yik Yak was a social media application that fostered an environment for users to create their own discussion threads and view the discussions

of others. The problematic nature of anonymity outweighs the good that it can sometimes allow. While anonymity can foster an environment for individuals to come together to make collective change for the betterment of society, it at the same time allows for extremist groups to take advantage of these sites allowing for there to be zero accountability for their rhetoric online. Anonymity on social media can pose a threat to the public sphere and encourage greater engagement with extremist groups (Forestal and Phillips 2019). To substantiate this point Forestal and Phillips turn to an app called Yik Yak, which is an application that allows users to engage in anonymous messaging (Forestal and Phillips 2019). This is because the white supremacist accounts manage to lure people into websites of extremist groups, typically being disguised as a different type of site, on basis of anonymity makes it less costly for people.

### **Case Study: Former White Supremacist Breaks out of His Epistemic Bubble**

In order to further understand all that has been discussed, I turn to the case of Derek Black. He is a former leader of the white supremacist movement who denounced his white supremacist views in his early twenties after he went to college and came to realize through interactions with his peers that his previous beliefs were based on misinformation. In what follows, I show how Derek played a role in the normalization of white supremacist's talking points ingression into the mainstream, along with weaponizing social media in order to further this normalization.

Derek Black is a perfect example of someone who entered into an echo chamber. Growing up, Derek was homeschooled. When someone is homeschooled, it is an objective truth that they are not going to be as politically socialized as those who have gone to a public school, of course, unless they are able to participate in activities with other children from different backgrounds. This was not something that Derek experienced. He grew up in a household of



white supremacists and was continuously surrounded by those holding those same beliefs. He was effectively entrapped in his very own epistemic bubble. When Derek went to college, he was exposed to a diverse group of individuals and eventually denounced his previous white supremacist beliefs (Gross 2018). Derek had previously held strong disdain towards Jewish people and was a staunch Holocaust denier. At college, Jewish people became his peers, and he began attending weekly Shabbat dinners. Listening to their conversations and learning from them, he denounced his previous denial of the Holocaust. He stated that he wanted to become someone who based their “beliefs off of facts and evidence” (Gross 2018). Through holding discourse with others, Derek was able to break out of his epistemic bubble and realize that the previous white supremacist beliefs he had held were a product of the way he was politically socialized growing up. It was through such group discourse that Derek was able to come to realize that his beliefs were misinformed.

When Derek was younger, he led the children’s version of Stormfront called “KidsStormfront” which is an online domain similar to that of its predecessor. Derek had set up this website by himself to help stop the ‘white genocide’ and honor his ‘people’ (Gross 2018). His father is the former grand wizard of the KKK, Don Black, one of the most well-known figureheads of the modern-day klan who led the group for around eight years. Derek was heavily involved in the movement, along with setting up the website he also hosted a radio show and gave multiple speeches about white supremacist goals. He would attend white supremacist conferences with his father and David Duke. At these conferences, the talking points mainly revolved around the academia behind their ideologies, as a way to try and break away from the violent history that the KKK historically had been involved in. Derek said that the belief which drove his family and those around him was that “race was the defining feature of humanity”

(Gross 2018). He further explained that the white supremacists did not want anything bad to happen to those of different races. What they wanted was for every race to have their own space, and this would ultimately be better for everyone in the end. Derek elaborated that his father and other white supremacists claimed that the previous point was the differentiating point between white supremacy and white nationalism: what they wanted had nothing to do with superiority, but about the well-being of everyone. This is an example of white supremacists attempting to normalize their ideology into the mainstream by making their ideas seem more acceptable through their phrasing.

When Don Black set up Stormfront he set it up as a ‘white nationalist’ site, rather than white supremacist, making it appear less extreme, when in reality white nationalism is equally as morally unacceptable and racist as white supremacy (Gross 2018). As Derek grew up, he was heavily involved in this rebranding of the movement from white supremacist to white nationalist. For example, he realized that white supremacists could win elections as long as the term ‘white nationalist’ or ‘white supremacist’ was not used. To prove this, he would run in elections in his hometown as a Republican, using white supremacist talking points and would still get the majority of votes, though he was unable to take his seat due to his viewpoints (Gross 2018). These talking points included speaking “about what he believed to be the facts of racial science, immigration, and a declining white middle class” (Saslow 2018, 7). Before his denunciation of white supremacy, Derek believed that immigration from non-European countries was damaging and that there was massive support for thoughts as such. Another way he was able to normalize white supremacist talking points was through holding “training sessions” to teach people how they could talk about white supremacy without “freaking people out” and thus being able to capture an audience’s attention. Instead of saying “the white race is superior”, he would say,

