

How can we be different and still get along? Polarisation in a digital age

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Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	3
<i>How can we be different and still get along?</i>	4
<i>Introduction</i>	6
The Internet and the Information Environment	11
Polarisation and Consensus	12
<i>Chapter One: The Old Way: Rationality is Neutral</i>	16
Enlightenment Thinkers.....	16
Deliberative Democracy	17
The Third Way	18
<i>Chapter Two: The Old Way: Defining Polarisation</i>	19
<i>Chapter Three: The New Way: Identity, Language and Power</i>	22
Identity	22
Language.....	24
Power.....	25
<i>Chapter Four: Let's Agree to Disagree</i>	27
Mutual Recognition	27
Confidence	30
Respect	30
Esteem	31
<i>Chapter Five: Long Live Democracy</i>	32
What does 'design' mean in this context?.....	32
The crisis of meaning and translative technologies	32
Put the human before the message	33
Map agenda setting and new definitions	33
<i>Conclusion</i>	34

Preface

About 2 years ago, I entertained the idea of writing a book. I wanted it to be on polarisation, which I had dedicated a lot of time to researching and being an activist in. I wrote an outline, which can be found here, and thought I would just need another 15,000 words to turn it into full manuscript. I spoke with many agents, and a couple of publishers, but no one thought it was commercially viable for publication.

This draft was finished in the summer of 2019. Since then, it's been lying dormant in my hard drive. I considered rewriting it as a think-tank report, which would involve using lots of bright colours and icons. I was unable to secure any sort of grant for that. So now, my efforts have turned to creating a for-profit tech ethics business which can then fund the activities of a philosophical democratic think tank. So, this particular report has been waylaid.

Despite my inability to secure funding, this document has been sent to a number of people. I've got so much positive feedback from it, that I realised I could just publish it as it is. Please read it critically - do not believe everything you read - but also sympathetically – tell me about any errors, but please be kind about it. This is also intended as a book proposal, which is why some sections are more fleshed out than others. And it was written last year, so there is no mention of Covid-19 (bar this one), and yet there is reference to the Change UK party (which no longer exists).

There is so much else that I would love to do on this subject – I really would love to see more work done on translative technologies for instance, as well as a more nuanced approach to polarisation in technical sector. If you would like to fund the Echo Chamber Club, please get in contact.

If you intend on citing/referring to this work:

Alice Thwaite (2020), How can we be different and still get along, The Echo Chamber Club

It seems gratuitous to have an acknowledgement section if I'm just publishing a book proposal online, but I would like to mention my father, Richard Thwaite, who died in February 2020. He was a great supporter of my work. In many ways we were different, in more ways we were the same. We got along very well.

Alice Thwaite
Founder, Hattusia and the Echo Chamber Club
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How Can We Be Different and Still Get Along?

Every week, for 18 months, I sought out opinions with which I disagreed. I looked for Putin sympathisers, Trump fans, Brexiteers, safe-space advocates, no-platformers, climate change deniers and anti-immigration campaigners. Some of the ideas I found made me feel very uncomfortable. But I always tried to dig deeper, to understand exactly why someone would make those claims. What are the value systems they advocated? What did they not like about my point of view?

The aim was always to send my findings to my subscribers. They were about 3,000 people who, like me, were pro-remain and anti-Trump, and they wanted to find a way to connect with different groups. We had an underlying belief. No one wakes up and tries to be a bad person. Everyone is trying to do their best. We just have different ways of getting there.

“The system is failing”, warned Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, as he observed his creation’s impact on society.¹ Amongst fake news, net neutrality and political advertising, he cited increasing polarisation as an area for concern, and one that social media platforms are responsible for. A democracy with a digital public sphere is a poisonous place, where citizens cannot employ rational debate to resolve their differences, and all conversation is hateful and churlish.

Western communities appear plagued with conflict and divisions; the Leavers and Remainers, Momentum and moderates, 'deplorables' and 'the resistance'. It's said that we're more polarized and fractured than ever before. This all makes politics very raw. Some state that we no longer recognize the countries that we grew up in. We're afraid about the future and we're fearful of our fellow citizens.

But what if this panic is unwarranted? What if the divisions we see in society are a mark of ignored groups becoming empowered? What if conflict is the solution, and not the problem?

To get the root of this issue, we have to understand why we believe that polarisation is so bad. What is the difference between disagreement, difference and polarisation? How is disagreement supposed to function in a democracy? Once we've looked at the old way of conceptualising agreement, then we can start to rebuild ideas around democracy and dissent. What frameworks can we use? How can we start to solve the new problems of living in a multi-cultural and pluralist society?

This book is about positive conflict. It looks to show why politics in a digital age is more vibrant and inclusive than ever before. Since conflict is an unavoidable part of democracies, this book will look to summarise how we can manage conflict well, instead of trying to eliminate it. My aim is to make you excited about the democracy's future, and offer some

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/15/tim-berners-lee-world-wide-web-net-neutrality>

Hattusia

suggestions about how we manage the most diverse public sphere that Western democracy has ever seen.

Here is how to build a future we can get excited about.

Introduction

Are you scared about the future of democracy? If the answer is yes, you are not alone.

Every time I check social media, watch the news or read an article, panicked voices surface left, right and centre. “We can’t let the Brexiteers divide our country” frantically tweets MP Chuka Umanna². Beto O’Rourke spoke of “a time of division” as he conceded to Ted Cruz during the Senate campaign³. “We are in crisis, the population should be together but we are divided” said a Brazilian during the 2018 election.⁴⁵ This rhetoric is not confined to heavy news programmes. Even when you escape to light hearted entertainment shows you hear Greg James, the Radio 1 breakfast presenter, talk about the terrible state of the world⁶, or Jack Whitehall on Netflix reference our “divisive times”⁷.

The assertion that Western society is polarised is now so accepted that no one dares challenge it. But that is exactly what this book seeks to do. Not only do I look to challenge the idea that we are more polarised than ever before, I’ll explain why polarisation, in and of itself, is no bad thing. Conflict is at the heart of democracy. It ensures our democracies are vibrant, introspective and progressive. But we do need to get more comfortable with it.

Is this a book for you? Well here is the gist of my argument. Society currently believes that conflict is bad because it makes consensus very difficult. And some believe that consensus is important because it leads to a stable government. However, I believe this approach is wrong. Progression comes from innovative ideas. It comes from dissent and protesting the status quo. It requires people who can think externally to the rules that society gives them. It requires women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Marsha P. Johnston to say that societies’ definitions are wrong and men like Martin Luther King to set new agendas. This can only be achieved through conflict. But it needs to be conflict that is managed well. And I believe there is a way of managing that conflict through a well-trodden theory called ‘recognition’. If this is an area which interests you, whether in your personal life, or in your democratic life, then this will be a good book for you to read.

And why me? Why would you listen to what I have to say on the subject? It’s always the first question I ask when I pick up a new book, especially if I haven’t come across the author before. I want to know what kind of identity and credibility this person actually has.

² <https://twitter.com/ChukaUmunna/status/1056902046065016835>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-46120996/beto-country-s-been-as-polarised-as-i-can-remember-it>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/political-polarisation-intensifies-brazil-elections-181001070248808.html>

⁵ I’ll have to update this and make it relevant for the release date of the book – I’ll also ensure that the people I reference are a little more diverse than what I currently have here

⁶ Heard on Radio 1 29th October 2018

⁷ Jack Whitehall: Travels With My Father

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Like many journeys in real life it's difficult to find an obvious 'start-date' in my exploration to understand conflict in a democracy. You could say it was in September 2016, when I moved to Berlin to develop a social project called 'The Echo Chamber Club'. I quit my job and moved out of London, the terribly expensive city I was born in, to try and help "unite our country". My approach was to seek ideas and articles that sat outside of my own 'echo chamber' and I would send a weekly newsletter of my findings to a group of subscribers.

You might be familiar with the phrase 'echo chamber', or perhaps its sister concept called a 'filter bubble'. In late 2016, these words were used to try and make sense of why the establishment failed to predict the presidential election of the USA and the Brexit referendum in the UK. Many social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google have algorithms which dictate the order and the content of the posts you see on your news feeds. Proponents of echo chamber theories hypothesised that the purpose of these algorithms is to keep you on their website. That way you would make the platforms more money because you literally viewed more advertising. Advocates of echo chamber theory stated that these algorithms encouraged you to only see information that you liked and supported your own view. This created a very biased information environment which would mean that you couldn't access points of view that came from different groups, or points of view that you didn't like or disagreed with.

