

What do we know about digital public debate?

Technological affordances and democratic dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have become ubiquitous arenas of public debate, changing the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions. On the one hand, digital technologies offer enhanced possibilities for citizens' participation in public debate, but on the other, they destabilise democratic institutions. In this conceptually informed literature review, we take stock of what we know about digital public debate. To do so, we posit technological affordances – that is, technologies' latent action possibilities – as a lens through which to study digital public debate. We establish a typology based on human-centric, issue-centric, and technology-centric forms of participation, each of which can be engaged bottom-up by citizens or top-down by democratic institutions. We illustrate the resulting six types of participation through a review of empirical studies based in the Nordic context. We summarise what we currently know about digital public debate in a key democratic dilemma: increasing digital participation goes hand in hand with decreasing institutional trust.

KEYWORDS: affordances, democracy, digital public debate, digital publics, Nordic countries

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Introduction

The democratic value of public debate is contested; some theories of democracy view citizens' participation in the public exchange of opinion as key to democratic legitimacy while others see it as peripheral to the adequate functioning of democratic institutions (van Dijk, 2000). This, for instance, was the point of contestation in the Dewey–Lippman debate, where Dewey took the side of participatory democracy whereas Lippman advocated an elitist stand (Allan, 2010). The controversy, as it first played out in the 1920s, exposed lasting tensions between the normative appeal of unrestrained bottom-up processes of public opinion formation and a realist view of the sociotechnical configuration of citizens' involvement with issues of public concern (Marres, 2005).

Over the century that has passed since Dewey and Lippmann articulated their concerns with the normative potential and empirical feasibility of public debate, the view that citizens' participation is key to democratic legitimacy has become increasingly predominant (Teorell et al., 2007). Still, accepting that public debate is necessary for democratic legitimacy begs the question of what type of public debate holds democratic value and whether such debate is, indeed, practicable and scalable; is participatory democracy possible in mass society? (Lafont, 2019).

Societal and technological developments have contributed to the urgency of this question, incurring growing concerns about a potential disconnect between citizens and institutions (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021; Pfetsch, 2020; Whipple, 2005). As famously diagnosed by Habermas (1962/1989), the issue at stake is that of “the structural transformation of the public sphere”, that is, the changing ways in which sociotechnical developments shape the conditions of possibility for democratic participation. Most recently, this shaping has taken the form of digitalisation, which has renewed hopes for participatory democracy as well as deepened worries about the deterioration of public debate. The former position begins from observations of the democratising potentials of digital media, which enhance access to information and lower thresholds for participation, empowering citizens to organise around agendas of their own choice (Moyo, 2009). The latter view, as recently articulated by Habermas (2022) himself, sees digitalisation as a continuation of the dissolution of the public sphere, emphasising how the algorithmic curation of social media feeds, based on individualised data points, leads citizens to withdraw from rather than participate in the formation of public opinions – or, perhaps more precisely, to participate in ways that are not aligned with Habermas's vision of the role of the public sphere in deliberative democracy.

As Habermas (2022: 152) phrased the issue, “there must be a *recognisable* connection between the results of government action and the input of the voters' decisions such that the citizens can recognise it as the confirmation of the rationalising power of their own democratic opinion and will formation [emphasis original]”. Digitalisation, in this analysis, hampers “the rationalising power” of public debate by privileging mundane expressions of opinion in specialised and segregated fora. Somewhat paradoxically, the Habermasian diagnosis concludes that digital technologies offer increased possibilities for

people to participate in public debate but nevertheless threaten democratic legitimacy, as they invite the formation of ever smaller spheres of engagement that converge around idiosyncratic opinions and partisan modes of expression, dividing publics rather than bringing them together.

While Habermas's assessment is primarily conceptual, many studies have sought to identify and explain the empirical relationships between digital media and democracy. In a systematic review of this literature, Lorenz-Spreen and colleagues (2023) were unable to draw unequivocal conclusions and, instead, indicated that while digital media seem to increase the consumption of information and participation in debate, they also lead to decreasing trust in traditional democratic institutions, growing polarisation, and other tendencies that are detrimental to public debate and, by implication, democracy. Thus, these authors have indicated that the available empirical evidence confirms the discrepancy around which Habermas built his conceptual denouncement of the digital transformation of the public sphere. However, the extant literature does not unanimously conclude that digitalisation is "to blame" for the loss of democratic legitimacy. Rather, the overriding diagnosis is that digitalisation produces democratic dilemmas, leading Lorenz-Spreen and co-authors to call for further research on the relationship between citizens' participation in digital public debate and the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Seeking an overview of what is already known about this matter, we turn to the question of *how* digital technologies invite public debate, positing the concept of affordances as key to answering this question and building an analytical typology around it. We build this typology from our reading of studies that focus explicitly on the affordances of digital publics (e.g., Deseriis, 2021; Hartley et al., 2023) and apply it to a broader set of studies of digital public debate. Thus, we perform a conceptually guided review, containing two main sections: one building the typology and the other offering empirical illustrations of it.

First, centring affordances enables us to explore the latent action possibilities for public debate that digital technologies offer, thus identifying and explaining the invitations to (democratic) participation these technologies provide and how they are taken up. This orientation to affordances is informed by the sociotechnical perspective that digital technologies form the conditions of possibility for action, but that specific actions are not predetermined by their technologies of mediation: "Technology", as Kranzberg (1986: 545) famously put it, "is neither good or bad; nor is it neutral". In our context, this implies that the configuration of digital public debate is never given, neither at the level of specific processes of public opinion-formation nor in terms of the broader configuration of publics. Similarly, the democratic outcomes of digital public debate are also not given but depend on how participants act on possibilities for participation.