“some people are just better than others, and it all comes down to race”. Some of the talking points included, “Don’t you think all of these Spanish signs on the highway are making things worse” and “Don’t you think political correctness is just not letting you talk about things that are real” (Gross 2018). The Spanish comment was a subtle way for Derek to appeal to those who did not want immigrants from non-European countries in the U.S. In speaking on political correctness, Derek was able to frame statements in such a way to make them subliminal enough that they were not outwardly racist, but still obvious enough for other white supremacists to understand the point that he was trying to get across. These talking points are what got him elected as a committeeman in his town’s local election in 2008. Derek wanted “to bring white nationalism into the center of American politics” (Gross 2018). Derek would also organize teams that essentially functioned as “online hit squads.” He trained to go to any article that was concerned with race and post talking points about how “anti-racism essentially means anti-white” (Gross 2018). For example, Derek explains that the group “developed things like the phrase white genocide, saying that all non-white immigration into white countries is white genocide and would talk about white pride” (Gross 2018). The group would publish these viewpoints on the internet in an attempt to “change the language” (Gross 2018). Changing the language refers to moving away from being affiliated with white supremacy and moving towards ‘white nationalism’ as a means of normalizing their ideologies.

Derek Black used social media to aid the ‘white nationalist’ movement and normalize their ideology into the mainstream. So, what can we learn from this account in terms of how white supremacists weaponize social media? Firstly, social media enables white supremacists to disseminate their ideology at an accelerated pace. Also, it allows for the normalization of white supremacist ideology into the mainstream. The case of Derek Black exemplifies how echo

chambers can be breached by individuals integrating into places that have a diversity of opinions, such as college campuses. Being exposed to a variety of opinions will lead an individual to have to support their previous beliefs with facts and evidence in order for them to continue to believe them. In the case of Derek, he was able to realize that his previously conceived beliefs had no factual evidence and were in fact a result of hatred and ignorance.

## **Conclusion**

While I have mainly discussed white supremacy in regard to the online world, these types of interactions have very real and harmful effects on real people. White supremacists utilizing the internet through social media has led to, and will continue to lead to violence, fear, and the perpetuation of racial terrorism (Daniels 2009). Ultimately, white supremacist groups have been able to utilize social media with the aim of spreading their beliefs to a larger audience, gaining new members, and spreading this information fast. What is wrong with this type of weaponization of social media is that it is not without harm. These online interactions that occur via social media translate into action taken in the physical world. Social media is attractive especially for white supremacist groups because they can normalize their cause due to the echo chamber nature of social media that is created through algorithms. Additionally, the ability to remain anonymous throughout social media and still engage with white supremacist sites, accounts and posts, remains to be a factor that adds to the ease of weaponization by these groups. All of this continues to immortalize the digital hate culture that social media continues to acquiesce.

## **Conclusion: How Can we Foster Productive Political Engagement in the Public Sphere?**

Social media is an inescapable part of our lives. The rapid development of technology and innovation which has made our ability to share information both faster and easier, has resulted in the need to find a way to deal with social media's many repercussions. As philosopher Michael Lynch prominently points out, "'Fake news' has simply become a label for news that one doesn't like" (Lynch 2019, 1). Deliberation is an important aspect of a democracy as it perpetuates collective decision making (Curato, et al., 2017). My thesis question is as follows: is social media, and the internet, a productive source for increasing participation in democracy, or do they present new challenges? Why does social media contribute to the creation of insulated groups where people constantly are reinforced with their preexisting beliefs and ideas? What are these challenges and how are we able to combat them in the New Age of social media? To answer these questions, in my first chapter I turned to an account of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. I combined this theory with an account of belief polarization in order to understand how social media contributes to the creation of insulated groups. Through this account, I showed that group deliberation that occurs on social media applications perpetuates belief polarization and acts as an echo chamber of the user's beliefs. I concluded that social media is constantly reinforcing beliefs, but not always challenging them, thus leaving political engagement online to be unproductive. In my second chapter, I presented a case study of Cambridge Analytica to show how social media can be weaponized by private companies with the goal of advancing their own political agendas at the expense of the electorate. This expense is in the form of a less educated electorate due to there not being a focus on truth preservation in politics. Another harm that has resulted from this is less tolerance towards opposing political

