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Influencers as the New Opinion Leaders:

Polarization, Social Media, and Digital Populism

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Introduction

Through this thesis comprehensive analysis, utilizing the study of the Two Flows Communication Model, of the modern phenomenon of information dissemination that is rampant and prevalent on social media platforms, will be conducted. The analysis will take place through an introductory historical review of the concept of public opinion, up to its polarisation caused by the emergence of the nouveau opinion leaders both in the realm of social media and contemporary society: the influencers. The intent of this study, in fact, is to explore the multifaceted dynamics of this phenomenon, with a particular focus on the very existence of public opinion and its subsequent polarization, which is influenced by the emergence of these figures.

To accomplish this objective, the analysis will proceed providing and insight of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical research, the methods through which social media platforms have become influential spaces for the formation and diffusion of public opinion will be explored. Furthermore, the implications of this process will be examined, particularly the observed polarization of public opinion, which has been largely fueled by the persuasive abilities and widespread reach of influencers across various social media platforms.

In addition to public opinion dynamics, the phenomenon of rational ignorance will be observed within the context of limited political participation, especially in the digital realm. By examining the factors that contribute to the under-participation of individuals in political discussions and activities, insights into the complex interplay between technology, social dynamics, and democratic processes will be gained.

Furthermore, this research seeks to investigate the role of algorithms in shaping the information landscape of social media platforms, particularly in relation to influencers. The economic model of social media will be considered to underscore the profit-making purposes that the algorithmic operations of social media conceal. The analysis will develop delving into how the previously mentioned algorithms are utilized by both opinion leaders and political actors to achieve their personal goals and eventually perpetuate and amplify populism and extremism. One key mechanism through which this occurs, the creation of filter bubbles, will be taken into account wherein algorithms selectively present information that aligns with users' pre-existing beliefs and preferences, thereby reinforcing echo chambers and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

To provide empirical evidence, supporting the above hypotheses, the radical ramification of the feminist movement will be considered as a case study. Feminism, as a historical and permanent movement, has been both empowered and undermined by social media, with instances of radicalism and extremism often dominating the online conversation. An examination of its most extreme and counterproductive manifestations, through a consideration of the changing connotation of the term Social Justice Warriors, demonstrates how social media platforms, tautologically influenced by influencers, can become vehicles for the spread and amplification of polarized and often divisive ideologies.

Ultimately, this in-depth examination of the aforementioned topics seeks to offer potential solutions to the sociological and political challenges arising from the modern information landscape on social media platforms. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics, implications, and potential consequences, the contribute to the development of strategies and approaches that can address the issues of polarization, populism, and extremism in the digital realm will be proposed.

In synthesis, through a rigorous analysis, drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, political science, and communication studies, this research aims to shed light on the complex interplay between social media, influencers, algorithms, public opinion and the polarization of the political debate. The culmination of this scrutiny will serve as a foundation for proposing potential solutions to this sociological and political phenomenon and fostering a more informed and engaged digital society.

Chapter 1: The Concept of Public Opinion

(1.1) Public Opinion: The Historical Origins and Development of the Concept

Public opinion is defined as "free and public communications from citizen to their government on matters of concern to the nation"[1]. The expression 'public opinion' was only formally conceptualized in the 18th century, in the course of the Enlightenment. The coinage of the term is in fact often attributed to Jacques Necker, finance minister at the time of King Louis XIV of France to describe the chatter in the salons of Enlightenment Paris. It may also prove useful to return to Machiavelli who demonstrates, despite lexical uncertainties, an expression of a political language in the making[2], the existence of a necessity to define public opinion, the position of the masses. The Machiavellian concept of "universal opinion" in fact has predominantly drawn attention for its obvious affinity with "public opinion," a term that first appeared in Italy only in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is therefore tempting to look for in the Machiavellian expression the anticipation of one of the pivotal ideas of political modernity.

In spite of this, as Susan Herbst points out in her chapter *The history and meaning of public opinion*[3], the concept has existed since the ancient Greek democracies. It is from the Greek πόλεις that people assembled for the sake of entertainment, discussion on public matters and, most importantly, for the pursuit of social acceptance. This is a reflection of public opinion being closely linked to interpersonal networks. In fact, public opinion is such, tautologically, as opinion disclosed to others. Ancient societies were indeed small-scale and constructed on the interrelationships. Nowadays, the dimensions of democratic societies make it infeasible to maintain an interpersonal paradigm.

In the modern era, the very definition of public opinion seems more complex than it has ever been due to the depth of global communication: shifts in communication have disrupted all of the basis of public opinion, prompting us to question the value of opinion polls and all of the other conventional vehicles for expressing and measuring public opinion that we were

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[1] Speier, H. (1950). *"Historical development of public opinion"*. In *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 55, No. 4. The University of Chicago Press, 376-388. Retrived from https://www.jstor.org/stable/2772299.

[2] Machiavelli, N. *"Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua"*. In *Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, Firenze, Gaetano Cambiagi, 1782, volume VI.

[3] Berinsky, A. J., & Herbst, S. (2016). *"The History and Meaning of Public Opinion"*. In *New Directions in public opinion,* edited by Adam J. Berinsk. New York: Routledge, 21-33.

accustomed to. Nowadays, individuals strive to keep pace, or not, with the knowledge that a realm of discussions on political and social matters awaits them on their screens, should they choose to observe silently or actively engage. Internet literacy is flourishing, and younger generations are accustomed to acquiring knowledge of public sentiment exclusively through the internet, a vast resource teeming with data and unexpected discoveries. The immediacy of communication we experience is perhaps the most fulfilling aspect of all: no longer must one struggle to have a modest letter published in the editor's column or yearn in vain for a glimpse of the president on the basketball court. Images, concepts, debates, and passionate rants abound, connecting us to a multifaceted yet seemingly interconnected world.

The evolution of public opinion, as I have demonstrated through my historical overview, progresses gradually. Change now appears to occur at a swifter pace, but attempting to predict the future of political discourse and popular sentiment would be a perilous endeavor. That said, the technological advancement, the advent of mass media and social networks has served to reconnect the opinions of individuals, but even more to influence them.

(1.2) Proving the Existence of Public Opinion

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu[4] argued that there is no such thing as 'public opinion'. The French sociologist sustained his argument stating that any opinion research assumes that everyone has an opinion on the topic at hand and that all opinions are of equal value. In addition, implicit in the simple fact of asking all individuals the same question, Bourdieu found the belief that everyone has the ability and tools to answer that question, which is deeply democratic but, unfortunately, poorly realistic. From these three postulates analyzing opinion polls Bourdieu deduced that public opinion does not exist except in the form of an illusion provided by those who have an interest in asserting that it exists. Indeed, capturing the public's sentiment is a long-standing desideratum of both the political and economic leaders and citizens.

The American sociologist Leo Bogart[5], in support of his French colleague's thesis, stated: "The question of what people think about public issues is really secondary to the

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4 Bourdieu, P. (1979). "*Public Opinion Does Not Exist*". In *Communication and Class Struggle 1*, edited by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub. New York: International General: 124-130.

5 Bogart, L. (1967). "*No opinion, don't know, and maybe no answer*". In *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *31*(3), 331. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

question of whether they think about them at all". The questions that make up opinion polls are, in fact, too often far removed from the interests and knowledge of the people they are addressed to. As the communication scholar Klaus Krippendorff suggests[6], declaring it not to exist or as a phantom of the imagination, would not facilitate understanding the phenomenon. It is, surely, a social construction[7]. Indeed, the focus of the analysis conducted throughout this paper is less on the nature of this concept and more on its unstoppable force.