Second, applying the typology to empirical studies helps us avoid the impasse of condemning or celebrating the democratic potentials of digital public debate. Instead, we detail the democratic dilemmas that emerge from digital invitations to participation. With their commitment to participatory democracy and their high levels of digitalisation (Andersen & Hoff, 2001; Ervasti et al., 2008; for

a recent policy-initiative, see Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023), the Nordic countries are apt sites for exploring articulations of democratic dilemmas of digital public debate. Consequently, the empirical illustration draws on studies that centre on Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

In what follows, we first introduce the concept of technological affordances and then establish our typology, which distinguishes between bottom-up and top-down approaches to human-centric, issue-centric, and technology-centric forms of participation. Applying this typology to Nordic studies of digital public debate, we then identify six patterns of participation: mundane citizenship, negotiations of trust, connective and affective organisation, post-truth mediation, personalised polarisation, and critical infrastructure. Each pattern is informed by distinct approaches to the study of digital public debate, highlighting different aspects of the formation of digital publics and offering varied assessments of their democratic potentials. Based on the analysis, we revisit the question of what we know about digital public debate, discussing how the identified patterns constitute democratic dilemmas, separately and in conjunction.

Knowing public debate through the lens of digital affordances

Disparate theoretical and normative diagnoses of the present situation form the backdrop to our conceptualisation of digital affordances for public debate, but we aim to avoid establishing antecedent hypotheses as to the empirical state of affairs. Instead, we begin from Bruns's (2023) recent suggestion that examining the democratic value of digital publics may benefit more from investigations of "actually existing" networked publics than from assumptions about the democratic desirability of a comprehensive public sphere. Informed by this position, we aim to identify "what we know" about the empirical phenomenon of digital public debate before discussing its democratic value. We do not abandon the normative ideal of participatory democracy but suggest that this ideal may need rearticulation to adequately explain and evaluate the potentials of digital public debate.

Whereas Bruns's (2023) point is primarily methodological, we adopt his understanding of digital publics as "networks of networks" as a baseline for conceptualising the formation of publics in terms of assemblage theory (Asenbaum, 2021). Assemblages are "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant matters of all sorts" (Bennett, 2010: 23) that arise in and through processes of grouping the involved elements – of making, breaking, and changing networks. As such, assemblages are the intermittent results of ongoing interactions of the elements that are involved in them, and these interactions – or enactments of agency – are, in turn, conditioned by the invitations to action that are available within assemblages (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016).

Assemblages are shaped by participating elements, but the participants are not free to create any shape they want, as they are themselves shaped by their participation (Dahlman et al., 2021). The concept of affordances has been offered

as an explanation of how agencies and assemblages interrelate, giving shape to and taking shape from one another (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016, 2020). As such, affordances are not just a meso-level, connecting the macro-level of assemblages to the micro-level of agencies, but are actively involved in the formation of both.

Our understanding of specific digital affordances is specified from Gibson's (1979/2015) general definition, which encompasses "all kinds of action possibilities latent in the physical environment" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018: 235). For Gibson, an affordance – for example, the possibility to walk on ice – is relative to an actor's abilities but exists independently of whether or not it is taken up. For instance, not all animals are able to walk on a particular frozen lake (the ice could be too thin, the animal's feet could be unsuited for ice-walking, etc.), and even if an animal could walk on the frozen lake, it might choose to not do so; but, the lake's affordance of ice-walking exists nonetheless. Still, as possibilities for action, affordances must be actualised to become fully visible; we do not know if the affordance of ice-walking is available to us in this particular instance before we have tried walking on the frozen lake in question.

Thus, affordances are first and foremost relational, designating the possibility for action that exists between actors and their environments while distinguishing between potential and realised action. The concept's relational character makes it particularly useful for the study of sociotechnical organising, generally, and the organisation of digital publics, more specifically. Focusing on affordances enables us to answer the question of the types of social action that digital technologies invite, and how those invitations are taken up by users of digital technologies. Thus, affordances establish action opportunities for the formation of digital publics in and through digital public debate (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Pond & Lewis, 2019). Adopting the lens of affordances, we can explain how digital technologies shape publics by offering distinct opportunities for discursive self-organising – that is, possibilities for individuals to come together as collectives and to act on behalf of those collectives (Warner, 2002).

As Bucher and Helmond (2018) have shown, digital affordances can be high-level (possibilities for action that cut across digital technologies) and they can be low-level (the distinct invitations to, e.g., post, like, share, etc. of specific social media platforms). In her seminal work, boyd (2010) identified persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability as the central high-level affordances that shape networked publics. In other words, these four features recur across different networking sites, inviting users to engage with the sites and each other in distinct ways and organising publics accordingly. Similarly, Treem and Leonardi (2013) established visibility, editability, persistence, and association as the main affordances of social media use in organisations. Although these two influential studies do not offer the exact same terminology for the identified high-level affordances, they clearly indicate the same set of action opportunities: Digital technologies invite human users to participate in "the discovery, preservation, management, and distribution of messages in and through communicative networks" (Just et al., 2023: 505).