views. In my third chapter, I presented a case study on white supremacy in the United States to show the harm that extreme polarization and misinformation exacerbated through social media has caused. This particular case study also exemplifies how social media is able to be weaponized by extremist groups to disseminate their ideologies and become a breeding ground for extremism. Given this, I conclude that social media is not a productive platform for political deliberation. Social media further divides the electorate and has resulted in personal data being weaponized to advance political agendas, disseminate extremist ideologies, and promote an electorate of individuals who are overall less tolerant.

The nature of social media has led us to become less reflective on our reasons for why we believe, or do not believe, certain ideas. In recent years, there has been an increase in partisanship in the United States. The rise of partisanism and severe political polarization is a direct result of the increased usage of social media by the electorate. How can we have meaningful political engagement in the public sphere if social media is so damaging? What can be done about this? To combat the issues I have brought to light, one option is to have more regulation on social media because the problem of misinformation is clearly out of hand. However, this option brings up its own questions in regard to freedom of speech. It is not easy to regulate what can and cannot be said on social media because of freedom of speech protections. Instead, I argue that we can overcome the problem of political polarization only if we find ways to partake in group discussions that allow one to reason and critically analyze why you believe something to be true or false. Rather than a state-centered solution involving more regulation, we should, as citizens, all engage in political epistemology. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the notion of epistemic arrogance as explained by Michael Lynch to emphasize the importance of truth preservation in a democratic society. He defines epistemology as “the study of what we can

know, and how we can know it” (Lynch 2021). Lynch prioritizes this because it is important to value and “acquire knowledge as opposed to lies, fact rather than propaganda” (Lynch 2021). I am combining this account with Archon Fung’s description of minipublics in order to explain how the electorate can break out of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. As Lynch argues, we can move away from epistemic arrogance only through practicing epistemology and emphasizing truth preservation. I suggest that what Fung calls minipublics can offer a productive avenue for achieving just that.

It is important to point out that even if social media does not make for a sufficient platform for proper discourse on politics, it does make it easier for individuals to talk about and engage in politics. In a study done by the Pew Research Center, they found that 53% of adults living in the United States engaged with politics through social media in 2018 (Anderson, et al., 2018). The types of engagement included: taking part in groups that shared interest in issues/causes, encouraging others to take action on issues that are important to them, looking up information on local protests/rallies, changing profile pictures to show support for a cause, and using hashtags that relate to a political/social issue (Anderson, et al., 2018). All of these actions are valid forms of political engagement. For example, to show that someone is in support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Facebook provided a way for users to put a border around their profile picture; I myself engaged this way. When I saw that it was an option while scrolling through my Facebook feed, within seconds I was able to add a temporary profile border around my personal photo that said, “Black Lives Matter.” But the changing of my profile photo did not prompt political deliberation to occur regarding the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement. While this feature allowed me to feel as though I was participating politically, this engagement was not productive in improving my critical thinking or argumentative reasoning

skills. There was no knowledge gained or important topics discussed as a result. It merely showed my fellow followers that I was in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Nothing changed because of this act that I did, changing a profile picture is not enough. If I were to host a seminar about the systemic injustices Black people face in the United States, that would be a productive form of political engagement. Even if one of my followers commented on my change of profile photo, this type of engagement would not be nearly enough to have an impact on the viewpoints of myself or others.

A case study done in Chile regarding social media and its effect on political engagement found that social media in general and sharing your politics through social media both increase political participation (Halpern, et al., 2017). This research additionally concluded that those who use social media as a platform for politics find themselves empowered by being able to produce their own political content (Halpern, et al., 2017). The fact that taking part in politics through social media allows individuals to have their voices be heard and be empowered is extremely significant. However, even though social media can provide a way for individuals to have their opinions be heard, social media is set up in a way to simply boost an individual's engagement with the site. As a result, individuals are presented with thoughts and views that are like their own due to the algorithm social media platforms use, reinforcing the echo chamber (Nguyen, 2018). For example, "60 percent of news stories shared online have not even been read by the person sharing them" (Lynch 2019, 41). Sharing information online and reposting news stories allows one to *appear* as if they are engaging politically, when in reality they truly do not know what they have reposted most of the time. Because of examples as such, social media does not provide a productive platform where individuals in the public sphere can adequately adapt and respond to new information (Forestal 2017).