(1.3)Rationality Underlying Political Ignorance: Scarce Political Participation

When the cost of gathering sufficient information on a topic, to develop an objective opinion about it and in order to make an informed decision, may outweigh the potential benefit that can reasonably be expected to be obtained from that decision, ignorance about the topic in question is defined as rational. However, this does not imply that people choose to be completely uninformed. In fact, they prefer to turn to informational shortcuts, such as social and mass media, to acquire a smattering of knowledge on a determined and trending subject, sufficient to sustain real but mostly virtual conversations.

In recent years, it has become impossible not to notice how polarised the public debate is and how it is characterised by increasingly weak and vacuous arguments. Social media in particular, which should be the natural habitat of free confrontation and host the triumph of uninfluenced individuality, instead prove to be the most fertile ground for the growth of a polarized political scenario. They are, in fact, all too often the primary source of information for individuals who, vastly scrolling their feeds, read passively repeated slogans and end up repeating them in turn. This lack of interest on the part of the audience implies little verification of the information received and learned and a consequent increase in the power of those who propagate and spread the messages. Social media have indeed turned out to be the megaphone of rational ignorance sold as informed opinion.

Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld were not wrong when they declared that the mass media would entrench people into "an informed but inactive attitude"[8]. Or perhaps, they were

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6 Krippendorff, K. (2005). *The Social Construction of Public Opinion*. Kommunikation über Kommunikation. Theorie, Methoden und Praxis. Festschrift für Klaus Merten, 129-149. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/75

7 Herbst, S. (1993): "*The Meaning of Public Opinion. Citizens' Construction of Political Reality*". In *Media, Culture and Society,* 15: 437-454.

8 Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1957). *Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action.*

only incorrect in terms of how informed our views would have been after the advent of social media.

Chapter 2: Two Flows Communication Model

(2.1) Two Flows Communication Model: the Role of Opinion Leaders

In 1955 Lazarsfeld and Katz wrote "*Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*", which introduced the two flows communication model[9]. Under this theory there is no continuous stream of information from the media to the final recipients. On the contrary, it would proceed from the media to the so-called opinion leaders, individuals which are both most susceptible to certain news and most socially influential within a certain social group. In this communication model the role of opinion leaders is crucial, as they help bridge the gap between the media or information sources and the general public. The message would then be conveyed by opinion leaders to the social group to which they belong or to which they refer.

In the debate between Emile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde[10], Durkheim argued that sociology revolved around the compelling force of social norms. On the other hand, Tarde, who was considered the apparent loser, prioritized the study of aggregation, focusing on how communication from person to person contributes to the formation of these norms. When designing "The Decatur Study," Paul Lazarsfeld aligned himself with Tarde's perspective. Lazarsfeld admired Tarde's brilliant exploration of the role of conversation in the aggregation of public opinion, as detailed in Tarde's[11] study which serves as a classic precursor to Lazarsfeld's concept of the two-step flow of communication.

Lazarsfeld found that messages from the media can be further mediated by informal "opinion leaders" who intercept, interpret, and disseminate information to their personal networks. This concept, coupled with the idea of "selectivity" in exposure, perception, and recall of media messages, points to a shift in the power dynamics between media and

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[9] Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication.* Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

[10] Clark, T. (ed.) (1969). *Gabriel Tarde on Communication and Social Influence.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[11] Tarde, G. (1898, 1989). *L 'opinion et la Foule.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

audiences, particularly in terms of short-term persuasion. It implies that the effectiveness of media is somehow dependent on interpersonal influence[12].

In the following sections we will see how, following the advent of social media, influencers have become the new opinion leaders and filter bubbles have substituted the just mentioned social groups.

(2.2) Opinion Leaders and the Advent of Social Media

A growing variety of human practises that heavily rely on means of communication have made digital media a vital aspect of our life. Over the years, the Internet has been celebrated for its enormous potential, such as sharing data and information, disseminating knowledge and promoting public debate, thus contributing to the enthusiastic rhetoric about so-called collective intelligence[13], a new form of intelligence that emerges from the collaboration and collective efforts of individuals. It has been positioned up as the primary framework in our everyday existence, with the power to influence politics, society, and public opinion.

Influencers are emerging as the new opinion leaders in the social media era: before the advent of social media, traditional media (such as television, radio and newspapers) were the main vehicles of information and influence, with journalists and pundits acting as opinion leaders, spreading news and opinions about them to the masses. With the advent of social media, however, a significant change occurred. Influencers, people with a large amount of followers and credibility within specific niches of interest, have gained power and influence in the digital sphere. Through social media, influencers are able to create original content, share their opinions, tell personal stories and interact directly with their audience. This two-way interaction allows influencers to establish a closer and more personal connection with their followers, building trust and a relationship of dependence.

This updated two-stream communication model has fundamentally changed the way people obtain information and make decisions. Now, instead of depending on traditional media or experts, people seek advice, opinions and information from influencers they feel

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[12] Katz, E. and Popescu, M. (2004). "*Narrowcasting: On Communicator Control of the Conditions of Reception*". In P. Golding and I. Bondebjerg (eds.), *European Culture and the Media.* Bristol: Intellect.

[13] Levy, P., & Bononno, R. (1999). C*ollective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace.* Perseus Books.

close to and identify with. However, it is important to note that not all influencers are necessarily carriers of accurate information or experts in their niches. According to the theories of Lazarsfeld and Katz, opinion leaders are not simply more exposed to the media but above all have greater media literacy, i.e. a greater familiarity with media language and content, which translates into a better understanding and interpretation of messages. Nowadays, social media allow people with low media literacy as well to reach a large amount of users in a short time and influence them. The internet, social media and this hyper-connectedness between individuals who are undeniably rationally ignorant, proves to be increasingly dangerous.

Political and social discussion is now instantaneous and has no frontiers: these technologies have changed how contemporary politics are performed[14]. Citizens and their use of social and digital media now have more influence over the manner in which public opinion is shaped. With the accessibility provided by the social media, most people can voice their viewpoints to a massive arena, irrespective of the ponderousness or authenticity of the facts. In fact, despite the profusion of both information and opinions made available on social media, political participation hasn't grown at the same rate. In spite of the considerable quantity of information, the quality can be poor, for reasons ranging from the difficulty of monetising content or the rational ignorance of the new opinion leaders, to the scarce use of verification mechanisms.

It is necessary to highlight that influencers rework the message they receive from mass media and address it to a more generalist audience. Therefore the result is that what reaches the final addressee is no longer the original message transmitted by the press, television and newspapers, but rather the one infused with the opinions and subjective re-elaborations of the intermediaries. It is easy to understand, then, how the hypothesis of a two-stage flow of communication can have a relevant and substantial impact on the very content of media messages.

Being capable of reshaping the message as most useful for their personal interests, opinion leaders enjoy a certain credibility with their followers and above all are able to influence their opinions, attitudes and behavior. Online opinion leaders are increasingly

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[14] Jungherr, A. (2016). *Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review*. J. Inf. Technol Politics.

covering supporting and empowering needs, helping their interlocutors to reflect and take action on social and personal issues. They share advice and guidance; but also more simply stories and reflections, which can become a stimulus for action. It is perhaps more correct to speak of coaches, mentors and activists rather than influencers. They not only influence, but also listen, tell and motivate. Nevertheless, the reception of the message is mediated on a human component, of personal affinities precisely between influencers and the influenced. Seldom it is the influencers themselves who, conditioned by the direction taken actively or passively by the masses, spread to their followers the messages they choose to propagate in the exact way the masses wish to receive it.

In summary, with the advent of social media, influencers have emerged as new opinion leaders, exploiting the two-stream communication model to influence and interact with their audiences. This phenomenon has redefined the way people seek information and make decisions, opening up new challenges in the contemporary media landscape.

(2.3) Public Opinion Shaped through Social Media

The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) has conducted several studies on the topic of manipulating public opinion through social media. One of their well-known studies is the Computational Propaganda[15] research project, which examines the use of social media for political manipulation in several countries.