Digital affordances of self-organising publics: A typology

The question of how technological affordances are taken up for purposes of digital public debate has led scholars to emphasise various low-level affordances, showing how, for instance, invitations to like, comment, and share shape participation (Farkas & Schwartz, 2018). However, the issue is also addressed at the general level of democracy, for which Dahlberg (2011) has coined the concept of “the digital democracy affordance”, arguing that digital affordances can support different democratic positions. Hence, if one wants to know whether digital technologies are “good” or “bad” for democracy, one must begin by asking, “what version of democracy?”

Further, Deseriis (2021) found that digital affordances cut across different articulations of democracy to enable both bottom-up or emerging uses by citizens and top-down or instrumental uses by institutional actors, meaning, no matter the type of democratic society in question, digital technologies can be used to support as well as to destabilise established positions. The central affordance of digital technologies, in this view, is political participation, but the question remains of what type of political participation and with which democratic effects.

How one answers this question not only depends on one’s democratic theory (Dahlberg, 2011) and the direction of one’s perspective (Deseriis, 2021), it also depends on whether one focuses on what users do with digital technologies or on what digital technologies do to users. It depends on whether one comes to sociotechnical relationships from the social or the technological side: The former is the perspective of researchers who study networked publics as social formations in digital spaces, and the latter view is expressed in emerging literature on algorithmic publics, highlighting the organising capacities of digital technologies (Hartley et al., 2023). While digital affordances invite organic participation, they also enable systemic control, which becomes particularly apparent when one focuses on the increasingly active role of technologies in the organisation of publics, on the ways in which digital algorithms operate on user data to produce “calculated publics” (Gillespie, 2014).

Combining these affordance-oriented perspectives with Bruns’s (2023) understanding of digital publics as “networks of networks”, we can identify three forms of participation in digital public debate: human-centric, issue-centric, and technology-centric, where the first two are variations of the view that publics are social formations (centring individuals’ contributions and social processes, respectively) and the third highlights how technologies form publics. Further, we can distinguish two directions of participation – bottom-up and top-down – corresponding to whether one addresses the mediating role of affordances with a view to how agencies form assemblages or how assemblages condition agencies (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016). The resulting typology indicates how the topic of digital public debate can be approached through the lens of affordances; it shows us what we know about the conditions of possibility for digital public debate, conceptually speaking, but does not present any empirical knowledge on the topic. In other words, for now, the six categories only indicate invitations to participation but not how they are taken up.

Seeking empirical substantiation to the question of how digital public debate plays out, we conducted a review of Nordic studies of public debate, identifying recurrent patterns for each of the six conceptually established categories. Before turning to the analysis, we provide a brief note on our methods of data collection and analysis.

Application of the typology: A note on method

As mentioned, the illustrative analysis focuses on studies of the Nordic countries – or, more precisely, studies conducted in or from a Nordic context. As such, we do not exclude studies that involve other geographical areas, nor are we seeking to identify a particular Nordic form of digital public debate. Rather, we use the Nordic setting – and concomitant Nordic research – as a starting point, arguing that the Nordic region’s high level of digitalisation and strong tradition of (researching) participatory democracy makes it an interesting site for the application of our typology.

To establish a corpus of relevant studies, we manually searched through the past ten years (2014–2024) of publications in the two Nordic media and communication journals *Nordicom Review* and *MedieKultur*, identifying all published articles that deal in one respect or another with the interrelations between digital public debate and democracy. The search resulted in 47 articles published in *MedieKultur* and 64 in *Nordicom Review*.

Applying the typology to the selected articles, we were first interested in how many of them could, indeed, be fitted into the six categories. The result of this first reading can be seen in Table 1, and the subsequent closer reading was based on this set of 109 articles (these 109 articles are marked with an asterisk in the reference list). The two articles that we were unable to categorise were a methods paper and a theory paper, respectively; thus, all empirical studies (and articles referring to empirical studies) could be fitted into the typology. It should be noted that many articles hold affinities with several categories; however, we decided to only count each article once, making a judgement in each case as to the predominance of one category over the others. This partly explains the overweight of some categories, especially that of bottom-up studies of human-centric forms of participation, which contains empirical studies of specific processes and articulations of digital public debate. Such studies being what we were primarily looking for, it is unsurprising that this category is predominant. In the analysis, we indicate how it overlaps with other categories. Still, the skewed categorisation suggests that some approaches are more prevalent than others, just as it indicates some concerns are more niche or emergent.

Table 1 Nordic studies of digital public debate that align with the six categories (N = 109)

Type of participation	Direction of participation	
	Bottom-up (Agency shapes assemblage)	Top-down (Assemblage shapes agency)
Human-centric	42	19
Issue-centric	17	20
Technology-centric	7	4

In conducting the analysis, we searched for patterns within each of the six subsets, seeing the results as illustrations of how digital public debate can play out, but not claiming these findings to be exhaustive. The analysis, then, offers illustrative substantiations of what we know about digital public debate from the perspective of affordances. We present these findings as starting points for further discussion of the democratic potentials of digital public debate – no more, no less.

What we know about digital public debate: Patterns of participation

As we searched for empirical patterns within each category, we became aware that the subsets of articles also represent distinct scholarly approaches. In what follows, we unpack both, providing a label for each category that, we hope, is indicative of the patterns we have found (see Table 2). We read the Nordic studies of digital public debate in relation to the broader literature on digital publics, moving abductively between empirical illustrations and conceptualisations to establish and explain patterns of digital participation.