My take on echo chambers concerned elites⁸. If elites are sheltered from the lives and views of under privileged members of society, and only see information which corroborates their own worldview, then they do not have enough information to do their job fairly. This applies to those who are directly involved in politics, but also those who are leaders in business and the public sector.

I definitely sit in the elite group. I've had an excellent education, I live in London and I can't imagine a situation where I wouldn't have a roof over my head, or food to eat. So, the idea was that if I could identify the views that were common in my 'echo chamber' and then try to find anything that was different, or that directly contradicted these views, then perhaps I could help myself and others like me to pierce the filter bubble. Perhaps this work could contribute towards a fairer and more equal society.

That was my positioning. However, much of the conversation about echo chambers did not concern the elite. Instead commentators looked to blame those that had opted for Trump and for Brexit. The view was that these voter's behaviour was completely irrational, and the only way they could have decided to support these movements, is because they did not have enough information. A Clinton voter made a rational decision, whereas a Trump supporter had not. I had founded the Echo Chamber Club previous to Trump's election, so I was contacted by a few journalists for commentary. And every single one of them asked a particular question. "Why are you doing this for us? Surely it's the conservatives who need this?"

⁸ Elite is defined as a group or class of people seen as having the most power and influence in a society. This is a very vague term and I don't really want to go too into it here.

My response was in three parts. Firstly, I'm not part of the 'conservative echo chamber'⁹. I wouldn't be able to authentically communicate with this group of people, because I do not fully understand what they think in the first place. Secondly, I learned a long time ago that it is very hard to change other people, and it is much easier to change yourself. By appealing to people who think like me, I could hopefully learn how I can become a more accommodating and tolerant person. And finally, even if conservatives did need a service like the Echo Chamber Club, it didn't mean that my group of liberal and progressive elites did not. Everyone benefits from trying to understand different worldviews. I also didn't want the Echo Chamber Club to be a newsletter which just trilled out conservative media. There are so many issues that get very little attention that have huge social costs for minority groups. Why would I restrict myself to the left-right divide?

But to put the start date on 14th September 2016 is fairly arbitrary. Since I was a teenager I'd been interested in the concept of truth. At university I'd been the editor for an anarchist (and in many ways ill-informed) termly magazine which helped me understand how information is constructed. After my undergraduate, I worked as a publisher producing B2B special reports distributed in *The Times* newspaper. Here I watched our commissioning strategy change to attract more views on our digital platforms. After a few years I moved to a start-up which provided software to help a user create their own social media algorithms. Wouldn't it be great if the user was in complete control of their news feeds? It was here that I learned why social media algorithms were so successful. It was difficult to persuade users to put in a bit more effort to control their information environment. Throughout history we've consumed news passively, we pick up the newspaper, we listen to the radio, we switch on the news and then news is fed to us. It's a high cognitive load to start making all these editorial choices for yourself.

As the Brexit debate took hold of the UK in 2016, I became more convinced that algorithms may be biasing my outlook. As I listened to my friends rant about the importance of the EU over dinner, drinks and at 3am stumbling drunk back home, it seemed that my peer group were not aware that we actually might leave the EU. But the polls stated that at least 30% of the country were in favour of Brexit. But I couldn't find these views anywhere. And why not?

Given that none of my peer group were really using advanced software to access different opinions, I started to experiment with other business models that could bust you out of your filter bubble.

In May 2016 I visited a friend who was studying at business school abroad. One afternoon I was a bit stuck for what to do, so she invited me to one of her lectures. This one was on 'Blue Ocean Strategy'. The idea is that a business takes an existing format, changes one thing, and then manages to create a new market for an old product. For example, a circus is quite an old-fashioned form of entertainment. It's aimed at families, and generally has

⁹ Whatever that means

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animals and clowns as the main attractions. The lecturer compared a traditional circus with Cirque de Soleil. If you remove the clowns and add stunning acrobats and operatic music, then you could attract an audience who would never actually go to a 'normal' circus. By inverting what a circus should do, the organisers created a new kind of spectacle.

This lecture got me thinking about the media industry. Typically, a media brand takes a specific community and produces content which represents their views and beliefs. For example, The Economist was founded in 1843 by the banker and businessman James Wilson, to repeal the Corn Laws and campaign for free trade. To this day, the Economist stands for open trade and a liberal democracy. The Daily Mail was founded in 1896 to be a newspaper for busy working people. In contrast to other broadsheets, the articles were short and punchy, with a clear editorial stance that put the news into context.¹⁰ It clearly still has a similar mission.

So, what if I took a specific community and curated content which didn't represent their views and beliefs? Could this be a way to earn a living?

I'd heard of some successful media businesses which distributed their content over email. The main one was called 'The Skimm'. They created a round-up of the news that day, so subscribers could easily catch up on what was going on. With over 2 million subscribers, they made money through advertising and partnerships. I liked the idea of email distribution because I was so apprehensive of the algorithms of the major tech companies. Any social enterprise or business should be robust, and I'd heard so many stories of businesses going under with a product update or an algorithm change by Apple, Google or Facebook.

So, the Echo Chamber Club (ECC) became a weekly newsletter, aimed at those who were shocked by the election of Donald Trump and the outcome of the Brexit referendum, to help them access and understand different worldviews. And I draw on much of this experience for this book. My initial thoughts about echo chambers were completely disproved through the course working on the ECC. And yet, some assumptions I'd made turned out to be at the heart of my new conceptualisation of disagreement.

To begin with, I thought that the newsletter would simply be a curation of different articles. My idea was to let other voices shine through as much as possible. I didn't want to take up the role of a journalist and interview others. This would mean that I was presenting another view through my eyes, instead of adopting the language and the arguments that they themselves used. A subscriber got value from the ECC because it helped them save time, not because you couldn't actually find this information yourself elsewhere. I would find and define a topic, and then select the best contrarian articles that articulated a different view.

However, as time went on and the subscriber base grew, I realised that this initial strategy was too simple. For example, I had to justify why the topic was chosen in the first place. To do this I created my own media monitoring system. I asked my subscribers which media

¹⁰ From Grub Street to Fleet Street by Bob Clarke

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sources they trusted, and some basic questions about their ideology. From this I learned the comparative diversity of the so called homogenous ‘metropolitan elite’. Some voted Green, some Liberal Democrat, some donated to the Conservatives and some supported Labour. I bet some would vote for the new Change UK party.¹¹ They read from a variety of sources, and many of these were offline. However, there were some similarities. The majority trusted the BBC and the Guardian, and most went straight to news websites to get their news in the morning, others went to social media. All¹² were against Brexit and were horrified by the election of Donald Trump. Armed with this information I documented the front pages of all major news outlets in the UK, and a couple in America. I also created a list of influencers who I believed represented the opinions of my subscribers. Using an application called ‘Nuzzel’¹³, I found which articles were most shared amongst this group of influencers on Twitter.

Each week, I surfaced a news story where there was a broad consensus on both its relevancy, and the attitude towards it. For example, my subscribers were generally anti-war, so I tried to find arguments in favour of war. They loved comedy shows like *Have I Got News For You* and *Saturday Night Live*. So, I tried to find articles which compared alt-right humour with our liberal humour. My subscribers were unfamiliar with caste discrimination, so I found articles which would highlight the problem. However, given the diversity of the base, I had to explain why the topic was chosen to my subscribers. Through my transparency, the subscribers were able to choose whether this newsletter was relevant for them.

I also realised that there were many different ways to have views that sat outside of a particular group. You can see below the distinct categories I developed.¹⁴

<p>Sherpa Tenzing content</p>  <p>The stories you won't find on your news feed unless you have a guide.</p>	<p>Explore the dark side of the moon</p>  <p>An alternative view on a prevalent news story that week.</p>	<p>Against the 'indisputables'</p>  <p>Challenging our deep rooted beliefs.</p>	<p>A deep-dive into other cultures</p>  <p>See the world through the eyes of others.</p>
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I realised that in many cases, our knowledge was so far apart from other communities, that I needed to explain the context of story as well as the current developments. If it was a

¹¹ Though the ECC stopped sending newsletters by the time this group/party had formed in February 2019.

¹² By ‘all’ I mean about 95%

¹³ Which has since been bought by ‘Scroll’

¹⁴ I did receive some criticism about calling one of the categories ‘Sherpa Tenzing’ because of its colonialist roots. However, I chose that I wanted to give credit to these other cultures and identities for representing their point of view to us. I always credited the articles that were included to the authors and publishers.

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familiar culture, this meant uncovering past arguments that we might not have been aware of. If the newsletter focussed on a country where we had no knowledge at all, I had to go back to major historical events.