Since 2012, the research team, headed by Philip Howard, Director of Oxford University's Programme on Democracy and Technology, has been conducting an investigation of the manipulation of public opinion by political bots across major social networking applications. This project involves a collaboration between social and information scientists who aim to explore the impact of automated scripts, commonly referred to as bots, on social media platforms. The researchers examine both the bot scripts themselves and the individuals behind their creation. In collaboration with computer scientists, they strive to enhance their ability to detect and thwart such bots. Previous experiences indicate that political bots tend to emerge during international crises and are often designed to further the interests of governments facing difficulties. These political

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[15] Howard, P. N. (Oxford Internet Institute). (2016-2021). *Computational Propaganda* [Research project]. Retrieved from https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/computational-propaganda/.

actors employ bots to manipulate conversations, suppress opposition, and generate false support on popular platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and even Sina Weibo in China.

By establishing a network of experts specializing in political bot detection and building an extensive dataset, the researchers aim not only to gain a deeper understanding of how bots manipulate social networks but also to contribute to discussions within the social sciences, computer sciences, and industry. This sheds light on the scale of the problem and explores potential solutions.

The Oxford Internet Institute's research focuses on several major areas, including COVID-19, elections, tech platforms and governance, and state-sponsored disinformation. In the context of the global pandemic, the research examines the impact of disinformation related to COVID-19, which has exacerbated the public health crisis. The team investigates the prevalence of stories from junk news outlets and state-backed media on social media, analyzing the systems that contribute to the success of these misleading narratives. This includes studying the online advertising ecosystem and the incentives on social media platforms.

Regarding elections, the researchers explore how computational propaganda is deployed to influence public opinion through legitimate and illegitimate means. They analyze information-sharing behaviors of the electorate on social media, foreign influence campaigns, and the role of these campaigns in fostering political polarization. The research encompasses elections in various regions, including Europe, North America, South America, the Middle East, and Asia.

The team's interest extends beyond the content of disinformation to the technologies and systems shaping the information landscape. They investigate the forces that both constrain and enable computational propaganda, including how tech companies incentivize and amplify problematic content, how governments attempt to regulate these companies, and how tech platforms themselves respond to these challenges.

Another area of research focuses on state-sponsored disinformation, where computational propaganda tools are utilized by governments to manipulate public opinion domestically and internationally. The team examines the proliferation of "cyber troops" in different countries, the reach and content of state-sponsored media outlets, and the impacts of foreign influence operations.

Through research in these key areas, the Oxford Internet Institute aims to provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of disinformation, computational propaganda, and their effects on society, politics, and governance. A recent study[16] conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute found that more than eighty countries are home to at least one government agency or political party that is actively engaged in manipulating public opinion through social media. In the following sections a more nuanced investigation into the utilization of algorithms, automation, and computational propaganda in public discourse will be performed.

Chapter 3: Information and Social Media

(3.1) Contemporary Media Use: the Degradation of Journalism

To provide context, it is crucial to acknowledge certain fundamental yet often disregarded aspects of modern media consumption. In affluent democratic societies, media landscape is predominantly characterized by digitalization and the dominance of various social media platforms. While there is an abundance of online news available, individuals typically allocate a limited amount of time to engage with it, and a significant number of internet users do not actively seek out news on a regular basis. With the ease of accessing news online and the sheer volume of content available, disparities arise due to differences in individual choices and habitual behaviors, thereby contributing to an unequal distribution of news consumption.

The report[17] on information consumption by the Italian Communications Authority (AGCOM), dated 2018, noted the incumbency of a phenomenon that is currently in constant expansion: the use of social media as a means through which to acquire information and news. As noted in the previous sections, it is widely recognised that the media constitute the primary source to which citizens turn for information but also to develop orientations useful

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[16] Howard , P. N. (Oxford Internet Institute). (2021). "*Social media manipulation by political actors now an industrial scale problem prevalent in over 80 countries*" [Annual Oxford Report]. Retrieved from https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/social-media-manipulation-by-political-actors-now-an-industrial-scale-problem-prevalent-in-over-80-countries-annual-oxford-report/

[17] GfK Italia per l'Autorità (AGCOM) (2018). *Rapporto sul consumo di informazione.* Retrieved from https://www.agcom.it/documents/10179/9629936/Allegato+19-2-2018/22aa8cab-a150-449e-ad57-94233644cbe5?version=1.0

for political choices. The media, therefore, have great social relevance and are able to influence essential aspects of democratic life.

The study, carried out on the basis of the results of a survey conducted in 2017 by GfK Italia for the Authority on a sample of more than 14,000 individuals representative of the Italian population, highlighted some main findings. Given that, in order for information to reach an individual, it is essential that he or she not only accesses the media and makes the additional choice to benefit from the information content made available by them, but also that his or her consumption of information takes place in an effective and attentive manner, it emerged that the informational power of the Internet is on the rise. More and more people are also relying on the medium to find information and more than a quarter of the population considers it the most important way to get information. However, the perceived reliability of online information sources remains on average lower than the reliability found for traditional sources.

The processes of production, distribution, and consumption of political information were transformed by the rise of digital media[18]. Several new phenomena changed the relationship between journalism and politics. Among these, the growing number of sources of information that increased the competition and decreased journalists' monopoly over the news, the new forms of political news as well as the prevalence of fake news and sophisticated propaganda and disinformation strategies[19]. Moreover, there has also been a significant shift in the distribution of power within the communicative system and the exercise of social influence by the opinion leaders, influencers, and political actors.

To delve into this topic it is essential to state that in view of the increasing diffusion of devices among the public and the multiplication of fruition occasions, media and information consumption patterns are changing. If, on the one hand, the possibility of accessing multiple media, in multiple ways and at multiple times, raises the possibility of exposure to information, on the other hand, the emergence of consumption habits such as simultaneity in media use and fragmentation (of audience, time and content) may favour a superficial and

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[18] Casero-Ripollés, A. (2022). *"The great change: Impact of Social Media on the Relationship between Journalism and Politics - Introduction to the Special Issue"*. In *Social Sciences*, 11(2), 40. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020040

[19] Waisbord, S. (2018). *"Truth is what happens to news: On journalism, fake news, and post-truth"*. In *Journalism Studies* 19: 1866–78.

careless consumption of news, and increase the risk of disinformation. Equally relevant is the increasing access to content from smartphones and mobile devices, affecting the ways and times in which information is processed and elaborated. It is evident how this context is at the root of the loss of reputation and trust on the part of citizens in relation to the traditional information system, and can push users to rely on alternative, often unqualified, sources of information.

We are facing a new phenomenon: that of fast food information at the service of the algorithms of Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok and other social platforms. In recent years, the phenomenon of news influencers, i.e. people with hundreds of thousands of followers who chase the topic of the moment, spewing out quick information, taken out of context and misleading their followers, has been spreading on these platforms. All this obviously has little, if not nothing, to do with information: if we bring to mind the core values of journalism, namely transparency, verification and credibility, it is clear to understand why we refer to the advent of social media as the decline of journalism.

Social media have enabled anyone to proclaim themselves a news producer, publisher. This has lowered the barriers of access to publication and allowed a wide range of opinions and viewpoints to be shared. Put like that, it is hard to see the downside: opinions, in a world that embraces democratic ideals, are all worthy of being shared and social media allows this. Of utmost importance, however, is to consider that this can lead to the widespread dissemination of incorrect or incomplete news, fueling the spread of disinformation.

Digital platforms provide avenues for the dissemination of content that is detached from scientific accuracy. The nouveau opinion leaders, who have the total control on the attitudes of the members of their community, or more precisely, echo chambers, chase the news of the moment by posing as experts in any field. For instance, we can mention opinion leaders that went from being self-styled virologists during Covid-19 pandemics to being reinvented experts in geopolitics in the course of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Anti-scientific narratives do not solely arise as an organic consequence of free expression on the internet. Rather, they reveal the intentions, influence, potency, and astuteness of those who promote skepticism. Messaging tactics are constructed upon this very mechanism: instilling uncertainty, fostering bewilderment, and establishing connections within conspiracy frameworks to generate clickbait, generate profit, amass followers.

