

Elizabeth Melillo
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#republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media

Cass Sunstein's "#republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media" states that many Americans now prefer to receive their news from the Internet because it provides a different kind of news consumption than traditional media. Newspapers supply readers with all kinds of articles whereas Facebook allows users to personalize their news. Sunstein argues that this customization and filtration have created self-insulation, polarization and fragmentation and that these risks can diminish individual freedom and self-government.

Social media let people create their own world using the "Daily Me," the idea that people can design their own communication package by choosing exactly what they want to see. Since too much information can overwhelm people, they often make news consumption more bearable by following like-minded people and filtering out unwanted materials on their newsfeeds to see only what they agree with. Only being exposed to one viewpoint forms "thousands of information cocoons" that can drastically change someone's view of the world (118). Furthermore, many social media platforms use algorithms to learn users' likes and dislikes. By placing certain information at the top of someone's newsfeed, social media essentially tell users what they should focus on and what is important. This demonstrates "Facebook's potential power to alter our news consumption" (123).

"When society makes it easy for people to wall themselves off from others, there are serious risks for the people involved and society as a whole" (136). Social media can either bring people together or polarize them by creating two opposite sides on a social topic (#AllLivesMatter opposed #BlackLivesMatter). If people stand firm in their ideas and believe they already know the truth, they are less likely to listen to opposing ideas. People who strongly

equate their beliefs to their identity are also less likely to be swayed by contrary arguments. This makes it difficult for people with opposing viewpoints to reach an understanding.

Sunstein believes people should share an abundance of common experiences to be able to relate to each other. Shared experiences have the power to unite people and erase differences between them. They make it easier to interact with others and form a “social glue” that strengthens unity (143). Moreover, social media allow users to find other people with similar interests, thus giving users shared experiences without ever physically meeting each other.

In addition to shared experiences, there are several other ways to improve the communications market to fix the problems that personalization has created. First, Sunstein advises people to always self-regulate to ensure they are speaking the whole truth and giving all sides of the story. He also urges society to view the impact of social media on people as citizens, not consumers. In addition, Sunstein recommends the creation of deliberative domains, websites specifically designed for people to come to and civilly discuss controversial topics. Finally, Sunstein proposes the addition of an “Opposing Viewpoint” button on Facebook to give users the chance to see content with completely different viewpoints. Having a better understanding of how “our own choices can limit or expand our freedom” might help society begin to see the dangers of excessive customization (166).

In conclusion, “the Daily Me is best understood as a kind of nightmare” (253). A completely specialized speech market decreases individual freedom, makes understanding each other far more difficult and creates polarization and fragmentation. In order for society to have a well-functioning system of free expression, people must see materials they normally would not pick for themselves; hearing different perspectives helps people understand all sides of a topic. Until society changes and decreases its highly customized life, “there can be no assurance of freedom in a system committed to the Daily Me” (58).