In essence, I learned very early on that echo chambers were not just about access to information. When I simply presented articles providing a different point of view, my subscribers were a bit confused as to what they were seeing, and how to interpret it. Instead, I had to take them on a journey. The first step was introspective – I had to tell them that this is the news environment I believe we are in. The second was translative – I had to demonstrate why the articles I had curated were important. Essentially this was to give the articles context. Finally, I followed up with 4-5 articles with specific paragraphs highlighted from the text.

This process taught me that theory of echo chambers was incomplete. I started thinking about the relationship between being different from someone else, merely disagreeing with them and then being polarised from them. Where was the line? Was there even a difference at all?

The Internet and the Information Environment

But let's go back to echo chambers. The argument can be traced back to 2001 in a book called Republic.com by Cass Sunstein. Here's a summary:

Echo chambers are created by personalised news feed algorithms which causes internet users to have a lack of access to different points of view. This lack of access leads to polarisation. Polarisation is debilitating for democracy.

However, there are a number of problems with this argument. The first concerns the word 'access'. If you live in a country where there are few restrictions on the websites you can visit then technically you *can* access many points of view.¹⁵ You may not know how best to search the internet, and perhaps you might not have the desire to find alternative points of view. But in neither of these cases you are absolutely cut off from the rest of society.

The echo chamber argument assumes that internet users only can access information through one (or perhaps multiple) online algorithmic news feeds. This is also not the case. We all have a varied news media diet. We don't only find out about political and cultural news through social networks, but also from traditional media like TV and chatting with our friends. This may be explicitly political dialogue like 'The News at 10', but soap operas, TV shows and films also offer useful political commentary examining the lives of other people. Even if you *are* only plugged into social media (which is highly unlikely) the chances are you use lots of different platforms. You might use YouTube and Twitter, Snapchat and Facebook,

¹⁵ Restricted access to information occurs in countries like China and Saudi Arabia where some URLs are blocked at the ISP (Internet Service Provider) level.

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or WhatsApp and Mumsnet. Each of these have a different proprietary algorithm, different advertisers and thus helps you surface different types of news.

My point is not to say that your information environment is not in some ways biased, or that there are filters which are outside of your control. It is rather just to dispute the idea that one company, even one as powerful as Zuckerberg's Facebook, controls the news you, or any random person, can access.

Let's move onto the second part of the echo chamber argument. That is that a lack of access to different opinions leads to polarisation. As a British citizen, I infrequently come across political information that relates to Chile, to Iceland, to Serbia and many other countries. This does not mean that I am polarised from a citizen there. Likewise, I never read updates about World of Warcraft, nor about child-care, nor body building. Am I really polarised from the people who have those responsibilities and interests? Even when it comes to UK politics, it is impossible to know what is going on in every aspect of our community at all time. At the time of writing, I am unsure about the latest opinions about an independence referendum in Scotland, the state of homelessness in Sheffield, nor council elections in south-west London. This lack of knowledge, or access to information, does not mean that I am polarised from any of these communities that frequently are engaged in this kind of information.

Also, there is research that shows that accessing different points of view may actually increase polarisation. Recent studies show that mere access to arguments that show a contrary point of view actually polarises us further. Christopher Bail and his team designed a study where Democrats and Republicans were offered \$11 to follow a bot that retweeted content that opposed their existing beliefs. They found that Republicans tended to become more ingrained in their views when they frequently saw Democratic content.¹⁶ They called this the 'back fire effect'.

I will say that it's very important for elites to be familiar with the opinions that exist in the community over which they have power. They have to be aware of the range of effects that the decisions they make have over other people. But is this really necessary for the average citizen? There are so many different ways of life all over the world, and the diversity doesn't just sit on a binary left-right spectrum. Most people don't have enough time to engage in politics. That is why we have a representative democracy. Learning about all walks of life is an impossible task for the average citizen who spends 40+ hours a week at work, then comes home and has to care for the younger and elderly members of their family. We shouldn't deny anyone access to all information, but nor should we expect anyone to actually be able to access all of it.

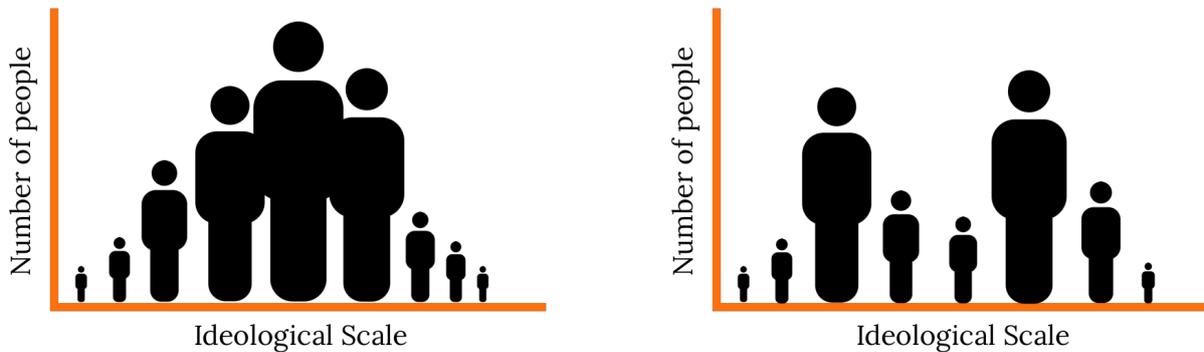
Polarisation and Consensus

¹⁶ Please see the study here:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9216?fbclid=IwAR2AyRllp3bIFQdute04NjG5Cl5bPKJ1UF-I82eDuUOQu-qdG-CMwowJiGU> Worth looking at the methodology and the limitations.

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The final problem I have with this theory concerns the idea that polarisation itself is debilitating for democracies. In political theory at least, polarisation refers to the extent of the disagreement. It does not refer to the way that disagreement is expressed¹⁷. This can be shown via the following diagrams.



On the left hand side we see consensus. On the right we see polarisation. This could be on a particular issue, be it sovereignty, gun laws, abortion laws or data protection. Or it could refer to groups that tend to have the same points of view on a variety of issues.

The reason why political scientists and theorists like consensus is because it leads to a stable country and stable politics. If the government passes a law, and everyone agrees with it, then there will be no protests, no policing issues and the law is completely legitimate democratically. However, this kind of homogeneity is also the kind of environment desired by totalitarians and authoritarians. There is no diversity, no innovative thought and fundamentally no dissent in the public sphere¹⁸. So if we go down this line of thought we have to answer: how much disagreement you tolerate in a democratic society?

What's more – it's difficult to say that we are certainly more polarised now than we have been for the past 150 years. Consider the division throughout the suffragettes movement as some men turned on some women. Or the division in 1960s America with Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. That was quite polarising! And the miner's strikes of the 1980s turned the people of the UK against each other.

It seems to be that the adulation of consensus is relatively new. Throughout most of the 20th century citizens were used to the existence of radically different and incommensurable opinions. These were admittedly expressed in very violent ways. The World Wars and the ensuing Cold War were expressions of very different ideologies and narratives¹⁹. We had Soviet Communists, vs fascists vs democrats. However, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many political theorists believed that democracy had won the fight. Famously, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history ... that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form

¹⁷ DiMaggio, P., Evans, J., & Bryson, B. (1996). Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?.

¹⁸ Though to be fair the 'elections' in totalitarian states usually have majorities of 90%+. In democracies we see majorities of a much lower percentage.

¹⁹ This is a very simplistic statement...

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of human government”.²⁰ There was universal belief that humanity was united around a specific value set, and our domestic politics reflected this hubris. Inspired by the work of Anthony Giddens and Geoff Mulgan, Tony Blair won the 1997 election preaching the ‘third way’. “I want a Britain that is one nation, with shared values and purpose” Blair wrote in his winning manifesto. These shared values included the acceptance of a global free market, and the idea that government should cultivate social and economic progress. Under these conditions, all public dialogue is purely operational and technocratic.²¹ It would not discuss whether these things were good, but rather about how we best implement this vision.

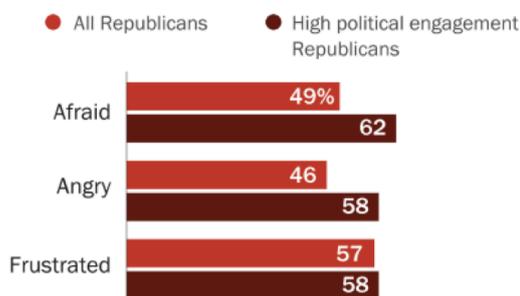
I am not advocating a return to ideological war, although many would argue that we are currently in the midst of it²². However, it was wrong of us to attempt to eliminate disagreement in the 90s. It is possible to hold different opinions and yet still get along.