The way the news is conveyed is direct, polarizing and superficial. The narrative is always emotional, based on creating scandal, involvement, and focuses too simply and solely on today's major issues: migration, feminism, ecology, civil rights. This is not only the death of politics, journalism and information, but is a devious mechanism that hides the desire to make profit behind social values and issues. In short, anything that can create effortless interactions, especially if it is conveyed with victimised, dramatic, scandalous narratives, becomes viral. This kind of information stream does not invite reasoning but the compulsive sharing of content that often not only adheres to the storytelling already dominant in the media but is full of inaccuracies, misrepresentations or lacking in sources.

In these circumstances, the correlation between journalism and truth cannot be narrowly perceived solely in terms of the protocols and standards journalists adhere to when assessing the veracity of information in news production. The core issue concerning the post-truth era does not revolve around journalists inadvertently or deliberately distorting reality, omitting crucial details, or failing to fact-check. Instead, truth within journalism is intricately tied to how news and information are utilized by a wide range of individuals[20], encompassing not only journalists but also opinion leaders and other social media users.

It is important to recognize that discussions surrounding news and truth extend far beyond the realm of journalism. Journalism is not the sole institution that shapes our understanding of truth. While many may expect journalism to wield unparalleled influence in shaping our perception of reality, the prevalence of fake news illustrates that the dynamics of news and truth are inherently complex and cannot be solely dictated by journalists or experts. The concept of news and truth is entwined with the actions people take in response to information, rather than being dictated solely by journalism's determination of accurate portrayals of reality. Truth emerges from the way the public interprets reality, or is willing to interpret it, as they actively engage with, navigate, avoid, and comprehend information. Truth is the product of collective sense-making rather than being unilaterally determined by newsrooms.

Doubts, questions, critical reasoning and fact checking have, in this historical era, ceased to generate consensus. That same consensus, social acceptance, mentioned in the

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[20]Casero-Ripollés, A. (2022). *"The great change: Impact of Social Media on the Relationship between Journalism and Politics - Introduction to the Special Issue"*. In *Social Sciences*, 11(2), 40. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020040

previous sections concerning the small Greek πόλεις. Opinion leaders have thus gained more power in the toxic polarisation of public debate: rather than pushing users towards an understanding of certain complex and intricate political and social phenomena, influencers feed a boorish stadium cheer, which turns into a more generic good against bad warfare. Sitting on the side of the so-called good guys is supposedly the right thing to do, and the simplicity of this choice easily leads users to give trust, credit and consequent omnipotence to these increasingly ignorant opinion leaders. This results in a nouveau hegemonic culture that from social media spreads to our daily life: the extremisation and radicalisation of political correctness.

These phenomena are obviously detrimental to information, that should instead be based on logical reasoning, research of sources, and lucidity rather than emotionalism. Pop-corn news is far from conveying facts: it is mere opinionism passed off as instrumental journalism to obtain digital interactions at the service of the fame of the opinion leader himself. In all its forms, from deliberately false information created to the detriment of others, to inaccurate, misleading or deceptive information and mere propaganda, disinformation has undeniable negative effects on public opinion and repercussions on society.

(3.2) The Economic Model of Social Media

Although digital media has granted individuals significant empowerment, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals do not exert absolute control over their destinies. Media systems possess the capacity to exert influence by subtly pushing content towards users, often operating beneath users' conscious awareness. In contrast to prevailing choice theories, these encounters can shape preferences that would not have emerged spontaneously. Moreover, the increasing prominence of data exacerbates this phenomenon, as data-driven systems, such as recommendation algorithms and audience ratings, serve as the filters through which both users and the media perceive the marketplace[21]. It is crucial to recognize that these filters are inherently flawed and never devoid of distortion. They possess biases that favor specific outcomes and possess the capacity to direct public attention in divergent directions.

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[21] Webster, J. G. (2014). *The marketplace of attention: How audiences take shape in a digital age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The economic[22] model of social media uses algorithms to create echo chambers and filter bubbles in order to pursue economic goals. In discussions within public discourse and policy, the concept of the "echo chamber" is sometimes used interchangeably with the term "filter bubble". However, it is crucial to make a clear distinction between the two. The term filter bubble was introduced by activist and entrepreneur Pariser in the eponymous book[23]. Pariser expressed concerns about the increasing personalized ranking of search engine results and social media feeds, which he believed would create individualized information universes for each user. This trend posed a risk to the existence of a shared common ground, as we would be exposed to more of the things we already like while being shielded from information that we may not naturally gravitate towards. Such personalization decisions are driven by data and serve the commercial interests of platform companies rather than being the result of our active choices.

While an echo chamber can be considered a type of bubble, it does not inherently imply why individuals find themselves within such bubbles[24]. It is possible that some individuals actively choose to be in these environments, suggesting that the situation is more a result of personal preference than a consequence of information distribution or availability. On the other hand, a filter bubble is an echo chamber that primarily emerges through ranking algorithms engaging in passive personalization without our active involvement. It is a potential outcome of specific aspects of online news and information distribution. To recapitulate, the concepts of echo chamber and filter bubble may appear similar, but they have distinct nuances[25]. The filter bubble specifically relates to the impact of algorithmic personalization on our exposure to information, while the echo chamber acknowledges the existence of information bubbles without explicitly attributing them to any particular cause.

Having made this distinction, which will be explored more in detail in a later section,

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[22] Downs, A. (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957; p. 244–46, 266–71.

[23] Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you.* London: Viking.

[24] Möller, J. (2021). *"Filter bubbles and digital echo chambers 1"*. In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, 92-100. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004431-10.

[25] Arguedas, A.R., Robertson, C.T., Fletcher, R. & Nielsen, R.K. (2022). *Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: a literature review.* Oxford: Reuters Institute, University of Oxford. Retrieved from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/ Echo_Chambers_Filter_Bubbles_and_Polarisation_A_Literature_Review.pdf

it is worth emphasising that algorithms are designed to increase user interaction with the content and boost advertising revenues, thus contributing to the financial success of the social media platforms. Algorithms facilitate the creation of filter bubbles for economic purposes through various mechanisms; among these are personalized content recommendations, targeted advertising, maximization of users' interaction and amplification of popular content.

Algorithms analyze user data, including browsing behaviors, interactions and preferences, in order to provide personalized content recommendations. The goal is to keep users engaged and maintain their constant activity on the platform for long periods of time. As mentioned in the previous section, these functions tend to favor content that aligns with users' pre-existing beliefs and interests. By presenting them with content that reinforces their preconceived notions, platforms aim to increase user satisfaction and encourage sustained use.

Additionally, social media rely extensively on targeted advertising as a significant source of revenue. Algorithms serve this economic pattern collecting a vast amount of data about users, such as demographics, interests, and online behaviors, to deliver personalized advertisements. These advertisements are tailored to users' preferences, thereby increasing the likelihood of online and economic interaction and conversion.

Moreover, algorithms are designed to favor content that generates high levels of user interaction, such as likes, comments, and shares. Controversial or emotionally engaging content tends to elicit intense reactions and stimulate discussion, thus leading to increased interaction. Platforms optimize their algorithms to favor such content, as this keeps users on the platform for longer periods, allowing them to show more advertisements and generate more revenue. Consequently, this emphasis on interaction-oriented content can amplify polarizing or extreme positions, thus contributing to the filter bubble effect.

Algorithms tend to favor popular content that is shared or interacted with by a large number of users. When certain opinions or ideas gain popularity within specific communities or social networks, algorithms can further promote and amplify such content, making it more visible and accessible to like-minded people. In other words, they render the popular content viral. This emphasis on viral content solidifies preexisting attitudes and beliefs, limiting exposure to alternative perspectives.

