

***#republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, by Cass R. Sunstein. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 328 pp. ISBN: 978-0691175515**

Dominic Martin, Université du Québec à Montréal

Cass Sunstein's recent book reflects upon the political impacts of new communication and information technologies. His worry is that we are using technologies such as radio or television broadcasting, the internet, online forums, Facebook or other social media outlets in ways that pose a threat to democracy and freedom. He identifies two desiderata for a society to function well at the political level. First, unchosen informational exposure: people should be "exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance" (6). Second, people "should have a wide range of common experiences" (7). The book tells us that we are at risk of not being able to supply either. People familiar with Sunstein's work may recognize these from ideas he has developed in other books, especially *Republic.com 2.0* (Sunstein, 2007) and *Republic.com* (Sunstein, 2001). Still, Sunstein's warning seems as timely as ever, and parts of the book have been updated to take new realities—such as the rise of Facebook and Twitter—into account.

Let us start with chapter 2, which provides an account of democratic freedom as the theoretical foundation of the book. According to Sunstein, the framers of the US Constitution were not simple democrats; they were republican, and they placed a high premium on the idea of civic virtue, which involved an attempt to create a deliberative democracy. In this system, representatives were accountable to the public, but there was also supposed to be "a large degree of reflection and debate, within both the citizenry and government itself" (46). Other defenders of that democratic system include Jürgen Habermas and his ideal of speech situation, John Rawls, and even Aristotle. Finally, the founders also believed that "for a diverse people to be self-governing, it was essential to provide them a range of common values and commitments" (52).

Chapters 1, 3, and 4 discuss the political effects of new technologies. The first issue is what Sunstein calls the *Daily Me*. Internet technologies, the increased use of algorithms, and AI give a growing power to people "to filter what they see" online and a similarly growing power to the provider of information to "filter for each of us, based on what they know about us" (6). If your taste runs toward William Shakespeare, you can hear about Shakespeare all the time; if your views are left of center, you can read stories fitting what you think about climate change, equality in immigration, and labor unions.

Another issue is group polarization: "after deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group's members were originally inclined" (68). Studies show that members of a jury may develop more extreme points of view after deliberation. Or consider a group of pro-feminist women that may become even more strongly pro-feminist after discussion online. The internet and other information technologies also increase the occurrences

of *cybercascades*, that is, chains of communications where people start repeating information from other people, either because they stop relying on their own private opinion or information, or because they go along with the crowd in order to maintain a good reputation within the group. Sunstein considers, for instance, the fast propagation among American conservatives of the theory that President Obama was not born in the US.

These dynamics are intertwined in the analysis with other issues of our new communicational and informational universe, such as partyism, isolationism, ideological segregation, confirmation bias, radicalisation, extremism, identity building, the fragmentation of the communication universe, self-insulation, and deliberative enclaves. The upshot is that these dynamics are problematic because they make it more likely that people will isolate themselves in echo chambers, that they will radicalize, and that the stock of common experiences will be deprived. This will make it difficult to meet the two desiderata for a society to function well at the political level, and is likely to undermine the quality of free democratic deliberation in society.

Sunstein's argument is compelling and recent events remind us that the internet and new information technologies may be used in ways that are politically impactful. To cite one example, it is plausible that political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data to create finely targeted political advertising for President Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election.¹ There is also cause to believe that non-US governments have used Facebook and YouTube to destabilize US politics, especially during that election.²

But what is missing in Sunstein's analysis, crucially, is a clearer account of the severity of the Daily Me phenomenon. We may use new technologies in ways that isolate us in echo chambers, but these technologies also offer means to access much more information, much more easily. Consider a US citizen with a low level of education living in a small community fifty or one hundred years ago. Most of the political information that this individual received likely would have come from a few other community members or religious institutions. Yet, these individuals accounted for a significant portion of the voting population. To use another example, from Sunstein this time, magazines and newspapers have often catered to people with definite interests, such as African-American newspapers that have been offering different coverage of common issues since the early nineteenth century (66). Sunstein also quotes studies showing that people are exposed to a "remarkable degree of balance in [their] overall media diets regardless of partisan affiliation" (116-7). Can we really say, once all things are considered, that people today are less exposed to unchosen materials? If the US could function as a republican democracy at the beginning of the past century, why can it not function now? Can we observe similar trends in all countries that have access to the same communication and information technologies?