Readers may raise their eyebrows at this analysis. I’ve defined polarisation in a way that you may think ignores the fundamental attack on democracy. You may think polarisation refers to the growth of extreme parties in Western democracies. Well, yes. That is also a problem. These parties are generally xenophobic, racist and totalitarian. They do not want to encourage diversity of thought and expression. Another objection thinks that emotion is taken out of this definition. Which is true, and it doesn’t make any sense. In other sciences, such as psychology, polarisation does not refer to the extent of the disagreement. It refers to the nature of the disagreement – that is the way it is expressed.

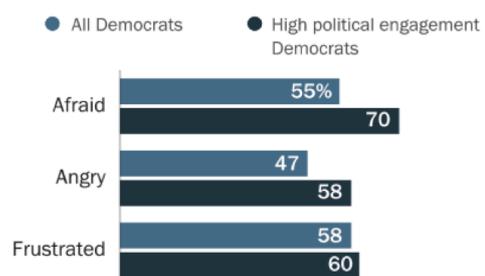
This is certainly a problem. There is evidence from the Pew Centre to show that in America at least, there is growing fear, frustration and anger towards the other side, on both the part of Republicans and Democrats.

Frustration, fear and anger among partisans

% of Republicans who say the Democratic Party makes them feel ...



% of Democrats who say the Republican Party makes them feel ...



Note: Engagement scale based on voting frequency, campaign volunteerism and/or contributions. See Appendix A for details. Source: Survey conducted March 2-28 and April 5-May 2, 2016.

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²⁰ Francis Fukuyama (1992) “The End of History and the Last Man”

²¹ Technocracy is when you run government like it is an engineering or a mathematical problem.

²² Via disinformation campaigns from Russia and cyber-attacks from China

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I agree that this is not a good state of affairs. I will address how we might be able to cope with animosity and fear of the other. The challenge is not how we eliminate diversity, but how everyone gets more comfortable with it. It's about how we feel safer in a heterogeneous environment.

The key question I seek to answer in this book is:

How can we be different and still get along?

With this introduction I hope I have shown you why you should read a book on this subject by me. I've also brought you up to speed on a popular argument about how the internet is destroying democratic dialogue, and also why it is wrong. So now let me show you a new way of conceptualising disagreement and polarisation, and how we might be able to use new technologies to make democracy stronger and more inclusive than ever before.

This book will focus on this question of conflict. It will challenge the idea that polarisation is inherently bad for democracy. It will offer some solutions about how we should be pressuring internet communication platforms to design their technologies in a way that enables disagreement, but creates peaceful conflict.

Chapter One: The Old Way: Rationality is Neutral

Quite often, when I'm hearing stories about disagreements between two of my friends, or my friend and their partner, I might hear: "but she's just not being rational"²³. This is said because the person doesn't understand their argument – and the only way they can explain it is through irrationality. I had an old professor at university who constantly appealed to his 'rationality'. An example statement might be: "as a rational man, of course, you'd take the higher paying job". We speak of the irrationality of climate change sceptics with arguments like: "even if the world had a 5% change of self-destruction, then it's rational to try and save it". Their scepticism is irrational, and it will lead us to our doom.

What is rationality? If you look at a dictionary it might say that rationality is basing your argument on reason or logic. You can think of it as a system which provides a way of stating whether an argument is good or bad. If you evaluate your argument according to the 'rational system', then that system has the power to decide the right and the wrong point of view. Rationality helps us to establish consensus.

You might think of our current system of rationality as being neutral. This chapter seeks to show you that it is not. All forms of rationality that are adopted in our society have succeeded because they had a political goal. In general, most have been used to exclude members of society – whether based on sexuality, gender, race, class, age or other characteristic. Consequently, if you control the system of 'rationality' you are in an excellent position. If you control the agenda, and the language of rationality then you have a lot of power.

Think of the people who believe that surgically-changing your gender is irrational. Or the people who believe that taking a pay-cut is irrational. We're conforming to a system where some ideas are prioritised more than others.

Let's take a look at three groups through history which have appealed to rationality as a goal in society.

Enlightenment Thinkers

Before the enlightenment period the truth was decided upon by the crown and the church. And these two establishments tended to use this power fairly arbitrarily. Enlightenment thinkers therefore wanted to find a way to overthrow the power of religion and the monarchy with a way that the nobles could also access. They created enlightenment values which are and the scientific method which is:

²³ This is usually gendered, in my experience.

Reason + evidence = good argument

Political theorists wanted in. They saw what scientists had created for understanding physics and thought that something similar to neutrally uncover political truth. There was the development that 'public opinion' on matters, was a neutral and unbiased tool for determining what policies should be created. Historian Antony La Vopa writes: "[it] was endowed with a rational objectivity opposed to the blind adherence that traditional authority commanded"²⁴.

However, as we know, lots of people were excluded from this 'public opinion'. Women were denied the vote. Anyone without property was denied the vote. Black people were still slaves until 1807. And it was unclear exactly how individuals, who read and wrote in their own solitary time, could ever come together to be 'a public'.

Deliberative Democracy

Like the enlightenment thinkers, deliberative scholars in the 1950s and 60s also had a clear political goal. They wanted to make sure that the people in a democracy were consulted in between election cycles.²⁵ Deliberationists state that democracy functions best when citizens address public problems by reasoning together about how best to solve them.²⁶ Political scholar Joshua Cohen stated deliberative democracy is to: "subject the exercise of power to reason's discipline."²⁷ You can immediately see echoes of enlightenment period thinking in the words of these 20th century academics.

The principles of deliberation, as set out by Seyla Benhabib, include asymmetry and equality. That is, everyone taking part in the discussion must have the same opportunity to speak as anyone else.²⁸ But this is where it becomes obvious that this is not a good model for the public sphere. In the UK there are 53.1 million adults.²⁹ There is simply not enough time for everyone to listen to everyone else. We would need some model of representation to ensure that deliberation can be functional.

²⁴ La Vopa, A. (1992). Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society. Reinhart Koselleck The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Jurgen Habermas, Thomas Burger, Frederick Lawrence, Jack R. Censer, Gail W. O'Brien. *The Journal Of Modern History*, 64(1), 79-116. doi: 10.1086/244442

²⁵ Check reference here – I'm pretty sure it's Dryzek's *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*

²⁶ Cohen, J. (2009). Reflections on Deliberative Democracy. In T. Christiano & J. Christman, *Contemporary debates in political philosophy* (pp. 246-262). Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/reader.action?ppg=263&docID=428114&tm=1531487926807>

²⁷ Cohen 2009

²⁸ Benhabib, S. (1996). Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy. In S. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (pp. 67-94). Princeton University Press.

²⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/july2017>

Hattusia

This model presupposes that all citizens would be able to agree on the best course forward once they had decided on the best way of forming the questions to be answered. Living through the Brexit deliberation, I'd say that was optimistic. But on the other hand, I do not know how deliberationists come to the conclusion of which agendas to set. They would have to divert to a set of values, and a system, which everyone agrees on. Again, I do not think this is possible. And I will explain why later in the book.

The Third Way

Throughout Blair's government of the 1990s, the power of setting the questions to be deliberated was ignored. As written in the Labour manifesto of 1997, Tony Blair proclaimed: "I want a Britain that is one nation, with shared values and purpose"³⁰. This was an amplified technocracy.³¹ If there was no room for debate about what society should aim towards, then the only room for discussion is operational: "how should we get there?"

New Labour had adopted the absolute version of enlightenment values and the method of deliberation. This is extreme. Blair's guru, the sage Anthony Giddens, wrote in 1994 about a deliberative public sphere: "[we need] a public arena in which controversial issues ... can be resolved, or at least handled, through dialogue". This reliance on the public, and the ability to have a national conversation, harks back to the idea that public opinion is indeed 'rational'. However, this put to bed any political conflict about how society should be run and governed. Should Britain actually be in the EU? How should we define equality? What happens when freedom of expression clashes with freedom of religion?

In each of these cases, either the model is impractical or it is constrictive. In the enlightenment case many were excluded. Testimony couldn't be given by a woman for instance. It was outside of logic to believe that different races were also humans. This meant that many minorities were outside of its power. If you tried to criticise the 'rationality' using ideas and languages from outside of the system, it was very difficult to win the argument. The Blairite culture has been described as a form of "moralizing liberalism" which shut down debate.

These models do have their uses. They do look to the people for decisions rather than to an authoritarian model. They work very well in a court house, or the House of Commons, or a boardroom. However, I do not believe they are practical for a vibrant public sphere.