In synthesis, the algorithms of social media platforms create echo chambers for economic purposes through the provision of personalized content recommendations, targeted advertising based on users' preferences, the privileging of interaction-oriented content, and the amplification of popular content. Although such practices can improve user satisfaction and increase the profitability of platforms, they also contribute to the polarization of public opinion and the limitation of exposure to diverse perspectives.

(3.3) Political Polarization: Social Media and Filter Bubbles

Polarization is a key area of interest for media and communication scholars. Polarization, within the field of social science, pertains to divisions that exist among groups. This concept can be applied to describe situations where divisions are already significant enough to be considered polarized, or to describe a process in which divisions are growing over time, even if they are currently relatively small. Polarization can manifest in various forms and is not inherently problematic. Scholars in social science examine different types of public polarization, including ideological polarization, affective polarization, and news audience polarization.

Ideological polarization has long been a focal point in political science, exploring divisions in public opinion regarding a range of policy issues. Affective polarization refers to the extent of dislike between opposing partisans. Most research on affective polarization has focused on the United States, and in contrast to ideological polarization, affective polarization seems to be increasing.

It is extremely urgent to debate about the role social media are playing in inflaming and intensifying political polarization. It is already in *The Prince*[26] that Machiavelli identified and emphasized the importance of public opinion on political action, the influence it exerts on rulers and determining their choices. To be clearer, citizens are influenced by opinion leaders, who in turn are influenced by the needs of the echo chambers they attempt to influence. From this process comes the emergence of a generalized, generalizing public opinion, which the political class uses to formulate its proposals. De facto, the need to leverage general consensus to lay a solid foundation for one's power is a priority that Machiavelli prematurely highlighted in *The Prince.* The uninformed positions taken by the masses are used by politicians, journalists and opinion leaders to satisfy their own needs for generalization,

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[26] Machiavelli, N. *The Prince,* trans. N.H. Thompson. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1986.

analysis, study and above all sale of the information gathered. In practice, the direct relationship between politics and the masses is a constant that has formed the basis of political life in recent centuries.

News audience polarization refers to the distribution of public attention to news media, specifically whether a country has prominent news outlets that cater to strongly left or right leaning audiences, as opposed to outlets with more mixed or centrist audiences[27]. News media consumption is increasingly fragmented and polarized: most people tend to gather around a few popular news outlets, and all news sites, including partisan ones, attract reasonably ideologically diverse audiences.

Political science and sociology offer an extensive body of literature exploring the drivers of polarization and social dynamics, including social homophily and various forms of social sorting. These dynamics are primarily rooted in our offline lives; in spite of this, research which has also focused on media, including media reporting on polarization, is of extreme relevance. Studies have found that exposure to like-minded partisan media under experimental conditions can reinforce the views of already partisan individuals[28] and survey research measuring individuals' media use and attitudes at different points in time, has shown that using like-minded partisan media in the United States can increase anger toward the opposing side and make people more inclined to share political information on social media[29].

Of fundamental importance in this paper is reporting on the sociological studies of Robert D. Putnam. The author, one of the leading social scientists, proposes in his *Bowling Alone*[30] a research-reflection on the changes taking place in contemporary society. And he does so by taking a cue from an apparently insignificant phenomenon: Americans used to go bowling together after work. Now they don't any more. The scholar's main interest is to

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27 Fletcher, R., Cornia, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020a). *"How polarized are online and offline news audiences? A comparative analysis of twelve countries"*. In *International Journal of Press/Politics, 25*(2), 169–195. Retrived from https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219892768

28 Levendusky, M. S. (2013). "*Why do partisan media polarize viewers?*". In *American Journal of Political Science, 57*(3), 611–623. Retrived from https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12008

29 Hasell, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2016). "*Partisan provocation: The role of partisan news use and emotional responses in political information sharing in social media*". In *Human Communication Research, 42*(4), 641–61. Retrived from https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12092

30 Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

investigate the health of the resource at the basis of social cohesion: social capital. Using a considerable amount of data, Putnam reconstructs how individuals have become separated from the cohesive structures of society, and finds one of the causes of this fracture in social media itself. A sociological discovery which sounds inherently paradoxical, social media being platforms based on the network between individuals.

Possessing the ability to use the World Wide Web drastically decreases the expense of interacting and obtaining information. The opportunity for citizens to readily interact and structure based on commonalities is acquired. As Sustein contends in Republic.com.[31], the Internet, despite its numerous benefits, could potentially harm deliberative democracy. This harm could occur as a result of the growing utilization of filtering software, which selectively presents information aligning with users' existing biases and beliefs. Online venues foster enclave deliberation, a term that describes an instance of deliberation carried out when interactions take place among individuals who share the same beliefs and viewpoints. Although this is not always undesirable, the typical consequence of enclave discussion is group segmentation, which stimulates extremism and jeopardizes societal stability and democratic discourse. The unprecedented form of polarization taken into account by Putnam et al. is undoubtedly related to this ability of digital technologies to nurture and encourage the origination of spaces where extremist values and viewpoints are escalated and magnified. The focal feature of social media is, in actual fact, the possibility given to agreeing and like-minded users to assemble into specific echo chambers or filter bubbles.

In this increasingly fragmented[32] context, which envisages the mass well divided into distinct clusters united by a common, de-personalising thinking, members of the filter bubbles, isolated and alienated from users holding different political views, only consume information and reports that reinforce their political beliefs. Users from different and contrasting echo chambers rarely interact and, when this happens, the discussion frequently degenerates. The reverse process being considered, politics provides the pretext to divide into groups or tribes and the sharp tones of online debate accentuate the polarisation that pushes users to lock themselves into virtual spaces frequented by like-minded people and makes

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31 Sustein, C. R. (2001). "*Democracy and the Internet*". In *Republic.Com.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

32 Webster, J. G., & Ksiazek, T. B. (2012). "*The dynamics of audience fragmentation: Public attention in an age of digital media*". In *Journal of Communication, 62*(1), 39–56.

their initial opinions even more extreme. Those who are not part of the in-group, whose voices are outside of the chorus, are increasingly forced to stand trial before the social media court, resulting in stigmatisation.

What has been stated in the previous sections is one of the recurring themes in models of participatory democracy[33]: extensive digitalisation is not a sufficient condition for fostering public debate. Social media which should have ensured access to information and participation in debate, two pillars of democracy, have instead been guilty of the extreme separation and divergence of attitudes and the exacerbation of disinformation. The result is that there is a loss in the sense of debate with inconclusive discussions to understand the facets of reality.

Users isolate themselves into factions where there are no adversaries but only enemies and in one's own bubble of homogeneous opinions limiting argumentation to likes, retweets and shares, no democratic spirit is actually allowed. While real world interactions often force citizens to deal with diversity, as Putnam suggests in his study *Bowling Alone[34]*, the virtual world doesn't encourage user's proximity to different viewpoints. It is as a result of this mechanism that information becomes increasingly opaque, conditioned by fashions and trends: filter bubbles are the stimulus for editors and opinion leaders to share clickbait and hyper-fanatic one-sided content. An ideological spectrum, a model of society that grows progressively fractured along partisan affiliations is the outcome of this upward trend. The increasing segregation of users into echo chambers or filter bubbles, moreover, seems to be strictly linked and to be the tool through which the spread of disinformation is performed.

(3.4) Filtering Information: Algorithms and Confirmation Bias Result in Populism

As already mentioned in the previous sections, traditional mass media have been joined over the years by a heterogeneous mass of information sources. Social media have quickly consolidated as the main source of information for many of their users, who prefer to access information content through these platforms, rather than by browsing the source's website directly or draw on more traditional methods such as television news, radio or newspapers.

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[33] Katz, E. (1998): "*Mass Media and Participatory Democracy*". In *The Changing Nature of Democracy,* (eds.) Takashi Inoguchi, Edward Newman and John Keane. Tokyo, New York, Paris: United Nations University Press, 87-100.