## Using Political Epistemology to Preserve the Truth and Desert Epistemic Arrogance

Michael Lynch well-expressed the current climate of the United States stating, “when millions of voters believe, despite all evidence, that the election was stolen, that vaccines are dangerous, and that a cabal of child predators rule the world from a pizza parlor’s basement, it becomes clear that we cannot afford to ignore how knowledge is formed and distorted” (Lynch 2021). I have shown how Social media has exacerbated the spread of misinformation. In what follows, I am going to argue that there needs to be more of a focus on epistemology on the part of ordinary citizens. Focusing on an emphasis of truth preservation is a way to remedy the harms that social media has perpetuated. Truth preservation involves using evidence, facts and reasoning to come to conclusions about what we believe to be true about this world. This is proposed as a defense against the misinformation and propaganda that has flooded social media as I have previously described. Due to the misinformation culture of the digital world, we now “care more about our convictions than about truth” (Lynch 2019, 37). Meaning, we care more about believing something because it is *us* that believes it, rather than caring about the foundations behind the belief and whether or not those foundations are true.

Epistemic arrogance has steered the electorate away from a focus on truth preservation and epistemology. Epistemic arrogance, as Lynch defines it, is “an unwillingness to learn from others arising from a distorted relationship with truth...those whose passionate intensity flows from the conviction that they have it all figured out; that they know it all...” (Lynch 2018, 284). This is the type of environment which I have shown social media to perpetuate in its users. Epistemic arrogance is dangerous to the way that we socialize politically because it reinforces the echo chambers that are made by social media, allowing for users to become complacent. If

one is epistemically arrogant, they do not engage with others who hold different beliefs. Lynch highlights this idea by stating:

The fact that someone thinks she can learn nothing from others (or new sources of information) does not all by itself make her epistemically arrogant. Nor is she arrogant just because she overestimates the epistemic worth or correctness of her view – although the arrogant almost always do. True arrogance is not based on a mistaken assessment of the correctness of one’s view, but on a self-delusion about *why* it is correct (Lynch 2018, 286).

The epistemically arrogant individual will hold their beliefs simply because they are theirs rather than because their beliefs are true (Lynch 2018). So, the epistemically arrogant believe that their beliefs are true because it is *their* belief. Epistemic arrogance is not productive to a democracy because those that are epistemically arrogant do not engage in the proper discourse that would benefit the public sphere. Engagement on social media exacerbates epistemic arrogance because it provides an individual with the ability to stay in an echo chamber where their beliefs are constantly validated. We have turned to “identity-protective reasoning” (Lynch 2019, 66). Instead of defending our points of view because we want to preserve the truth about our beliefs, we are defending them because convictions “have become so woven into our self narrative that they have become a part of our self-identity” (Lynch 2019, 59). When someone disagrees with our political beliefs, we take it as an attack on who we are as a person, Lynch asserts that “arrogance is the result of confusing our self-esteem with truth” (Lynch 2019, 74). We need to break away from identifying ourselves with our political beliefs, if we are unable to do that then we will not be able to break away from such epistemic arrogance. It is harmful for the electorate to be so emotionally involved in their reasons behind their beliefs because it interferes with the way that one can defend themselves, rather than reason one is using emotion.

Epistemic arrogance does not mean that an individual is arrogant about all views and towards all opposing views, rather they can be arrogant towards specific groups of people. For

example, “someone might be arrogant towards republicans or democrats, towards African-Americans or immigrants, towards atheists or religious believers” (Lynch 2018, 287). So, a white supremacist would be more arrogant towards democrats or those who identify themselves as liberals. It is important to note that, “just as someone can be arrogant towards a group, one can be arrogant because of a group” (Lynch 2018, 287).