³⁰ <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>

³¹ Definition: the government or control of society or industry by an elite of technical experts

Chapter Two: The Old Way: Defining Polarisation

The previous chapter looked at the vague term ‘rationality’ and argued that it cannot be used as a model for settling disagreement in the public sphere. This chapter is going to look at how disagreement is traditionally understood and measured in political science. I’m going to show you why it is limited, and hopefully it will give you insight into understanding claims made about polarisation.

As an example, I’m going to use the very old, yet very current, argument around abortion. We have pro-lifers on one side, who are anti-abortion, and the pro-choicers on the other, who believe abortion should be accessible and legal. In order to measure the level of polarisation between these groups the political/social scientist would follow this process.

To start, they would recruit a group of people from the population s/he is studying that seeks to be representative of the wider group. In order for this group to be representative, they will attempt to ensure that the genders, geographies, age groups, education and income levels in the selected group are similar to the larger population.³² The scientist would then ask the people in the sample to complete a survey with a series of multiple-choice questions.³³ Some questions would relate to their views on abortion. These could include: “at what point does a foetus become a child” or “is it permissible for a woman allowed to abort a foetus without consulting their partner” or “should a woman be punished in any way for aborting a child?” These questions will build a picture of that person’s views on abortion, and the social scientist will then be able to create a scale as to how permissible that person believes abortion to be.³⁴ Let’s say this scale is between 0 and 24, where someone who believes that women should be killed for aborting a child gets a 0 score, and perhaps where a person who believes all foetuses should be aborted gets a score of 24.

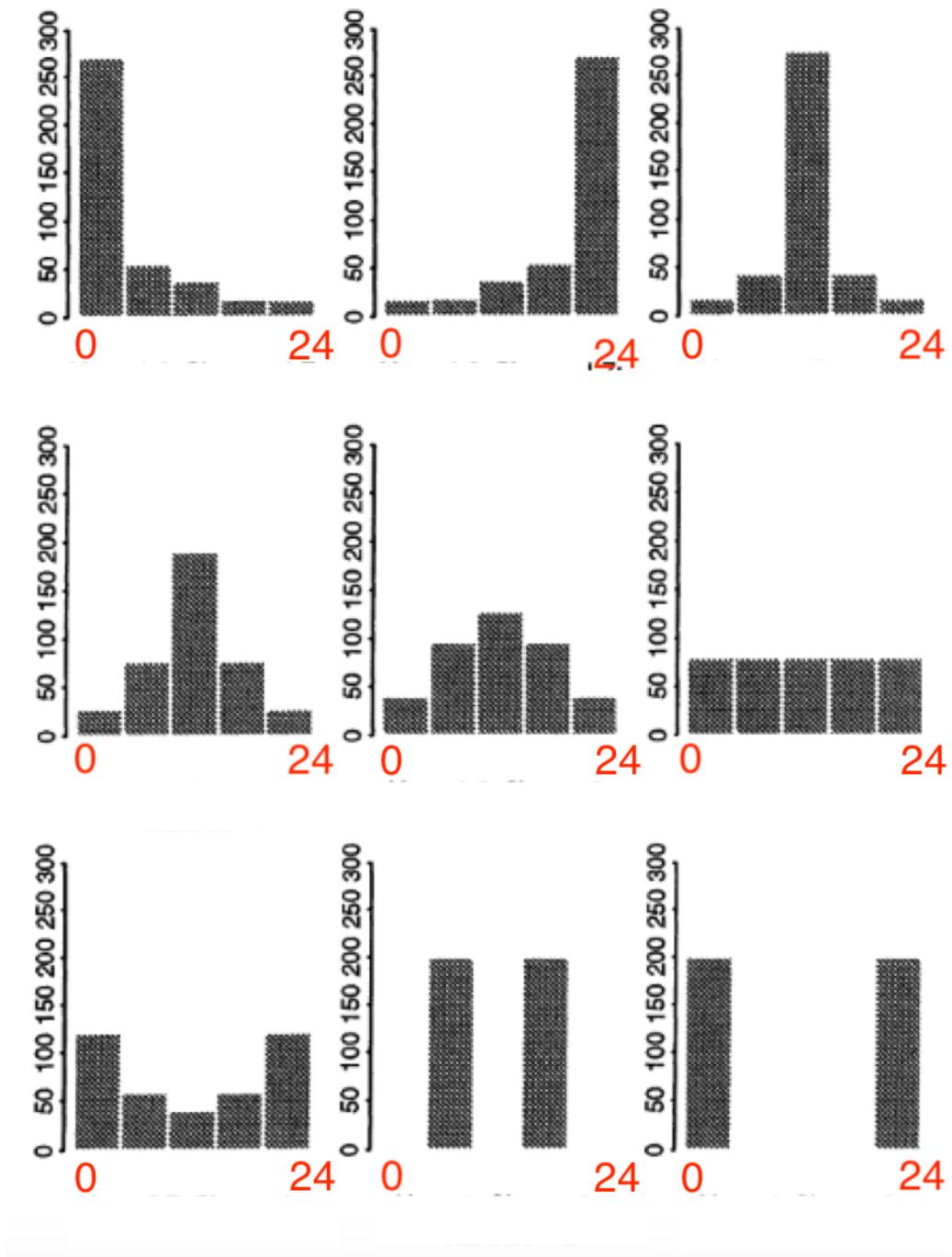
From this, the social scientist would then plot each of the individuals and their corresponding score on a line chart. And these are the range of options that we might see as a result of that analysis.

³² Any more?

³³ A very well funded project might also allow respondents to answer freely, and then use some form of coding and discourse analysis to understand the nuance in respondents points of view.

³⁴ This is called Principle Component Analysis. I would make sure this is better explained with diagrams and stories in the book.

Hattusia



Take a look at the above graphs. Which do you think show a more polarised population? The answer is, of course, the bottom three. In each of these we see two distinct groups forming around very different ideas about abortion.

However, from this scale we are just measuring the scale of difference of opinion. We are not actually measuring anything about the emotional component of the debate. We still see arguments as presented as rational facts, and the points on the scale as being equally valid components.

Hattusia

But this isn't the only criticism of this method. The researcher has given themselves the role of a neutral arbitrator on the topic. They defined the scale. This means that they have defined whether people are closer or further apart already according to the questions they ask and the scores they give people. This means that you're in a bit of a catch-22. Either you acknowledge that the nuance of the debate changes, and therefore change the scale accordingly. This way it lacks rigour and is fairly arbitrary. Or, the researcher may choose to use the same scale for decades on a topic, and this doesn't allow the debate to move forward at all. Instead it remains in stasis.

You may hear academics state that 'we are more polarised than ever before'. This may mean something different to politicians or journalists use of the word. Always question exactly what people mean before jumping to conclusions. Is polarisation of the type described above ALWAYS terrible? What if we were talking about attitudes towards the film: "Legally Blonde"? How about the best method of travelling from Edinburgh to London? Well no, we need to include some sort of analysis of why certain topics matter more than others. We don't find that in this piece.

In all these cases we create systems or methodologies for analysing disagreement. I'm not claiming that these are not useful in some contexts, but rather that they ignore a critical component of public sphere dialogue. They ignore the role of 'agenda setting' and 'definition making'. I think that the public sphere should be thought of a place where different groups with different interests set agendas and try and push their own definitions. Why will be found in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The New Way: Identity, Language and Power

What does it mean for me to hold an opinion? Why do I hold that opinion? Why do I describe myself in a certain way and feel comfortable in particular groups, but not in others? How do I change my mind? How am I influenced? How do I influence others? These are all questions we should be asking to understand the dynamics of group disagreement.

Whereas before the researcher and theorist looked for a rational and a neutral way of understanding polarisation, I'd like to see if we can understand disagreement whilst ensuring that the researcher is included in that debate. We have to acknowledge that we shape the nature of the disagreement as we try and measure it. So, let's start off by examining ourselves. How might we go about this process?³⁵

Identity

In 2019, I'd probably describe myself in the following way. I am white, I am fairly tall and have fairly deep voice. I am a feminist, but I have behaved misogynistically in the past. I feel uncomfortable in West London³⁶. I can be funny. I am brave, generous and creative. I like sewing.

Why did I choose those words? What led me to describe myself in that way rather than in another way?

I chose to state that I am white because I feel like it's an important consideration when reading a book which discusses identities, power and disagreement. I think of myself as being fairly tall because I am above average height for a woman, and I also have a deeper voice than the average woman. I do think a lot about feminism, but I also don't think this makes me a saint. I've said things which devalue women which I regret.³⁷ I belong to a group that spends a lot of time in East London.