[34] Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Social media have revolutionised the distribution of information, leading to an exponential increase in the amount of content to which news consumers are exposed. With the rise of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, access to information has become instantaneous and global. One of the main factors that has contributed to this rise is the ease with which any individual can share content on these platforms. Every user becomes a potential 'producer' of news, able to publish and disseminate information without the need for traditional intermediaries such as editors or journalists. This has lowered the barriers of access to publication and allowed a wide range of opinions and viewpoints to be shared. Social media have amplified the amount of information to which news consumers are exposed, allowing anyone to become a 'publisher' and delivering personalised content. The filtering of this enormous stream of news is often made by algorithms, necessary to select a quantity of information that is otherwise too vast to be grasped. Social media use algorithms that analyse users' behaviour and offer them personalised content based on their preferences and past interactions. This has created 'information bubbles', where users tend to be exposed mainly to content that confirms their pre-existing opinions, limiting the diversity of information they are exposed to.

The core connection between digital technology and the polarization of the political spectrum has to do with people's natural tendency to screen out information that could conflict with their previously present beliefs and opinions. As previously discussed, the availability of the Internet has resulted in an overabundance of data that the public is unable to effectively manage. On the Internet, in fact, an enormous amount of information competes for our attention, which is, however, limited. Putting our analysis, reflection and synthesis skills to work is often difficult; instead, cognitive biases[35] and prejudices emerge, i.e. shortcuts, heuristics that we use to simplify reality and react quickly. Among these, a fundamental role in the processes of information dissemination and selection is played by confirmation bias, the human tendency to seek information that is already consistent with one's own belief system. Indeed, personalisation algorithms tend to show users content that is in line with their past preferences and interactions. For example, if a user follows pages or profiles that share political or ideological views similar to his or her own, social media will

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[35] Lombardo, C., & Nobile, S. (2023). *Tutti i clacson della mattina: Sociologia del Populismo Cognitivo.* ISBN 9788835152156. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

mainly show content that confirms those views. This creates an environment where people are mainly exposed to information that reinforces what they already believe, thus contributing to the phenomenon of confirmation bias.

Robert D. Putnam, in his study of social capital [36] *Bowling Alone,* suggests an additional interesting argument, outlined in three main components: digital technologies facilitate the birth of communities of like-minded individuals, previously referred to as echo chambers or filter bubbles, where users are progressively isolated from any challenging information, process which is exacerbated by filtering algorithms. Despite the almost infinite variety of information available, in fact, online users tend to fragment into microcosms, each characterised by its own narrative web in which they become entangled. Within each community, users share interests, select information, discuss and reinforce their beliefs around a shared world narrative. The dissemination of information, in fact, is driven by homophily, the human tendency to associate and create bonds with similar individuals. Users tend to form polarised groups whose members are united by a shared narrative and, immersed in echo chambers or filter bubbles, acquire information consistent with their worldview, even if false or incorrect.

Social media news consumption is customized to each individual's preferences and points of view, as opposed to information consumption through newspapers and TV newscasts, where journalists operate as the administrators that select whether articles are noteworthy. Users' exposure to pro-attitudinal information increases while their exposure to information that is contrary to such attitudes diminishes. In the modern day age of algorithms, users may be compelled to drift into echo chambers even if they are opposed to doing so given that social networking platforms have become the guardians of what users see and don't see. This is where the distinction between echo chambers and filter bubbles needs to be recalled: regardless of whether the user's choice to be in an echo chamber is active or whether he or she has fallen passively into a filter bubble, social media platforms enable the proliferation of communities consisting of individuals who share similar beliefs, interests, or perspectives.

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[36] Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

In conclusion, the intervention of algorithms translates into people's likelihood to connect with people who are close to their way of thinking, their political orientation, and their point of view. From this, united by the deliberate use of inflammatory language and the dissemination of controversial ideas to attract attention and divide the users into factions, benefits populism, which aims at polarisation. It is important to emphasise that confirmation bias is not a phenomenon exclusive to social media, but is also prevalent in other forms of communication and in everyday life. Nevertheless, social media have the potential to amplify this phenomenon due to algorithmic filtering and the viral nature of content sharing. It is not surprising to find that individuals with authoritarian leanings are actively exploiting the opportunities offered by social media, given the favorable environment in which they operate.

Chapter 4: Social Justice Warriors and Feminism as a Case Study

(4.1) Social Justice Warriors: from a Compliment to an Insult

The term Social Justice Warrior has, over time, acquired a deeply equivocal and ambivalent meaning. The Oxford Dictionary, in 2015, included this term in its dictionary due to the expression's surge in popularity. Nowadays, most individuals are aware that being referred to as a social justice warrior is certainly not a positive connotation. On the basis of the definition given by the Oxford Dictionary, the term 'social justice warrior'[37] is "a derogatory noun for a person who expresses or promotes socially progressive views".

The phrase was originally intended to be impartial and merely descriptive or perhaps complimentary. It originated in the late 20th century as a neutral or positive term for people engaged in activism concerning social justice issues. Presently, instead, referring to someone as a "social justice warrior" implies that the individual is considered one of the influencers, activists, or bloggers who frequently engage in heated discussions with members of opposite echo chambers about a variety of topics related to political correctness, identity politics, and social injustice. The social justice warrior caricature breaks out from the social justice blogosphere as a whole because it employs overpowered, extremist and self-entitled rhetorical techniques and appeals to sentimentalism as opposed to scientific explanations and logical reasoning. But how did a straightforward concept end up in the Dictionary as a pejorative noun?

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[37] Stevenson, A. (Ed.). (2015). "*Social Justice Warrior*". In *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press.

Prior to 2008, the term "social justice warrior" was used to denote someone who advocated for economic and social causes. The Washington Post claims that Michel Chartrand, a Canadian union activist, was the first individual to be identified as a social justice warrior in the year 1991. In 2011, when the term first appeared on Twitter, its meaning changed from predominantly positive to extremely negative. When people were looking for a term that could describe persons who participated in social justice discussions for profitable, egoistic or dishonest motivations, such as enhancing their standing in the community, the term "social justice warriors" began to carry an adverse connotation. The phrase was particularly targeted at and addressed to those who uncritically and slavishly adhered to social liberalism, cultural inclusivity or feminism, as well as other views deemed extremely and passively immersed into political correctness, with the aim to specifically separate these individuals from those who were sincerely committed to a specific cause and battled for it.

During the Gamergate controversy, the negative connotation gained increased use. The dissolution of a relationship in 2014 triggered and engendered a chain of events that included a wave of harassment directed at female video game developers and culminated in the contentious abuse campaign known as "GamerGate," which focused on sexism and anti-progressivism in video game culture. Eron Gjoni published a post detailing the story of his relationship with Zoe Quinn, a video game developer. In the post, Gjoni accused Quinn of cheating on him with several men, including one Nathan Grayson. Grayson happened to be a video game journalist who wrote for the well-known website *Kotaku*. This apparently trivial detail will be the spark that will set off one of the most violent and destructive hate campaigns in the history of the Internet. Some readers of Gjoni's post were all too quick to draw an unwarranted conclusion. Their most credited hypothesis was that Zoe Quinn was having an affair with Grayson so that the journalist could positively review his video game, entitled Depression Quest. Grayson had mentioned the game in one and only one article, in a marginal way and alongside dozens of other games. According to the online gaming community, a huge and very dangerous conflict of interest had just been discovered. A small niche of users used this 'evidence' to claim that the whole world of video game journalism was corrupt and colluded with 'feminist' women, who were trying to impose their worldview on video games. Within a few days, that narrow niche grew larger and larger, until it spread to every corner of the Internet.