Table 2 Six patterns of participation in digital public debate

Type of participation	Direction of participation	
	Bottom-up (Agency shapes assemblage)	Top-down (Assemblage shapes agency)
Human-centric	Mundane citizenship	Negotiation of trust
Issue-centric	Connective and affective organisation	Post-truth mediation
Technology-centric	Personalised polarisation	Critical infrastructure

Mundane citizenship

The first strand of literature begins from observations of the many ways in which individual users take up digital technologies' invitation to participation in public debate. By their very existence, human participants' contributions form personalised publics, centred on individuals and the connections they make to specialised communities or broader issues of public concern. In this subset, there are numerous examples of studies of self-organising practices that begin from the articulation of a personal concern or interest, forming communities of, for example, women who suffer involuntary childlessness (Stenström & Pargman, 2021), men who seek to enhance their beard and hair growth (Raun & Petersen, 2021), or people who enjoy performative overeating (Nielsen & Petersen, 2021), to name but three diverse examples. Studies that show how individual participants organise around broader concerns are less frequent but more encompassing in scope, including issues like the Covid-19 pandemic (Johansen et al., 2023), the rise of populist racism (Askanius, 2021; Krzyżanowski et al., 2021), and climate change (Moe et al., 2023).

The research in which we have identified patterns of human participants' self-organising of digital publics often takes the form of case studies that detail how users employ the low-level affordances of different platforms, for example, the invitation to share pictures on Instagram (Christiansen & Heiselberg, 2022), the possibility to engage with video content on TikTok (Klug et al., 2022), or the option of sharing news stories on Facebook and Twitter (now X) (Almgren & Olsson, 2016). These studies map the many ways in which sociotechnical relations manifest in and as user participation, organising publics in and through individual actors' uptakes of technological means for the expression of social concerns.

Thus, the evidence that users do, indeed, take up the invitation of digital affordances to participate in the formation of publics is overwhelming. Think of a private concern or personal interest, and there will most likely be a public for it, as users self-organise in and through their engagement with others who also identify with the topic (Thomsen et al., 2025). Such engagement, many authors have noted, need not be very demanding, nor very sustained. Rather, the affordance of participation can be enacted through what Picone and colleagues (2019) have termed "small acts of engagement" or even, as Solverson (2024) has shown, as "active spectating".

Further, individual users' engagements with issues of public concern, whether large or small, need not be overtly political. More often than not, they begin from and venture deep into personal concerns and private desires that earlier publics might have considered out of bounds. And they can be expressed in playful – often ironic or satirical – terms that contrast with the serious tone, which was previously deemed necessary for public participation (Hornmoen et al., 2022; Klitgård, 2020; Storsul, 2014). Still, participation is far from unrestricted but depends on perceptions of the debate environment in terms of factors like tone of voice and source credibility. Thus, potential participants assess how inclusive a debate will be to them and their opinions, often leading them to resort to "lurking" rather than joining actively (Mozdeika, 2024).

Jointly, these studies indicate that digital participation in itself is, to paraphrase Kranzberg (1986), neither good nor bad – or, perhaps more precisely, it defers normative judgement. The affordance of bottom-up human-centric participation is equally available to feminists, neo-Nazis, vaccine sceptics, and climate activists – to people who long for more facial hair and to those who want less of it. Whatever their topic of choice, self-organising digital publics deviate starkly from traditional normative positions on how to adequately enact democratic citizenship. Their predominant style of participation is personal, emotional, sometimes insincere, and often ambiguous. Still, the surge in user participation may be seen as a revitalisation of democratic public debate or, perhaps, as Dahlgren (2006) has suggested, as “training ground” for more formal participation where individuals are able to practice their democratic skills – and exercise their democratic rights – through what Barkadjieva (2012) termed “mundane citizenship” (see also Thomsen et al., 2025).

Here, citizenship may – to shift the source of intertextual reference and riff off John Lennon – be what happens while you’re busy doing other things. Or in Dean’s (2003: 111) more formal terminology: “Democracy [...] may well be a secondary quality that emerges as an effect or a result of other practices, but that can never be achieved when aimed at directly”. Digital technologies may invite mundane acts of citizenship, but they invite acts of citizenship nonetheless – and as individual human participants take up these invitations, participation in digital public debate unfolds through everyday interactions between people who self-organise as discursive communities (i.e., publics), within and beyond mainstream societal norms.

Negotiation of trust

Turning from the bottom-up to the top-down perspective on human-centric participation, the joy in “wild” self-organising is replaced by concern about its democratic effects. As the first group of studies shows, digital affordances’ invitation to participation is taken up by multitudes of people in numerous ways, leading to the organisation of a hitherto unimaginable number of publics that cater to specified demographic groups and their particular interests but also bring together people from all walks of life around topics of general public concern. From the theoretical starting point of participatory democracy, participation should correlate positively with democracy. Therefore, it is a deep irony that digitalisation, as studies consistently show, leads to decreased trust in the traditional institutions of democracy (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

We can begin to unpack this discrepancy through Deseriis’s (2021) distinction between established political actors’ top-down use of digital technologies and citizens’ bottom-up participation. When the latter increases, people might become more wary of the former or, perhaps more precisely, come to expect that political institutions are – or should be – responsive to the citizens they claim to represent. Against this backdrop, politicians and other political actors negotiate the action possibilities that social media create for them as well as for citizens, seeking to (re-)establish people’s trust in them in the context of the hybrid media environment (Severin-Nielsen, 2023).