Each of these qualities is a comparison. I could not have written this if I had never interacted with anyone else. It is only through my interactions with others, that has led to the creation of my own identity.

This idea of 'the self' takes root in Hegelian philosophy. He writes that by discovering an other, and seeing ourselves through the eyes of that other person, only then do we discover ourselves. To paraphrase his stance:

³⁵ This chapter is based heavily on the work of Chantal Mouffe

³⁶ By this I mean Mayfair, Knightsbridge and Chelsea which have quite an upmarket feel.

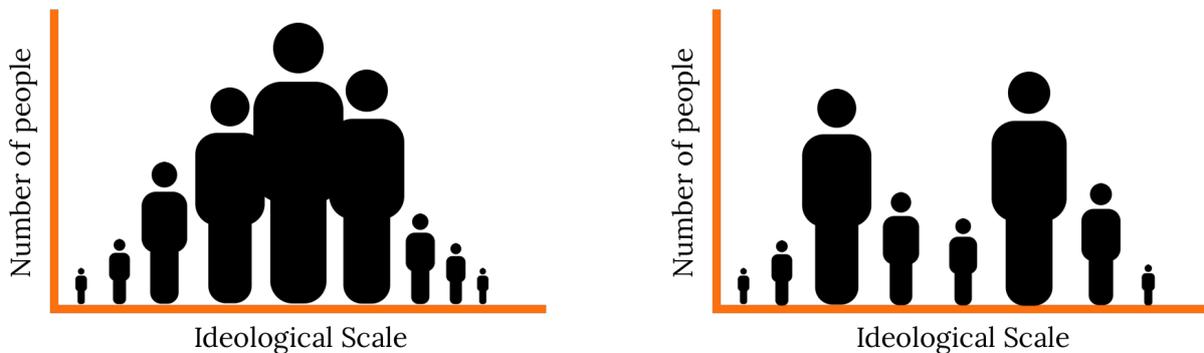
³⁷ I have also behaved in ways that devalue many minority groups without fully understanding who they are and what they stand for. I am not proud of these things and I continuously try to learn from them.

Hattusia

“I exist because you exist, and you recognise that I exist.”³⁸

I am a feminist, because I know that other people are not feminist, and therefore it is worth my time to be feminist. However, I’m also loosely part of the sewing community – and within this community there will be some clashes with my feminist community. As humans navigate this by gravitating towards our common interests with specific people. Parents in a playground will bond over other kids and may never talk about politics. Football fans bond over sport.

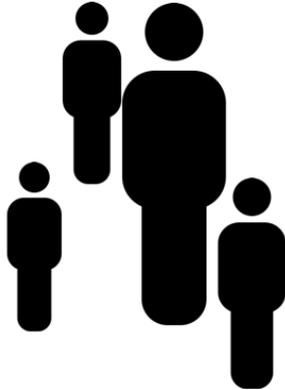
So how should we examine disagreement between various groups? Recall last chapter we looked at the old way:



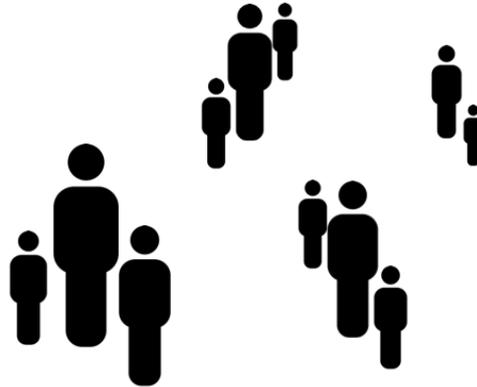
Perhaps we shouldn’t be thinking about a binary scale, but rather a collection of different clusters of views on a topic. Some we consider threatening, and others we consider allies. In the following picture, I’m with my ‘team’ looking out over a sea of other groups with different beliefs.

³⁸ This is a vastly different framework to Descartes “Cogito ergo sum”, which is “I think therefore I am”. Descartes tries to justify his own existence without anyone else.

Me and my group



Lots of differing groups with slightly different beliefs



Whilst we are on this topic, I would like to point out that the majority of Western existential thought lies in the work of Descartes. He stated:

“Cogito ergo sum.” Or... I think, therefore I am.³⁹

This idea of the self and our own existence is highly individualistic. For that reason, it feels inaccurate. You would not exist without your parents, nor would you be able to think or reason using language if it had not been taught to you by another human being. It does not teach us how to understand our existence, and how to live with other people.

Descartes’ aim was to create an argument about our existence which could never be refuted. He wanted it to be as logical and as rational as possible. Relying purely on a Cartesian, and individualistic notion of the self does not teach us much about how we should behave in communities, nor who we actually are as humans. It is not a good model to understand the human condition, nor to think about technology.

Language

When #MeToo came to the fore in October 2017, I was struck by how difficult it suddenly was to talk about feminism. Without realising it, prior to #MeToo, I’d just discussed feminism with those who were truly sympathetic to the concept – my female friends and occasional male allies. However, with this hashtag, suddenly those who were outside of these circles wanted to talk about it too. And I realised that I had to explain concepts and words to them that I had just assumed everyone was aware of. I shared statistics over domestic labour. I explained my own experience of going to the police after assault. I explained bias in board meetings and funding. But whereas before most of the people I was

³⁹ Second Meditation, Descartes.

Hattusia

discussing these concepts with had already heard of them, in this instance, the people simply didn't have the language.

It was then that I saw what it meant to be in an echo chamber. For some reason, I had chosen to only discuss feminism with a select group. And although those outside of the group had always had access to it, nevertheless they had never thought to ask about feminism, and I had never thought to bring them into the circle.

Then they had to learn new words, rules and value structures. And I was challenged to explain the root cause of my beliefs. I have to say that in most of these conversations, I was fought and challenged. Very few people approached me with curiosity, but instead told me where feminists had got it wrong. I found the whole process exhausting because I felt like most people thought feminism could be debated rationally, rather than taking the time to understand what it is about.

Every group has a value structure. They consider some things important, and some things not worth considering. They have specialised language for the things which they think need special attention. They are vague about other areas. Sometimes when we view these groups through our own logical lens, we fail to see what is so special and unique about them. We fail to speak their language.

Power

Power can be defined in many ways and one of the ways is this. If you belong to a group which can define the agenda of the day, and define terms in a way that influences how they are used by a majority of people, then you have power.

It was striking to watch the debate unfold in 2019 about Shamima Begum, the girl from Bethnal Green who left the UK aged 15 to become a bride of an Islamic State jihadi fighter. Swiftly, the agenda was set to talk about whether she should be a British citizen. It wasn't about the punishment she should receive when she comes home, or about how to deal with adults who were clearly groomed whilst they were children, it was explicitly about her citizenship. As a result, no commentator nor politician could talk about Begum without referring to British citizenship. She eventually lost it. The agenda had been set, and we all set to answer this one question.

We all inherently know that this is how we disagree in the public sphere. We are looking to forward our own agendas and our own definitions. We read editorials from all sides which state how the other have framed the questions incorrectly. How they've missed out crucial parts from their definitions. How they've left particular groups out of the equation. And it is very difficult to make neutral judgements about who is right and wrong in each of these examples. Instead we appeal to metaphysical ideas – perhaps around justice, fairness and equality – to give weight to our own beliefs.

Hattusia

Power is inherent in any system which puts different ideas, objects, events and people on a scale. Think about systems which judge what is good and what is bad, who is capable and who is not, and in which order different websites will rank. There will be some who benefit from the system and some who do not. Naturally, if you are in a place where you can control that system, you have a lot of power. The more people who trust a system, the more powerful it is.

So, we all want to be able to state what exactly 'feminism' is, what 'democracy' truly is and what 'Britishness' is. We are trying to control meaning. And each of these meanings are inherently incommensurable.

Hattusia

Chapter Four: Let's Agree to Disagree

I've argued three things in this book so far:

1. Disagreements in the public sphere cannot be solved rationally
2. Differing groups use the public sphere to set agendas and push their own definitions of specific words
3. Our identities are combined with membership to many groups. Each of these groups have their own value statements and definitions.

The question still is, how can we be different and still get along? If I've rejected a rational framework, then how can we go about the messy process of feeling safe and secure alongside people who are very different to us?

Mutual Recognition

Should women have the right to abort their own baby? On one side we have the 'pro-lifers', those who place the rights of the unborn child/foetus/embryo as a priority and on the other we have 'pro-choicers', those who put the rights of the mother/woman first. The opposing groups disagree about when life begins, about human rights, and (sometimes) about religion.⁴⁰ These are fundamental and moral disagreements. By this I mean that no side is ever going to win the 'rational' argument. Each side have 'facts' to back up their argument, which the other disputes or ignores.