We could say that a single piece of fake news, thanks to its virality, and the over-hasty conclusions drawn from it were the catalyst for a cascade of scandals and events that permanently altered the internet, popularized right-wing extremism, and sparked the current debate on political correctness. The Gamergate incident had a profound effect on the video game sector as well as on public opinion and debate in general. The disagreement centered on the ethics of game journalism and the place of women in the typically male-dominated gaming industry. Gamergate detractors claimed that the video games industry had cooperated collectively to suppress women in the sector. On the other side, Gamergate supporters maintained that journalists and publishers of games were collaborating to alter the gaming landscape in accordance with their particular social agenda.

Regardless of the political beliefs of individuals, Gamergate is, objectively speaking, the most obvious and violent manifestation of the polarisation of political debate and its most dangerous ramifications. It is no coincidence that precisely through and as a result of Gamergate, as mentioned above, the term 'Social Justice Warrior' has decisively taken on a nuance of meaning far removed from the positivity with which it was conceived. Once the quarrel has been analysed, one could superficially and mundanely choose to advocate for one side or the other of the feud and pass a self-proclaimed judgement in the court of the World Wide Web, or recall and study the causes of such violent polarisation. Gamergate is, in fact, the clearest evidence of the ineffectiveness of communication between the parties involved in the political debate and that inhabit social media. The now exhaustively discussed echo chambers or filter bubbles, the microcosms easily created and isolated online, rarely interact. When they do, or are forced to, their interactions turn into fierce and bloody wars. The faction-specific beliefs of each faction ferment undisturbed in each echo chamber, protected, preserved and unchanged due to the remote distance from any confrontation and debate with their counterparts. As a result of this continuous feeding of the most extreme and destructive thoughts, destruction is the outcome of the occasional confrontation, which cannot be anything other than bestial and ferocious. This is nothing but the outcome of the spasmodic avoidance of confrontation and constructive debate between parties, nothing but the consequence of constant and repeated exposure to news and opinions that do not challenge what we believe to be our most invariable positions.

In the light of the above, it would be perfunctory to overlook the nuance of meaning acquired by the phrase 'Social Justice Warrior', both before and more drastically in the immediate aftermath of this event. The widespread use of the phrase is the scandal's long-lasting visible imprint; nonetheless, it must have been a common social need if, outside of the gaming world, many people sprang up in criticism of individuals labeled as social justice warriors. Among them Will Shetterly, who runs the website SJWars and who opposes social justice warriors' methods, more than their causes. It would be un-analytical to relegate the evolution of the connotations of this term to the ravings of the extreme right. Linguistics, the social and cultural studies on the development of languages shaped through social interaction, teaches us that neologisms or new connotations that a term develops over time are the expression of a social phenomenon or of a reaction to the same. Linguistic mutations are the expression of a societal need to give a name to all those extremist currents of social movements, viral on social media, headed by opinion leaders who create and profit from publishing content without content. It is undeniable, given the scientific evidence raised in each of the preceding sections of this paper, that opinion leaders, bloggers, influencers who pervade social media sell themselves to their niches as social justice warriors whenever they get the chance to do so. It is evident that they are keen to self-proclamate themselves as ambassadors of battles for justice albeit they have little or nothing to do with the cause for which they claim to fight, even despite the fact that they lack the basic notional knowledge or the appropriate social and cultural backgrounds to do so.

This phenomenon gives the opposing political or social faction the perfect alibi to ape and denigrate the entirety of the movement represented by a specific, feignedly interested but actually disinterested in the cause, social media warrior. This theme will be elaborated comprehensively and in more detail in the concluding sections of my paper.

(4.2) Feminism: From Its Roots Until Today

It is necessary to state that the evolution of the feminist movement is a complex process that has gone through several stages and seen significant changes over the decades. Uniquely the main stages in the evolution of the feminist movement from its inception to the present day will be outlined in the following lines. It is important to emphasize that this description represents a general and certainly superficial overview of the evolution of the feminist movement and that there are many nuances and relevant achievements of this consistently

stupefying movement within each phase that, due to structural impossibility, will not be reported. It may seem redundant to repeat the history and evolutionary stages of the feminist movement; on the contrary, for the purpose of this thesis, it is necessary to recall and bring to mind the causes and intent of the initial and original feminism.

The first wave of feminism, which began in the late tenth-ninth century and ended in the twentieth century, emerged in the context of struggles for women's right to vote and for property and divorce rights. This period saw the organization of women's rights movements in many Western countries. The suffragettes, for example, led a courageous struggle for women's right to vote through protest actions and mass mobilizations.

The second wave of feminism, spanning from the 1960s to the 1980s, was characterized by a growing awareness of gender inequality and a critique of dominant social norms. Feminists of this period raised issues such as wage equity, abortion rights, domestic violence, and women's sexuality. A greater organization of women emerged, together with the formation of consciousness groups, and increased political participation.

In the 1980s and 1990s, intersectional feminism began to emerge as a critique of second-wave feminism, which was perceived as focusing primarily on the experiences of middle-class white women. Intersectional feminism recognizes that women's experiences are influenced by multiple factors, such as race, social class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This approach seeks to address inequalities in a more encompassing and holistic way.

The third wave of feminism, from the 1990s to the present day, is characterized by a greater diversity of voices and a greater focus on issues of identity, sexuality, and popular culture. Feminists of this generation used social media to spread their ideas, organize protests, and create online communities. Indeed, social media allowed the feminist movement to convey their messages, but more importantly their needs and urgencies, with extreme rapidity and swiftness. To these evergreen issues have been added others as the feminist struggle has mutated, incorporating other demands: the environmentalist one, for example, since there is evidence that women are the first victims of climate change. The radical critique of capitalism, an economic and cultural system built on inequality, is increasingly strong and vital in feminist circles and is naturally intertwined with the need for broad-based action on all forms of inequality.

With the advent of social media, however, a more controversial facet of feminism emerges: the effects of social media structures and functioning result in the incommunicability of the movement's own demands to their counterparts. These platforms , moreover, give space to the most extreme ramifications of movements and provide fertile ground for the growth of the most radical and dangerous thoughts.

(4.3) Extremism and Social Media: Violent Drifts of Social and Political Movements

Extremism is the willingness to radically alter the existing order, if necessary even resorting to violence, in order to enact political, and not only, ideologies that claim for themselves the absolute monopoly of "true interpretation"[38]. Today, violent extremism constitutes an urgent threat for many communities and endangering the protection of fundamental rights of people worldwide. Governments and Internet service providers all across the world have drawn reactionary conclusions based on presumptions about the reasons and solutions to violent acts. There was no doubt about the fact that on the Internet users are increasingly confronted with forms of digital violence and radical content and discourse. They may fall victim to propaganda or even mindlessly share problematic content from third parties, sometimes unaware of the anti-democratic strategies they conceal. What happens online can also result in concrete acts of violence in the real world. In spite of this, it was difficult to provide analysis and responses with a solid foundation. There was a need for policy that was developed using facts and evidence.

UNESCO published a research[39] titled "Youth and violent extremism on social media" under these circumstances. The study, mainly conducted between 2012 and 2016, focused on the alleged roles social media play in violent radicalization tendencies. This research was conducted for UNESCO by independent experts Séraphin Alava, Divina Frau-Meigs, Ghayda Hassan and it concluded that social media is used as a tactical instrument to try to encourage violent action in the process of young people becoming radicalized online. It is pertinent to consider the role of these social media platforms in the context of other communication channels as well as important societal influences like political, social,

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[38] Kemmesies, U. (2006). *Zukunftsaussagen wagen – Zwischen Verstehen und Erklären. Methodologische und theoretische Notizen zur Prognoseforschung im Phämomenbereich Extremismus/Terrorismus.* In: Kemmesies, U. (a c.): *Terrorismus und Extremismus* – der Zukunft auf der Spur. Monaco di Baviera.