The second risk of the Daily Me is its potential to deprive us of shared experiences. But here, too, the impact of new technologies is unclear, for these new technologies have led to the emergence of deeply social systems of information and communication. This is a point that Sunstein grants as well: he writes that the internet is hardly "a lonely or antisocial domain;" in contrast to television, many of the current communication options are "dramatically increasing people's capacity to form bonds with individuals

and groups that would otherwise have been entirely inaccessible” (64). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to name a few, provide increasing and remarkable opportunities for the creation of new groups and connections. This contributes to the stock of common knowledge, and provides people with a wider range of views. Sunstein expounded upon his worries about the Daily Me in the first version of *Republic* fifteen years ago. In this latest version, *#republic*, he admits that there is “no Daily Me, at least not quite yet” (2). The reader is left wondering if the Daily Me is indeed coming, and why it has not happened already.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 further elaborate on the private and public benefits of shared experiences and knowledge in society, as well as a sense of shared tasks. The book then addresses the question of the relationship between our choices and our freedom, and shows that freedom should not only be associated with consumer choice. That is, Sunstein believes that citizens do not act or think as consumers in their role as citizens, rather they seek to “implement their highest aspirations” (167–8). The last of these three chapters aims at showing that regulation is necessary to protect the freedom of citizens to engage in this pursuit.

Chapters 8 and 9 comprise the recommendations portion of the book. First, Sunstein raises questions about the proper interpretation of the free speech principle in the US, and the idea that “the First Amendment to the Constitution requires governments to respect an ideal of ‘consumer sovereignty’” (193). The free speech principle is used, for instance, to protect the interests of the broadcasting industry—in limiting such regulations as quotas for educational programming or close captioning for the hearing impaired—on the basis that broadcasters must be free to satisfy consumer demand. Sunstein suggests a different interpretation of the free speech principle: in order to test if the First Amendment has been violated, we should see if speech regulation protects deliberation rather than consumer sovereignty. Sunstein also considers a series of proposals for addressing the issues raised in the book thus far. These include the creation of deliberative web sites or platforms, economic subsidies for nonprofit government space on the internet, and what Sunstein calls serendipity buttons or links that would expose people to diverse views on the Internet.

Among these proposals, voluntary self-regulation is probably the idea that will speak more directly to a business ethics audience. Sunstein suggests that broadcasters or other internet companies could establish agreements, such as codes of conduct, to ensure that they will provide a wide range of views to the public, even if it might violate antitrust laws. This idea could hardly be more relevant for current debates, given how tech giants such as Facebook or Alphabet have been struggling with the political exploitation of their platforms. So far, these companies have been trying to deal with these issues on their own. They also want to avoid being considered as media companies in order to not be regulated as such, but they have obtained only limited results. Much more work needs to be done on these pressing issues in order to establish, among other things, the proper level of governmental involvement.

Chapter 10 discusses how terrorism has benefited from new technologies to radicalize and isolate people. In the conclusion of the book, Sunstein invites us to recall the words of John Stuart Mill and John Dewey. According to Mill, it “is hardly possible to overstate the value . . . of placing human beings in contact with

other persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar” (252). According to Dewey, thought and its communication are not free simply because it is not legally restricted, for there is a central need to “possess conceptions which are used as tools of directed inquiry and which are tested, rectified and caused to grow in actual use” (252).

NOTES

1. See, for example, Cecilia Kang and Sheera Frenkel “Facebook Says Cambridge Analytica Harvested Data of Up to 87 Million Users,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2018, New York edition.
2. Sheera Frankel and Katie Benner, “To Stir Discord in 2016, Russians Turned Most Often to Facebook,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2018, New York edition.

REFERENCES

- Sunstein, Cass R. 2001. *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2007. *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.