Democracies are meant to be a type of public space where individuals have the opportunity to speak freely and engage with others without the fear of being oppressed. This form of government is also supposed to allow individuals the ability to speak freely without being reacted to with violence if they have differing views from the individuals that they are deliberating with (Lynch 2018). The idea of public common space has also often been referred to as the “public sphere.” The public sphere is a crucial element of democracy as it allows for the perpetuation of the exchange of ideas, also known as deliberation. In a deliberative democracy, in which all individuals are free to express their opinions and exchange ideas with one another, the psychological attitude of epistemic arrogance poses a major threat. Such unwillingness to learn from others is what poses a threat to democracy. An example of such arrogance is highlighted by Jessie Daniels in which she argues that, “white supremacy online is founded in an epistemology of ignorance in which whites who adopt the white racial frame are unable to see the worlds they have created and their privileged position within it but instead configure themselves as victims” (Daniels 2009, 20). When individuals are constantly seeing information that validates their already formed beliefs, they become further entrapped in an echo chamber. Due to the algorithms utilized by social media sites this type of environment is fostered, ultimately allowing for epistemic arrogance to be cultivated and continued.

Those who practice epistemic humility provide productive conversations in our public sphere, they should be looked towards as an example of how we should interact during political discourse. Epistemic humility is what Lynch discusses as the opposite to epistemic arrogance (Lynch 2018). Epistemic humility is when an individual shows a willingness to engage in conversations with others. Those with epistemic humility will not only be willing to engage with others, but they will also have a desire to learn from individuals with beliefs contrary to their own. Additionally, they will change their beliefs if through deliberation with others they come to realize that their beliefs were uninformed or incorrect; they have a legitimate interest in improving their epistemic state (Lynch 2019). Or, as Nguyen would say, they are breaking out of their epistemic bubble (Nguyen 2018). Those with epistemic humility are the individuals that are the most productive to a democracy. This is because they allow for the truest form of a democracy to take place in the public sphere. Epistemic humility allows for proper public discourse to take place, the free-flowing exchange of ideas and information is an extremely important element of democracy.

It would be an easy way out for us to decide that we will simply not engage with those who have immoral beliefs, such as white supremacy. But, in order to have a true deliberative democracy, we must engage with individuals that hold immoral or offensive beliefs. If we are to not engage in such discourse, the public sphere would suffer dramatically. It is important to have uncomfortable conversations with those who hold immoral beliefs. It might be the case that some of those individuals hold those seemingly offensive beliefs because of the way that they have been socialized politically, leaving them to be in an epistemic bubble. As I have shown, political socialization plays a critical role in the placement of an individual into an epistemic bubble. Within an epistemic bubble, the individual is simply leaving out information by accident, or

omission, not actively discrediting the information (Nguyen 2018, 6). If we are purposefully leaving individuals out of the conversation because they have immoral beliefs, how are they supposed to learn that those beliefs are wrong? They must be part of our deliberation in order to form a more productive society as a whole. Your engagement with an individual who has offensive or immoral beliefs might just break them out of their epistemic bubble.

It could also be argued that we should not engage in discourse with individuals that hold immoral or offensive beliefs because these individuals are trying to perpetuate the spread of false information. In such a case, one would have reason to not want to engage with them because of the negative impact of their false rhetoric. This is because engaging with them would give them more of a platform and audience to which they could spread their ideas to. Ultimately, one could argue that this type of discourse and engagement with this type of individual is extremely harmful to the public sphere. However, I would like to argue that engaging with these individuals might actually enlighten them, as well as the public. If you know that they are spreading false information you would have the ability to tell the public through further discourse. Therefore, the electorate would know that all of the information that is circulating the public sphere is not always accurate. Additionally, it would force individuals to engage in their own process of fact-checking. Increasing fact-checking would ultimately better the public sphere as it would discourage the spread of misinformation. Specifically, if it is known that more individuals are fact-checking information we might become less likely to create and promote false information.

If we refuse to engage with those that hold offensive beliefs, then we would be acting as someone who is epistemically arrogant. It would be arrogant because we would be having the psychological attitude that our beliefs are right, and their beliefs are wrong. Also, it is epistemically arrogant because you would be unwilling to learn from them just because they

have offensive beliefs. What is offensive to you might not be offensive to someone else, which is why it is extremely important to engage with others that hold different beliefs from yours. This is because you are implying that your beliefs are not offensive and theirs are, just for the sake of your beliefs being right because you hold them. Ultimately, group discourse is a way for the electorate to become well informed citizens. These citizens would optimally be able to, on their own, critically think and reason, thus distinguishing between beliefs that are supported by factual evidence and beliefs which are misinformation spread through political propaganda. There are objective truths in the world, and we can find it “by pursuing evidence that supplies us with reasons for belief” (Lynch 2019, 166). What needs to be stressed is reasoning and evidence to support our beliefs and as long as we utilize those tools, we are taking a step in the right direction.