I should start by saying that I am firmly on the pro-choice side of the debate. This is for a number of non-subjective reasons. For example, I don't think a young foetus is a baby, but I think it's a collection of cells which has the potential to become a baby. I also think the rights of the woman should take precedent over this collection of cells.

But I also think I'm a pro-chooser for some personal reasons. I'm a little bit scared of having children. I know that there are a lot of women who desperately want to start a family, but at this stage, I am scared about the freedom I could lose, and how my identity might change. If I lost the right to choose whether I could have an abortion as a last resort, I would feel unsafe and insecure. I've also never had a partner who I feel would take on equal responsibility in parenting. To be honest with you, these reasons probably come first in my decision to be a pro-chooser. They are based on my own experiences and emotions, and are probably not very persuasive to someone who hasn't experienced the same feelings.

In January 2017, women all over the world gathered together for the Women's March. Inspired by the election of the 'pussy-grabbing' Donald Trump, it foreshadowed the #MeToo movement. The aim was inclusivity: "Gender Justice is Racial Justice is Economic Justice"

⁴⁰ This is a really complicated subject. Of course there are various different sub-cultures in the two groups and many have different reasons for supporting one of the sides.

Hattusia

was one of the march's guiding principles⁴¹. However, there was one group of feminists that were excluded as an official partner. The New Wave Feminists. This group vehemently oppose Donald Trump, describe themselves as feminists, and yet they also say they are pro-life.

Their reasons are nuanced. New Wave Feminists are inherently anti-violence. They are against war, against the death penalty, against torture and they feel it would be a contradiction to then be in favour of abortion. A similar group is called Feminists for Life. With the slogan "Women Deserve Better", they seek to eliminate the reasons that drive women to abortion. This group seems a little more extreme because they implicitly state that abortion should be illegal, though they write that the women themselves should not be prosecuted for seeking abortion. They say: "we should criminalize anyone who withholds child support, fires a woman from her job because she is pregnant, refuses to accommodate her pregnancy, expels her from school, or threatens violence—any act that forces her to choose between sacrificing her child and sacrificing her education, career plans, or safety from violence."⁴²

So how do I actually conceptualise my differences with these women? We agree on a lot. I would also like to live in a society where women are supported through pregnancy and motherhood. This is currently not the case. In the US, costs for delivering a baby in a hospital average at over \$10,000⁴³. Here in the UK, many women struggle juggling a career with motherhood⁴⁴. Their jobs are not supportive, and their partners have (generally) not been brought up to manage a household, so a woman (generally) takes on more of the burden. Rape is not rare enough, and women still have to deal with the stigma of being raped⁴⁵. Women (and some men) still live in fear of domestic violence⁴⁶, and there are many cultural reasons why they do not leave their abusive partner⁴⁷. Through the work of the New Age Feminists, perhaps my emotive negative perception of motherhood would be radically reduced.

I share many of the values of these pro-life feminists. However, I oppose them because I believe abortion should be an option to women who do not live in this idealistic world. And although we can work much harder to achieve reproductive parity, I think it's totally unrealistic to believe that we can create a society which supports every need of every person. And of course, I oppose them because I do not view the termination of a small

⁴¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/584086c7be6594762f5ec56e/t/58796773414fb52b57e20794/1484351351914/WMW+Guiding+Vision+%26+Definition+of+Principles.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.feministsforlife.org/fag/#otherviews> Retrieved 19th January 2019

⁴³ <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/04/23/a-typical-american-birth-costs-as-much-as-delivering-a-royal-baby>

⁴⁴ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/why-working-mums-are-being-sold-an-impossible-dream-about-work-life-balance-and-how-to-set-the-record-straight-8tzw0j6vl>

⁴⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/11/a-woman-interviewed-100-convicted-rapists-in-india-this-is-what-she-learned/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0fe987d6abf7

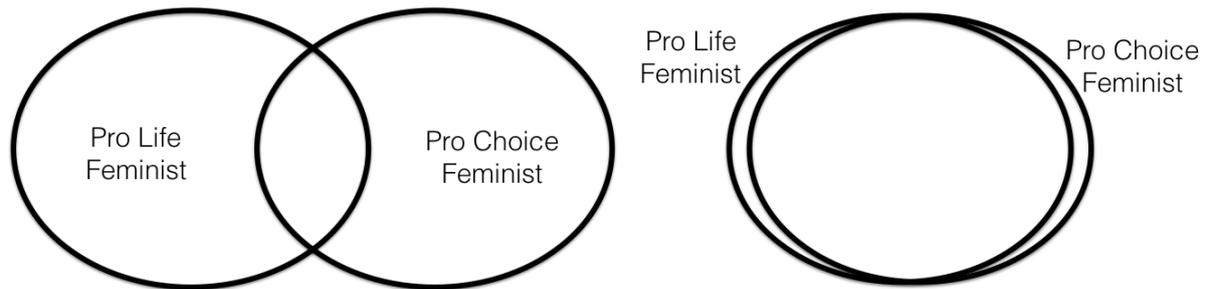
⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-46018604>

⁴⁷ <http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/domestic-violence-abuse/womens-experiences-domestic-violence-and-abuse/why-women-couldnt-just-leave-violent-or-abusive-partner>

Hattusia

group of cells as being violence. In terms of violence, it has more in common with a tooth extraction than with torture.

So, I'm left with a decision to make about how I react to pro-life feminists. I can either choose to see our similarities, or instead to see our differences. I like to think of this like a Venn diagram. Either I believe that we're mostly the same, but we differ on one issue like on the right side. Or can I just see our differences, represented on the left.



The ovals could be rigorously classified, and given scientific definitions to become numerical and 'objective'. But I don't think this would help me to empathise with the women who sit in a different space. This is a personal exercise. If I choose the right hand Venn diagram, I choose to see our similarities. I see how we can work as a team. But I will fight pro-life feminists on my right to an abortion. And I would hope that given their views, they would not advocate for the complete elimination of abortion as an option for the woman either.

What's more, when I took the time to understand pro-life feminists after the Women's March, I also learned a lot about myself. A process of introspection allowed me to understand my own views in light of theirs. It was incredibly valuable.

Where you might see irreconcilable differences, you can begin to ascertain where you definitely agree. This means you might find a course of action that goes forward. Yes, you will have some areas where you definitely disagree. But you might find that the disagreement may not matter. It can simply be celebrated. But in the cases where the disagreement does matter, ensure that you do not resort to dehumanising or disrespecting their position. In my mind, it does not make sense to not call these women 'feminists'. That is how they identify, and much of their behaviour and language correlates with the views of many feminists. So, out of respect, that is how I also define them.⁴⁸

Ok, this example might make sense but there are some obvious objections to this framing. The first concerns presumptions of equality where power is asymmetrical. Either abortion is

⁴⁸ Look, this exercise is a lot harder in countries where abortion is not allowed. In the UK, a pro-choicer is in a position of power. Consequently, I believe the responsibility is towards the pro-choicers to understand the pro-lifers. In other countries, where abortion is banned, the responsibility is on the pro-lifers to recognise the positions of the pro-choicers.

Hattusia

legal in a country, or it is illegal. So, one group would always be more powerful than the other - how could recognition be 'mutual?'

The answer is that, although recognition requires input from all sides, it takes more commitment from the stronger party, because it is much easier for them to dismiss the concerns of the weak. The continued denial of recognition from those in power can only lead to instability. Groups have to go through a difficult and respectful process to find genuine common ground, as opposed to an artificial consensus. This applies as much to pro-lifers in places where abortion is illegal as it does for me in the UK.⁴⁹

Secondly, many believe that those who are against abortion are inherently misogynistic. Why should we 'recognise' these views as valid? Or even racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views as valid? The theory of mutual recognition helps us turn this question on its head. Those with these views don't respect the humanity and identities of others; instead they deny recognition to women, people of colour, Jews and immigrants. The frame I'm presenting provides a way of understanding and communicating why these attitudes are so damaging and how we might combat them, since we can simultaneously expose racism and misogyny *and* look to understand other aspects of the identities of such groups which are not bigoted or xenophobic.

In order to achieve this level of understanding of each other, it is helpful to have a framework that looks at recognition in further depth.