We can situate this negotiation within the broader sociotechnical shifts that Andreassen, Kaun, and Nikunen (2021) have discussed under the label of “the data welfare state”, asking what happens when democratic institutions and their representatives treat citizens as data points. Here, studies of public authorities’ use of digital affordances within formal policymaking (Steinveg & Bjørnå, 2023) are supplemented with analyses of political parties’ and individual politicians’ strategic use of social media to engage with citizens, for example, in election campaigns (Farkas & Schwartz, 2018).

The studies in this subset often take a strategic perspective, asking whether and how a public or private organisation succeeds in engaging their audiences (i.e., citizens) by means of digital technologies (Baltz, 2020; Bolin et al., 2024; Valtysson, 2015). A democratic dilemma arises as efforts to put digital technologies to strategic use chafe against the very logics of those technologies (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, 2018). In other words, each (top-down) attempt to repair or enhance publics’ trust in traditional democratic authorities can be immediately questioned and destabilised through renewed rounds of (bottom-up) participation. As digital technologies disrupt traditional positions of authority, trust and trustworthiness become contentious matters, open to negotiation at every encounter (Bodó, 2021).

Connective and affective organisation

Turning back to the bottom-up perspective but focusing on affordances that invite the circulation of societal issues rather than individual people’s participation in self-organising processes, we find studies of the mobilising potential of digitalisation. As people engage with the issues of their choice on digital media, publics form around those issues, and sometimes these publics are stirred into action (Kjær, 2022; see also Marres, 2005). Social movement scholarship remains ambivalent about the mobilising potentials of digital technologies, but “hashtag activism” has undeniably moved from the screens to the streets and back again, as evidenced by (studies of) movements like #metoo (Askanius & Hartley, 2019) and Black Lives Matter (Blaagaard & Roslyng, 2022), to name but two prominent examples. Studies of the digital organisation of social movements highlight the integration of online and offline experiences just as they illustrate how digital affordances cater equally to the organisation for and against an issue, suggesting how social movements are formed, sustained, or altered through online controversy (Bhroin et al., 2021; Zhao, 2017).

Digital affordances, this strand of the literature suggests, invite collective mobilisation “in real life”, but they do so in particular ways, often associated with the action possibility of networking or connecting, of establishing links between otherwise disparate individuals. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have argued, digitally enabled “connective action” can be supported by an existing organisation, but it can also arise directly from the activities of individual users. Thus, connective action is an individualised form of collective action that is facilitated by digital affordances of participation and connection, linking people together in loose and informal networks that depend on personalised messages

as well as personal communication. As opposed to traditional collective action, connective action does not depend on formal organisation but “facilitates social movement organisation through individuals’ adoption and sharing of the movement’s message(s) in and through their own social (media) networks” (Just et al., 2025: 506). This, however, does not mean connective action always follows directly from individual action; rather, it depends on the specific sociotechnical relations of the process, on the technologies used and the cultural context of the usage (Pond & Lewis, 2019). Online, collective action tends to be highly personalised, and it is intimately related to the self-organisation of publics, but this group of studies suggests that its mobilising force is nonetheless distinct from individual action.

Significantly, this distinction hinges on the intensity of feeling that runs through user engagement, as online mobilisation for offline action is not only connective but also affective. Here, affect can be defined as the intersubjective distribution of emotions that is felt individually (Ashcraft, 2021) – and is differently embodied by different individuals, thereby underscoring both the interrelations of individual and collective agencies and of online–offline realities. Hence, the social force of affective intensification is not unique to digitally mediated interaction. To the contrary, it runs like an electric current through all human engagement with the world, orienting our relations and charging the connections we make; it is what supplies assemblages and the matter they are made of with their “vibrancy” (Bennett, 2010; see also Just, 2019). However, online circulation of affect is rampant, as the distance the screen affords has been shown to lower cultivated social inhibitions – sometimes enabling people who are otherwise marginalised to find a voice and a collective (Andreassen, 2016; Sveningsson et al., 2022), and sometimes giving rise to uncivil interactions (Nilsson, 2021; Oh et al., 2021; Ruzza, 2021).

Here, issue-centric forms of participation interface with technology-centric ones, as the algorithmic selection of the content that users are exposed to privileges the content users engage with most strongly. As such, users are more exposed to content that is emotionally charged and hence most likely to elicit emotional reactions, driving users to circulate that content further and engage with it more (Dean, 2019). We return to this point in the two final sections that centre the ways in which digital affordances are agential in themselves. For now, the key observation is that social and technological forces work together, reinforcing the process of affective circulation and intensification.

As Ahmed (2004: 120) noted, “the more [signs] circulate, the more affective they become”. This is a fortiori true when people take up invitations to participate in digital circulation (Just, 2019). While traditional understandings of public debate favour rational interaction and have dismissed the democratic potential of digital publics because of their affective organisation, studies of digital bottom-up mobilisation for collective action indicate that affectivity is a condition of possibility for the public exchange of reason (Just, 2016). To borrow from Kranzberg (1986) yet again, intensification of feeling in itself is neither good nor bad; the question is what feelings are intensified and to what ends.

Affective circulation can further purposes of inclusion and exclusion; they can open up and shut down public debate (Chaput, 2010). The direction of affective circulation is never given and can shift any second, highlighting the volatility of digital public debate.