### **The Significance of Group Discourse**

Given the undeniable fact that epistemic arrogance is at an all-time high in the United States, we should turn to group discourse in order to combat this fault of society. In an experiment done by the Social Science Research Institute at Åbo Akademi University, researchers tested modality and the importance of it in regard to group polarization. To do this they had the participants of the experiment partake in two types of group discussion. One mode would be face-to-face and the other group would partake in an online discussion. In this experiment, the individuals were placed into their discussion groups based on what particular baseline views they had in common (Strandberg, et al., 2019). From this study, they found that group polarization occurs when like-minded individuals partake in a discussion where there are no rules and facilitation put in place. They concluded from their data that when individuals discuss politics in “like-minded enclaves, especially on the internet” group polarization occurs

(Strandberg, et al., 2019, 52). To combat this, researchers suggest that discussion rules and facilitation should be put in place in order to achieve proper, balanced discourse and conversation about politics. Optimally, it would be a space where reflection about the ideas being talked about is available (Strandberg, et al., 2019). On popular social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, there are no sufficient rules/facilitation to ensure that individuals are not being polarized. The rules and facilitation that the study implemented were deliberative norms including “inclusion, equality of discussion, reciprocity, reasoned justification, reflection, sincerity and respect” (Strandberg, et al., 2019, 42). The study then concluded that these norms help to alleviate group polarization from occurring (Strandberg, et al., 2019). This lack of facilitation is something that damages the deliberation that occurs in the public sphere.

In order to break out of these echo chambers and to stop the perpetuation of belief polarization through social media there needs to be support for group discussions to be held. The sort of group discussions that are optimal for breaking out of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are those that take place between a small group of individuals who come from different backgrounds and hold different opinions. These discussions need to be among individuals with conflicting beliefs. The reason being, it has been shown that group interaction forces an individual’s reasoning mechanism to function at its best capacity through debating with others and eventually coming to form true beliefs through reasoning. To support the claim that the benefit of group discussion is its effect on individuals breaking out of echo chambers, I will turn to Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber in their essay, “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory.” Mercier and Sperber write, “reasoning based on the idea that the primary function which it evolved is the production and evaluation of arguments in communication” (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 58). What they are arguing here is that the primary

function of reasoning is to evaluate arguments in order to form true beliefs and come to more accurate conclusions. They explain that one of the most effective ways that truth conclusions are made is through small group discussions where individuals are forced to defend their beliefs and hear out ones that are contrary to their own. Individuals can have some knowledge that they have come to a conclusion but are not fully aware of the process to which they came to that conclusion (Mercier and Sperber 2011). There needs to be an emphasis on how and why we come to conclusions about certain political topics. For example, if someone says, “abortion is wrong because I disagree with it,” that is not a valid reason. Rather than focusing on conclusions, we should focus on how we get to those conclusions. It is perfectly acceptable for someone to think that abortion is wrong, that is their opinion. But in order for it to be a valid argument, they need to back up their conclusion with reasoning, with facts rather than beliefs. Individuals are generating “intuitive beliefs; that is, beliefs held without awareness of reasons to hold them” (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 58). This is what is happening to individuals when they interact on social media applications. In that, an individual will be quick to dislike a post, or unfollow someone who has a different core set of political beliefs without having a legitimate or substantial reason as to why they are disagreeing.

Social media allows for individuals to be lazy with their reasoning because it is not in-person and they are not being questioned of their beliefs. Lynch states, “the primary function of our practice of sharing content online is to express our emotional attitudes...when it comes to news stories, we often share them both to display our outrage... and to induce outrage in others” (Lynch 2019, 43). Most of the time users are not sharing posts online to spark political debate, they do it to express how they *feel* about a particular topic. Even if users are questioned over the internet, they do not have to engage the questioning with an answer. Conversations online do not



hold us to the same ideal conversation standards as in-person conversations do. These being: responding using examples or reasoning, a mutual respect for others' opinions, and listening to alternative facts and reasoning. Engaging in discussions online oftentimes does little to change someone's beliefs and enlighten them with logical thinking and reasoning. Instead, as I have shown, social media reinforces beliefs because an individual is most likely going to associate with those online who hold similar beliefs to their own. In order to form true beliefs, some level of reasoning must occur. The only time proper reasoning is done when it comes to political discussion, is when one is in an argumentative situation. Ultimately, social media does not allow for this sort of argumentative reasoning to occur.