Confidence

We start by understanding and recognising ourselves. On an elementary level, we understand that when we are hungry, we can satisfy this hunger by feeding ourselves. When we are in pain, we feel pain. When we are sad and happy, these emotions are valid. We tend to ourselves to understand ourselves. This breeds confidence. We start to see how our own actions have consequences, how we can relieve ourselves of hunger, sadness and pain, but also how we can be happy, comfortable and curious. Understanding that our actions have consequences, and being confident that our choices will lead to certain consequences gives us a moral dimension. We become a moral human being.

Respect

Next, once we have examined our internal selves and found ourselves to be a human being, whose actions have consequences, we have to look at others. We recognise that there are other people who also fit these criteria. They have attitudes and emotional states which matter to them. They are moral human beings. And as another human being, you must respect them as a human being. You must give them rights which you expect to have. These

⁴⁹ And, we often find disputes where both parties believe they are disempowered. Mutual recognition can help you ascertain whether you are actually the weaker or stronger party, and in which areas you gain that power.

Hattusia

are fairly well documented in the UN Declaration of Human Rights⁵⁰ and encompasses things like the right to freedom and security; the right to a fair and public trial and no arbitrary arrest; the right to assembly, to freedom of expression; the right to work and the right to rest. We have to acknowledge where we are similar and where we all deserve to be treated the same.

Esteem

Although we all have human rights by virtue of our common characteristic of being a person, we also have areas where we are not similar. Yet these differences should be esteemed, and not feared. I value those who do not have the same skillset as myself. It is good to learn from everyone's experiences and create communities that can move forward. This diversity should be held in esteem whether it's valuing the work that someone else does, or valuing the ideas that they contribute.

⁵⁰ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

Hattusia

Chapter Five: Long Live Democracy

I have argued that disagreement is inherently democratic. I have argued that as soon as we appeal to ‘rationality’ as a method for finding consensus, we are appealing to a system which excludes certain discourses from being rational. In fact, the public space is made up of so many different discourses with different value systems that they are incommensurable. Hence, I’ve offered mutual recognition as a framework that can be used to find where beliefs can work together, and where they are set apart. We choose to accept a messy world.

So, if the above is true, we need a way to manage this conceptualisation in our democracies. How might we be able to design our internet communication platforms in order to foster recognition? How can design improve the public sphere?

What Does ‘Design’ Mean In This Context?

Think about your situation as a person. Think about all the things that you’d like to do but cannot. There are some things that you cannot do because of the market – like you (probably) cannot buy a multi-million-pound house in Mayfair⁵¹. There are some things that you might feel prohibited to do because of social norms – most wouldn’t start screaming in the middle of a religious ceremony. Then there are things that you cannot do because of legislation. You cannot murder without there being severe consequences. And then there is design. You cannot jump 100 feet in the air because of our biology. You cannot move your body from Texas to Tokyo in 5 seconds because of physics. You cannot create gold from a base metal because of chemistry.⁵²

In a digital world, engineers create the laws of design. Someone with a blue tick on Twitter can easily direct message you, but you cannot direct message them back. We are unsure about the design of algorithms, which cause certain pieces of content to be more visible than others. The protocols follow TCP IP. Code is in binary 0s and 1s. And each of these design decisions has consequences.

Of course, there are areas where the market, design, social norms and regulation collide to create new currents of common behaviours. But for me, in a digital world, we should be thinking about design a lot more. We can shape a digital world. We cannot change the physical one.

The Crisis of Meaning and Translative Technologies

⁵¹ If you are reading this book and you can buy a multimillion pound house in Mayfair then please contact me so we can discuss funding opportunities for research.

⁵² For more information on this check out Lawrence Lessig’s Pathetic Dot theory in Web 2.0

Hattusia

So how do we begin to design technologies to encourage curiosity about the other, as opposed to fear, frustration and anger? Well, as explained in the book, our attitudes and ideas are expressed in different languages. Words have different meanings. As we're able to reach out to and create communities with people with similar values, we are developing new languages all the time. And this is leading to a crisis of meaning. I believe that we should be investing in more English-to-English translative technologies. We should become well equipped to understand that different cultures have different ways of expressing themselves. If we are able to create a culture of mutual recognition, we need to start with mechanisms that enable us to understand the other. We need to find ways where we could be similar, before resorting to tribalism.

Put the Human Before the Message

In a world where rationality rules – we would think that the message would be able to be standalone. I should be persuaded by the force of your argument, rather than acknowledging that different words have different meanings.

However, we've found that this causes us to get frustrated by the message. If we do not understand each other, and we speak different languages, then we should not be putting the content first. Rather we should be seeking to speak to each other human-to-human and not message-to-message.

We need to research areas where we acknowledge we are speaking with humans on social media, and not with machines.

Map Agenda and Definition Setting

Crucially, to understand how different debates came to the fore, we need to start to map different agendas and new definitions. There are ways to do this at the moment – we can use Google trends for instance to see how often a certain term was searched for – but this needs to be extended so we can have more idea about where ideas come from and the context for them being pushed forward.

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Conclusion

When I was fresh out of my Philosophy undergrad, I was frequently asked who my favourite philosopher was. Ever the contrarian, I didn't answer Plato, Hume, Sartre, or a philosopher than many would have heard of. Instead I answered a historian of science by the name of Alexandre Koyré. This is probably someone who's work would have passed you by, but in one of my classes his paper 'Galileo and Plato'⁵³ still inspires me.

Koyré was a Galilean scholar. And in this short paper he sought to answer why the scientific revolutionaries of the 16th century were able to produce so much insight in such a short space of time. Why was this era so innovative and productive where previous epochs had been sluggish and stifled?

His answer is simple enough. Scholars of the medieval period were firmly Aristoteleian in their outlook on physics. They believed it was completely impossible that mathematics and geometry could describe the world. At best, they believed that geometry could be used to inaccurately represent the world. Galileo, on the other hand, used experimentation to understand whether a philosophy of geometry and mathematics could better describe the physical world. This was the philosophy of Plato. Using these ideas, Galileo managed to "destroy one world and replace it with another".

I'm not claiming that this is the only reason the enlightenment happened. Nor am I claiming to have a genius on the same level of Galileo. But what this story taught me was that our philosophy, that is what we believe *the essence* of objects, people, politics and ideas actually is, has a huge impact on what we choose to research. And this has a huge impact on our society and way of life.

Philosophy tells us what is possible and what is not. Philosophical ideas underpin most of our thought. Even if you've never read De Beauvoir or Mill or Fishkin, their thoughts permeate the institutional structures that we've created. My hope is that this book may inspire a larger audience to think in a slightly different way. Perhaps then we can reframe the problem of political discourse, of polarisation and of technology in a manner which takes us out of this stalemate.

This book comes from a Western and an Anglican perspective. Some readers familiar with continental philosophical may find themselves disagreeing with my chapter concerning the rationality. They may believe that politics has already absorbed the irrational. And yes, from conversations I've had, that is acknowledged as true in those regions. But continental Europe has a much better grasp of a post-modern politics than the US and the UK. I'm not familiar with Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, South American nor African strands of philosophy but I expect they also have a different approach to creating knowledge and political structures.

⁵³ Koyré, A. (1943). Galileo and Plato. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4(4), 400-428. doi:10.2307/2707166

Hattusia

However, I feel this bias is warranted because so many social media communication platforms are based in America. Facebook, Google, Twitter, Salesforce, Pinterest, Reddit, Microsoft, Netflix, LinkedIn and therefore Instagram, YouTube and Whatsapp are all headquartered in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. Tumblr, an anomaly, is headquartered in New York City. Spotify, a greater anomaly, is in Stockholm.⁵⁴ The vast majority of the applications that we use to share information and communicate are based in a tiny part of the world. The politics in these areas is dominated by a kind of techno libertarianism⁵⁵. And we see this ethic permeating through the design of the technology platforms they create.

I often hear people ask for a new enlightenment. By this, they generally mean that we should return to the enlightenment ideals. If you recall, this means reason + evidence = knowledge. I also think we need a new enlightenment. But from this metaphor I believe that we need to rip up the philosophical underpinnings of society and figure out how we can structure and design for a society which is dependent on digital structures as much as physical structures like gravity.

This book is an attempt. I expect that you'll find many areas that are lacking and need further development. However, as my undergraduate philosophy tutor, Adam Caulton, taught me: it is easy to critique ideas and state where they are wrong, it is harder and more rewarding to find where a theory may be right, and use this insight to create a more robust philosophy. I hope that you've found something in this book that inspires you. I hope that a couple of stories have sent you thinking about areas in your own life where you achieved recognition and where you didn't. And finally, I hope that this book will be read by the future designers of internet communication platforms.

Long live democracy! Viva la *révolution*!

⁵⁴ I've purposely left out WeChat here.

⁵⁵ This is heavily reliant on a human rationality

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