Post-truth mediation

This volatility explodes into an “epistemic crisis” when the perspective on issue-centric participation is shifted from bottom-up mobilisation to top-down mediation (Dahlgren, 2018). Many studies that fall into this category focus on the institution of the news media, taking on the broader question of how digital technologies change the media landscape as such. Most notably, digitalisation is found to create new conditions of possibility for mediatisation (Ampuja et al., 2014) and to reposition the news media vis-à-vis democracy (Widholm & Ekman, 2024). Whereas the news media formerly held a privileged role as mediators between citizens and democratic institutions, this role is increasingly challenged, as people and their elected representatives circumvent the “middleman” to instead communicate directly on social media. Thus, the question of who can be trusted to tell the truth extends beyond political actors and formal democratic institutions to also include the institution of the news media, whose role as “democratic watchdog” has become open to renegotiation (Givskov & Trenz, 2014; Karlsson et al., 2022).

While politicians have been shown to use social media to directly undermine the legitimacy of news media (Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023), media organisations may counter this move by offering themselves as platforms for participatory democracy (Backholm et al., 2024) or epistemic authority (Farkas & Schousboe, 2024). Traditional news media, studies that deal with this issue find, have an opportunity to position themselves as the democratically legitimate alternative to the now rather well-established “alternative news environments” of social media (Brems, 2024; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024), which are often blamed for the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Beyond the jostle for positioning between “traditional” and “alternative” sources of news, however, the new media logics espoused by digital affordances have destabilised users’ ability to discern the validity of information to such an extent that the current moment of mediatisation is sometimes described as the “post-truth era” (Gunkel, 2019). Hence, the questions of who spreads mis- and disinformation and how pervasive it has become are certainly important (Kalsnes et al., 2021), but the invitation of digital media to spread any and all content with equal authority raises deeper questions of how to make epistemic judgements (Neuberger et al., 2023). How, that is, should citizens determine which issues are societally important and assess which information about those issues to consider? The problem is that whereas those questions were previously answered by the news media, the shifting media landscape has left the plethora of self-organising issue publics without a mechanism for what might be termed “meta-organising”. Bruns (2023) has suggested that issue publics do become connected, but it is unclear who or what makes those connections.

Further, the affordances of “post-truth mediation” raise ethical issues of how to protect freedom of expression whilst also guarding against the spread of fake news, hate speech, and other democratically harmful modes of participation (Jørgensen & Zuleta, 2020; Svensson & Edström, 2016). Articulating these epistemic and normative dilemmas shifts attention away from the ways in which members of civil society and representatives of democratic institutions take up digital affordances and towards the agency that digital platforms exert in their own right. Digital technologies may invite other actors to enact their agencies, but the technologies are not neutral; not only do digital platforms facilitate some actions at the expense of others, the platforms themselves (or, their owners and business models) are also actors with interests and agencies. They may facilitate self-organisation of publics according to the different interests and desires of participants, but they also organise publics for their own (financial) benefits.

Personalised polarisation

Bottom-up and top-down technology-centric studies form the smallest subsets in our collection of Nordic studies of digital public debate. As mentioned, this is partly explainable by the integration of this perspective in other studies, but it also indicates that empirical studies of the assertion of agency *by* technologies are just emerging. Conceptually, though, the idea that platforms hold agency has gained much traction in recent years. Arguments to this effect often begin from the observation that most social media and other digital platforms are owned by private companies whose prime objective is profit maximisation. While digital technologies enable new business models, organising value creation in ways that are distinct from those of the firm, they remain businesses, first and foremost (Stark & Vanden Broeck, 2024). This basic fact is foregrounded by conceptualisations of how tech companies extract value from user data, under conditions of what Zuboff (2019) has famously labelled “surveillance capitalism”. The diagnosis here is that while users are invited to act on digital platforms, platforms simultaneously act on users, turning each user action into a data point that can help predict each user’s subsequent actions and to tailor the user experience accordingly (Mathieu & Jorge, 2020). Technological affordances, then, are agential in themselves.

It may be considered a contradiction in terms to speak of bottom-up technology-centric participation. Accordingly, the studies we have placed in this category begin from a critical perspective to unpack how algorithms “operate on” users by extracting and manipulating their data. This “quantification of human life” or “datafication” (Mejias & Couldry, 2019) raises questions of how to protect the individual right to privacy, sparking queries of what platforms know about users and what they do with this information, just as these studies investigate how personal data can be protected from undue usage (Damkjær et al., 2021; Jørgensen, 2016; Mai, 2016).

Beyond issues of privacy and accountability, datafication has implications for bottom-up participation in public debate insofar as it personalises users’ access to information. The question of the extent to which the personalisation of feeds

leads to “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” remains empirically contested, and the underlying conceptual assumptions have been challenged (Dahlgren, 2021). In other words, it is unclear whether and how algorithms lock people into closed loops of data-based reinforcement of existing opinions and behaviours. Still, the fact that a concern with the democratic consequences of personalisation is part of the public imaginary of digital debate is telling; when users become aware that they are interacting with technologies rather than directly with each other, this awareness shapes their social *and* their technical interactions (Bucher, 2017; Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020).