An individual that is involved in an argumentative circumstance is going to be motivated to use their reasoning skills to their full potential, as well as more accurately. Social media does not account for this; what is perpetuated through social media, however, is the furtherance of belief polarization. Individuals can filter who they are following, along with what posts they want to see. As discussed earlier, algorithms are used to boost user engagement, thus presenting the user with more posts and users that share similar beliefs as their own, subsequently trapping them in an echo chamber. Users are not only being restricted by who they choose to follow, but also by the social media sites that ultimately hinder the individual's ability to see certain information. Debates are what is necessary in order to produce good and thoughtful reasoning. Mercier and Sperber cite an experiment using the Wason selection task, which is a logic puzzle. This ultimately showed that the performance for participants concluding correct answers on their own was only 10%, while when put into groups the percentage of correctness was 80%. It was then concluded that "debates are essential to any improvement of performance in group settings" (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 63). I agree with this, given the evidence shown in my other chapters

about how social media continues to prove to not be a platform for meaningful debate and continues to perpetuate more false beliefs and belief polarization in individuals. In a group setting where all participants agree on an opinion, they will find different reasons as to why they support that opinion, thus reinforcing their belief. Furthermore, “these arguments will not be critically examined, let alone refuted, thus providing other group members with additional reasons to hold that view. The result should be a strengthening of the opinions held by the group” (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 63). In a group setting where individuals hold the same set of core beliefs it falsely reinforces those beliefs by reason of the individuals not critically examining their claims since everyone agrees. There must be discourse held between individuals who hold different beliefs because it forces the individual to come up with reasons to support what they believe. This process can also lead one to reconsider their thoughts and listen to what the other person has to say. All of this evidence displays that group discussions that include individuals who hold differing beliefs are the most optimal setting in producing truth conclusions. The reason for this is that they have a higher chance of breaking an individual out of their echo chamber, whereas turning to solely social media to engage in political discussions furthers the echo chamber.

### **Minipublics as a Solution**

Minipublics are a way to perpetuate group discussions to have a meaningful impact on the type of deliberation that takes place in the public sphere. These minipublics are great sources for perpetuating meaningful public opinion through face-to-face deliberation. Minipublics can improve the public sphere, as they allow for deliberation and civic engagement to occur. They are spaces that allow the citizen to learn and debate about public issues through in-person, face-to-face conversation (Fung 2003). Using minipublics to facilitate meaningful dialogue among

those that reside in the United States would ultimately enhance the public sphere and lead us to a more educated and tolerant electorate. Not only would engaging in minipublics increase thoughtful deliberation in a democracy, but they would also allow citizens “...to monitor potentially corrupt or irresponsible officials” (Fung 2003, 343). Holding public officials accountable would benefit the public sphere. It would minimize the number of corrupt politicians that we have in political office. This is because the electorate would become more aware of policy decisions that affect them, adding more importance to the individual vote. The more politically aware that a citizen is, the more likely they are to demand transparency from elected officials (Fung 2003). Philosopher Leo Zaibert eloquently and accurately explains the lack of truth preservation from United States politicians. Zaibert states, “politicians of all stripes have always played fast and loose with the truth; they can properly be seen as the intellectual descendants of the sophists: they do not value truth as such; what they value is winning elections” (Zaibert 2021, 6). The first step to holding elected officials accountable is to be knowledgeable about the policy decisions they are making.

There are four “visions” for minipublics that Fung describes. The first vision of a minipublic “is an *educative forum* that aims to create nearly ideal conditions for citizens to form, articulate, and refine opinions about particular public issues through conversations with one another” (Fung 2003, 340). It is fine to discuss your opinions with those who hold similar beliefs, however, these should not be the only people you engage with. Alongside conversing with friends and family that hold similar beliefs, there needs to be an emphasis on engaging with those who come from different backgrounds and hold different beliefs. These educative forum minipublics would reflect “many kinds of background inequalities—wealth, gender, education, position, control over the means of communication and production” (Fung 2003, 340).

Conversations as such “would dramatically improve the quality of their public opinion” (Fung 2003, 341). Lynch says, “democracies need their citizens to have convictions, for an apathetic electorate is no electorate at all. Yet democracies also need their citizens to listen to one another’s convictions, to engage in political give-and-take” (Lynch 2019, 14). Such deliberation can take place between citizens through minipublics, they provide a way for the electorate to engage with their own personal ideas, as well as the ideas of others, in order to reason and defend their beliefs. An educative forum would allow for diverse opinions and arguments to be shared and listened to, mainly focusing on further enhancing the overall quality of the opinions we hold (Fung 2003).