At the level of informal civic participation, datafication calls into question users’ ability to form self-organising publics, suggesting instead that digital technologies organise users into “data publics” (Hartley et al., 2023) and raising issues of how the datafied personalisation of user experiences shapes public debate. Here, affective polarisation has been identified as one important consequence; this is not solely the outcome of algorithmic processing of user data but should rather be considered a sociotechnical relation: Users’ emotional predispositions affect how they use digital technologies, which in turn affects their feelings towards other users (Nordbrandt, 2023). Thus, studies that emphasise the bottom-up organising of algorithmic publics on, or as, technological platforms suggest that digital affordances do not determine processes of public debate entirely. Rather, they organise publics around individuals through processes of personalisation and polarisation that may make self-organising between those individuals (i.e., mundane citizenship) and negotiations of trust between citizens and institutions increasingly difficult (Just, 2024).

Critical infrastructure

Applying an institutional perspective to the issue of the agency exerted by digital platforms, it is apparent that these technologies have become critical infrastructures of societies around the globe, shaping social, economic, political, and communicative relationships, not least in terms of how public debate is conducted. Today, digital technologies drive mediatisation, mediating between other societal institutions and shaping the institution of the media itself (Jensen, 2013). As such, social media and other digital technologies are not just catching the attention of regulators and other political actors, they are themselves influencing political and other societal decisions by organising and governing social relations, notably through enabling or delimiting privacy and freedom of expression (as indicated above). This means that social media, despite persistent claims to the contrary, do hold editorial responsibilities; in fact, Big Tech companies have become political actors with both direct and indirect policymaking powers (Gillespie, 2018).

While this subset of studies is by far the smallest in our sample, it can be divided into two distinct perspectives: one is concerned with sociotechnical imaginaries of technological innovation (Hansen, 2022; Dahlman et al., 2023), the other understands digital technologies as critical infrastructure (Flensburg & Lai, 2020a; Lai et al., 2019). The latter group of studies typically takes a

comparative perspective, showing how technological infrastructures interrelate with market forces and policies to form distinct “digital communication systems” in national contexts (Flensburg & Lai, 2020a, 2020b). Thus, Flensburg and Lai (2020b) have analysed the hybrid character of the Danish digital communication system, drawing inspiration from O’Hara and Hall’s (2018) identification of “four Internets” (the open, the bourgeois, the authoritarian, and the commercial). They find a “dichotomy between socio-cultural policies, based on universalistic welfare state values that legitimate relatively strong state regulation, and competition policies encouraging market and self-regulation” (Flensburg & Lai, 2020b: 704). These studies show that although digital platforms tend to be global in reach, the technologies interrelate with economic and political contexts to create distinct conditions of communicative possibility within different polities. The platforms organise digital publics top-down, but there is still room for other actors to organise differently, not least through processes of public debate that reflexively consider their own organisation.

This last group of studies sets the scene for normative discussions of how digitalisation affects democracy by shifting attention from the specifics of technological affordances to broader changes in “the structural conditions that frame people’s communication” (Flensburg & Lai, 2020a: 127). They show that the invitations to action that shape digital public debate are themselves shaped by sociotechnical structures, suggesting that people’s ability to participate is constrained by the platforms’ ability to organise publics – and advocating further debate on this organisation and the development of alternatives to it.

Concluding discussion: Democratic dilemmas of digital publics

At the onset of this investigation of what we know about digital public debate, we established an empirical baseline: the dilemma that increasing digital participation leads to decreasing trust in the traditional institutions of democratic society (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). We also established a conceptual starting point, agreeing with normative positions as, for instance, established by Habermas (1962/1989), that public debate is necessary for a well-functioning democracy. However, we expressed disagreement with scholars who unilaterally blame present shortcomings on the affordances of digital technologies, Habermas (2022) again being a prime example. If current forms of digital participation do not match the theoretical ideals of deliberative democracy, maybe the theory is (at least) as much in need of revision as the practice. Or, to put the same point in practical terms, since the unexpected negative correlation between digital participation and institutional trust is a democratic problem, it should be up to representatives of democratic institutions to fix it. This is not to say that participation in digital public debate cannot be problematic or that inviting new forms of participation should not be part of the solution. Nor do we mean to imply that digital platforms – and their owners – are blameless with regard to current shortcomings. Rather, the point is that solutions must be based on a better understanding of the problem. To gain such an understanding, we have

offered a typology for studying uptakes of technological affordances, applying it to the illustrative case of Nordic studies of digital public debate.

A first outcome of our study is that digital publics are not as universal and comprehensive as the deliberative ideal suggests, a point that is at least partially accommodated within Habermas's (1998: 360) more recent definition of the public sphere:

The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way as to coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions [emphasis original].

While this definition still speaks of "the public sphere" in the singular, it makes clear that public opinions do not represent societal consensus; it is not the specific opinions (i.e., their substance) that lend legitimacy to democratic societies, but the procedure of basing political decisions on public consultation. If everyone agrees with the procedure, Habermas suggested, they will also accept the outcomes even when emerging (or coalescing, as he put it) public opinions differ from their individual views.

Second, our findings question this procedural ideal of the public use of reason. Beginning from the observation that digital technologies lower the bar for participation in public debate, Habermas (2022) has argued that because everyone can now express their opinions in the manner they see fit, no public opinions coalesce from these processes, and democracy is left without a legitimate basis for decisions. In Habermas's view, the very affordances that enable participation in digital public debate drive a wedge between bottom-up participation and top-down political decisions, making it impossible to base the latter on the former. Digitalisation promises democratisation, but this is a promise it cannot keep, to the detriment of democratic institutions.

The studies we have surveyed challenge the deliberative rejection of the democratic potential of digital public debate at the empirical level and in terms of its normative premises. Thus, some scholars suggest that digital public debate has more legitimacy potential than it is typically given credit for, highlighting its deliberative qualities or networked character – that is, its ability to bring together many different voices across various topics, tonalities, and technologies (Bruns & Enli, 2018; Bruns & Moon, 2019). Studies that adopt the perspective of connective and affective organisation go further and reject the very ideal of rationality (Just, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015), suggesting that self-organising publics hold the most democratic potential when they challenge rather than conform to established norms of rationality. As Warner (2001: 51) put it:

Because [the dominant organisation of "the" public sphere] is the field that people want to transform, it is not possible to assume the habitus according to which rational-critical debate is a neutral, relatively disembodied procedure for addressing common concerns, while embodied life is assumed to be private, local, or merely affective and expressive.

Consequently, one might evaluate democratic societies based on how many different voices their institutions are able to listen to rather than on how uniformly their citizens are able to express themselves.

Third, and finally, our analysis indicates the need to reconsider the Habermasian insistence on unity. Clearly, digital publics are many and multifarious, self-organising around different topics and in diverse ways, but it is less certain that these specific processes of self-organising cannot support the overall organisation of democratic societies. In fact, they may, as Warner suggested in the above quote, invigorate democracy in and through their very plurality. For Bruns (2023), the question of the multiplicity of publics is a methodological rather than a theoretical one, as he has advocated the study of digital public debate as networks of individuals, issues, and networks (i.e., networks of networks), showing how these networks interact to form publics. We have bypassed the methodological issue but follow Bruns in highlighting that the quality of digital public debate is an empirical rather than a theoretical matter. We cannot establish a priori that digitalisation is good or bad for democracy but must investigate actual practices of digital public debate before making any assessments of their democratic potentials. When doing so, however, the results are mixed, as our application of the typology to Nordic studies of digital public debate illustrates.

First, we have found that human-centric participation proliferates across topics and interests, giving rise to any number of vibrant publics that come together in multifarious combinations of different elements. But, we also show that this bottom-up self-organisation of publics is not completely aligned with top-down negotiations of trust. Significantly, self-organising publics are not always met with institutional support, nor do they always need to be. Many of these publics are, indeed, geared to resolving their own problems (e.g., by seeking each other's advice), but when self-organised and institutionally invited debates overlap, trouble brews. Bottom-up and top-down debates about the same matters often play out quite differently, and quite separately, raising democratic concerns.

Our second main group of studies focuses on the question of how digital affordances shape digital public debate around societal issues from the bottom-up and the top-down perspective. The two patterns we identify here both connect human participation and technological platforms, showing how issues evolve sociotechnically (Marres, 2005). For bottom-up processes, digitalisation alters the conditions of possibility for social movements, and while some studies are hopeful, the overriding pattern aligns with Jäger's (2024) recent suggestion that digitally organised social movements are "hyperpolitical" – good at mobilising, but bad at institutionalising. Again, this explains the disconnect between digital participation and trust, as participants in swift and sweeping protests may expect to gain political influence, but existing norms and procedures for political decision-making are not geared to such "extra-institutional" forces.

The top-down oriented group of issue-centric studies highlights a different problem of mediation, namely, the changing role of the news media. Here, the disconnect between people's participation and the traditional institutions is foregrounded; as the news media no longer provide the connection and

digital media are not geared to do so, questions of factual validity and content moderation are (increasingly) up in the air (a problem that is exacerbated by recent developments emanating from the US; see, e.g., McMahon et al., 2025).

Finally, the last set of studies is the smallest but, perhaps, also the most important. Foregrounding platform agencies as these technology-centric studies do, they present the most negative or pessimistic view of the democratic potential of digital public debate, showing how citizens' (bottom-up) participation is significantly constrained by algorithmic organisation because the (top-down) perspective of Big Tech corporations increasingly dominates interaction on their platforms. Hence, Big Tech gains the capacity to organise society through control of critical infrastructure.

From the Habermasian perspective on deliberative democracy, this last group of findings supports the conclusion that digitalisation is damaging to democracy, suggesting that invitations to participate must change to align better with democratic ends. For scholars who begin with practice rather than with theory, the opposite does not necessarily become true. Rather, these scholars tend to confirm the sociotechnical premise that digital technologies do not determine democratic outcomes, but that they are not neutral either. As Papacharissi (2002) has argued in an early intervention in this ongoing debate, whether digital public debates organise public spheres is not entirely up to the technological affordances themselves, but as Winseck (2002) simultaneously posited (indeed, in the same issue of the same journal) it is not entirely up to the people who use these affordances either.

In conclusion, how the democratic dilemmas of digital public debate are handled is a sociotechnical question, and it is a practical and processual one; the dilemmas cannot be dealt with in theory, nor can they ever be fully resolved in practice. Our review of studies that either deal with the Nordic context directly or by association indicates that there are reasons to look to this context for "best practices". While we caution against considering our findings as evidence of Nordic "exceptionalism", we do find hope in the top-down sensitivity to bottom-up participation that many of the surveyed studies illustrate or advocate – and which is corroborated by recent policy initiatives that seek to offer alternatives to the democratic risks posed by Big Tech (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023; see also Ministry of Digital Affairs, 2024). As scholars of digital public debate, our primary task remains the study of empirical processes through which we may not only follow practical developments, in the Nordic region and beyond, but also gain the potential to shape these developments through continuous assessments of the democratic potentials of various social uptakes of technological affordances.

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