The second vision of a minipublic is “the *participatory advisory panel* because it aims not only to improve the quality of opinion, but also to align public politics with considered preferences” (Fung 2003, 341). This version of a minipublic takes the deliberation a step further and “develop linkages to economic or state decision-makers to transmit preferences after they have been appropriately articulated and combined into a social choice” (Fung 2003, 341). These panels make sure to maintain what is in the best interest of the public and act as a mediator between those who are governed and the government. Fung uses the “budget-setting process in Washington, D.C.” as an example of such a participatory advisory panel (Fung 2003, 341). The third minipublic is “*participatory problem-solving collaboration*...envisioning a continuous and symbiotic relationship between the state and public sphere aimed at solving particular collective problems such as environmental degradation, failing schools, or unsafe streets” (Fung 2003, 341). This third version of a minipublic utilizes the effectiveness of citizens and government officials working together to solve the problems that face their communities. Lastly, the fourth minipublic is “*participatory democratic governance*” which “seeks to incorporate direct citizen

voices into the determination of policy agendas” (Fung 2003, 342). Directly involving the voices of citizens enhances policymaking by ensuring that the government is listening to those of all backgrounds and is not just doing what is best for the “wealthy and socially advantaged sections of the polity” (Fung 2003, 342).

The most effective way to have a high involvement in such minipublics is through individuals volunteering themselves to be a part of them (Fung 2003). However, those that are able to volunteer such time tend to be those that come from a wealthy and privileged background. In order to diversify the individuals who are engaging in the minipublics there will need to be “structural incentives for low-status and low-income citizens to participate” (Fung 2003, 342). Deliberation is not meant for one part of society, it is meant for everyone (Curato, et al., 2017). This is a critical aspect of minipublics, they allow for everyone, of all backgrounds to participate. It is necessary to provide those of lower socioeconomic status with incentives to participate because their input and reasoning is just as important to consider. Minipublics would enhance the overall education level of all citizens. In this way, it not only provides a remedy for the harms social media has caused, but also a remedy for the inherent education disadvantages of those who have a lower socioeconomic status. A more educated electorate would benefit democracy tremendously. More education on policy concerns and knowing the reasoning behind certain positions would allow for all citizens to see with clarity how public policy decisions would affect them directly. A lot of the time, citizens can become blinded by the particular language and rhetoric that politicians use. Engaging in minipublics would give all citizens the background needed to reason through a politician’s rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Instead of advocating for there to be institutional change to remedy the detrimental effects social media has exacerbated, as an electorate, we should shift our focus to political epistemology. A focus on epistemology would aid in remedying the various issues social media has been proven to cause. If we are to value reasoning and how and why we come to hold our political beliefs, then the public sphere would become overall more educated and have more of a tolerance to opposing viewpoints. As it stands now, the United States is extremely polarized in its beliefs, which has led to a rise in extremism. Face-to-face deliberation about politics will lead to an overall more educated electorate. Fostering an environment where all voices can be heard, listened to, and reacted to is of the utmost importance in ensuring the preservation of true beliefs. Such beliefs need to be founded upon facts, evidence and reasoning. We cannot rid ourselves of social media and we should not, for social media brings attention to certain issues, as we have seen from the Black Lives Matter movement. It was through online activism that the murderers of George Floyd were brought to be tried for his unjust murder. The public engaged in political protests which influenced the arrest of those particular officers. If it was not for the rapid spread of the video footage of Floyd's unlawful death via social media, those police officers might have not been brought to justice. It is no doubt that social media played a critical role spreading awareness of this injustice. Social media does allow for users to have a platform to spread information about such injustices. However, such capability becomes harmful when political actors, government officials, and private companies weaponize social media algorithms to spread misinformation and political propaganda. In regard to *how* we come to form our political positions we should not be basing them off of a 140-character post from Twitter, or a rant on Facebook. It is crucial for the preservation of our democracy for us, as citizens, to ask questions

about where information is coming from. Social media has led us astray from valuing objective facts about politics. Change can be fostered through the collective decision to focus on knowledge and truth-preservation.

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