[39] Alava, S., Frau-Meigs, D., & Hassan , G. (UNESCO) (2016). *Youth and violent extremism on social media.* Retrived from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382

cultural, economic, and psychological causes. Studies that adequately address how communications reinforce or mitigate instigation to radicalization toward violent extremism are scarce. However, research demonstrates that many of the ways that opinion leaders utilize social media are designed to polarize and divide societies. In fact, the study's examination of the scientific literature shows insufficient proof of an overlap between the characteristics of social media and the effects of violent radicalization on young people. Additionally, there is inconclusive information about the effectiveness of countermeasures. However, the body of literature as a whole does hint at some potential explanations. The Internet and social media in particular can act as enhancers within larger processes of violent radicalization, as opposed to being the origin or cause of violent acts. According to the research, violent extremists use the features of social media to recruit younger audiences, promote extremist, violent, and illicit content, locate potential participants, and engage in one-on-one conversations with young people. Having made this dutiful empirical incipit, which can be recapitulated by stating the ability of social media to act as facilitators and amplifiers at the service of extremism, it is possible to proceed individuating the forms of extremism present online and describing their prevalent characteristics.

On the Web, political and religious extremism takes various forms. In this area, the authors particularly exploit the way children and young people use social networking media: they spread their messages in social networks, often presenting them as political information, entertainment, or satire. Videos, songs, memes and slogans are popular tools for conveying ideologies and hate messages. All extremist discourses stare one prerogative, namely, they are diametrically opposed to the democratic principles of our society. The world is divided into allies and enemies, and resentments toward outsiders are fomented. Extremist ideologies are characterized not only by hostility to democracy, but also by authoritarianism and conspiracy theories.

It is found that the mechanisms upstream of radicalization are in no way dependent on ideological orientation. It is an active process different from simple involvement, in which various individual factors intersect, and thus it is not possible to outline a typical profile. Within the field of radicalization research, there is no unanimity on the origins of violent extremism. However, most models and theories identify the following three elements: a personal sense of discomfort, insecurity, dissatisfaction and conflict, an experience of

marginalization or political tensions; involvement in social and group dynamics characterized by loyalty to other members and peer pressure.

Social resentment[40], which is channelled into the more marked forms of populism, can be traced back to feeling part of the 'losers'. It is precisely for this reason that the cognitive responses to this condition of losers translate as much into desiring thought as into weakness of will. Contextually, the transversality of these feelings of bitterness and acrimony can be explained as much in terms of the mechanisms of relative deprivation as by reference group, echo chamber and filter bubble theory. This is, lamentably, the case with radical feminism.

(4.4) The Instance of Radical Feminism

Originating as a branch of the feminist movement that recognizes a male authority and power structure that is responsible for oppression and inequality, radical feminism has, through the use of social media, taken an increasingly extremist tangent. In these spaces reserved for radical feminists, hatred of men proliferates. More than that, for instance, some radical feminists argue, isolated in their echo chambers, that gender is an oppressive social construction linked to biological characteristics and that cisgender women have a unique experience of oppression that differentiates them from transgender people. As a result, some radical feminists argue that women's spaces and organizations should be reserved exclusively for cisgender women.

The mechanism of social resentment which results into extremism, previously examined, unfortunately, easily ends up parasitising even the most democratic, noble and equal political ideologies. Feminism, like any other social movement, can be subject to pervasive cognitive processes on social media that can influence its narrative and take populist bends. Pervasive cognitive processes refer to the spread of information, beliefs and attitudes through social networks and online platforms, often amplified by social media algorithms. Radical feminism on social media is a form of feminist expression that has spread and amplified through online platforms. This current of feminism often takes a more radical and violent approach to patriarchal power structures and, consequentially, men in general.

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[40] Lombardo, C., & Nobile, S. (2023). *Tutti i clacson della mattina: Sociologia del Populismo Cognitivo.* ISBN 9788835152156. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

It is comforting and salvific to recognize that these radical expressions do not represent the entire feminist movement and can lead to divisions and polarization within the movement itself. However, it is of utmost relevance to understand how easily opinion-leaders, driven by the will of achieving their own interests, can use the features of the social media through which they communicate and end up polluting social movements necessary for the affirmation of equality.

First of all, the struggle for equal rights can only and exclusively be effective if the needs of the disqualified and reputedly inferior gender are communicated to the same ones who reserve themselves the right to repute it as inferior. On the contrary, the neo-feminist movement subjected to the algorithms of platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook has been able to communicate relatively little to those who are not interested in this battle or who, perhaps, have plans to hinder it. Confined in their echo chamber or filter bubble, radical feminists have avoided confrontation with those outside their microcosm. Isolated, some currents of modern feminism have ended up removing and forgetting the causes that fueled their fighting, and their battle has not only been emptied of its own ideals but has, in addition, produced a boundless series of side effects. Among these, the most counterproductive effect for the purposes of the feminist movement is the distancing of the male gender: these platforms, as demonstrated throughout the paper, function by association of like-minded users with similar interests. Within the echo chambers, the image of the sexist man or individual, or of men in general becomes more and forcibly an enemy and progressively less a potential, future ally. Extremist activities often arise from prejudice and hate against other groups. Men are, for this reason, alienated from feminist echo chambers; on the contrary, they should be re-educated in the acceptance and promotion of gender equality, and not left behind in this necessary evolution. In the most severe cases, moreover, men are stigmatized and denigrated based on a, paradoxically, gender-based generalization.

Secondly, an aspect of extreme relevance is that which concerns the opinion leaders of these radical feminist echo chambers: what follows represents the most worrying aspect of the evolution of feminism through social media, from a noble, meaningful and active movement, conscious of its reasons and purposes to the most pathetic and debasing neo-derivatives, with the only aim of gaining passive approval on social media. In today's realm of social media, it becomes evident that the platform is more inclined towards promoting

extreme, emotionally charged, and divisive forms of content rather than fostering an atmosphere conducive to serene and principled discussions involving contrasting or intricate narratives. Extremism thrives by capitalizing on a notable aspect of social media: its inherent vulnerability. Activists, dissidents, and journalists, like many others, heavily rely on social media platforms. These platforms, which promote trust, intimacy, and sharing, have inadvertently provided an easy avenue for authoritarians to infiltrate and disrupt networks that they perceive as threatening to their interests. As a consequence, the rational and intentional pursuit of reaching a consensus and the genuine quest for truth appear to be diminishing in significance and relevance. Radical feminist rhetoric, as a matter of fact, is preponderant and hugely successful on social media. Feminist content, for obvious reasons, has an invincible emotional impact to which our society has become hypersensitive. Online radical feminist opinion-leaders make the algorithm work egregiously, often with pop-con content based solely on gender membership, responding to discrimination and generalizations with other emblematically sexist slogans. Among these: "Everything men can do, women can do better", "The future is female". The isolation in echo chambers and the hunger for virality has distanced the feminist movement from the ultimate goal of its battle, diverting it to often questionable choices whose purpose is to legitimize hatred of men or, increasingly, clickbait.

Thirdly, patriarchal structures create dynamics of deep suffering for men themselves as well. Toxic masculinity is "a heterosexual masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity (whether that is pink yogurt or emotions)"[41]. The concept of toxic masculinity was coined by Dr. Shepherd Bliss in the 1980s. Toxic masculinity differs from other conceptions of masculinity (i.e. hegemonic masculinity) because it focuses, precisely, on the toxic aspects of masculinity. Although the concept is tautological, its meaning is not to be taken for granted: it declares that there are traits of masculinity that can be deeply harmful to those who are forced to perform them in everyday life. To clarify further, toxic masculinity is an intrinsic component of our society's patriarchal heritage. The concept of toxic masculinity emphasizes what portion of the patriarchal heritage is inherently detrimental for men. It does not focus on what men can benefit from, namely the role of power and

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[41] Banet-Weiser, S., & Miltner, K. M. (2015). *#masculinitysofragile: Culture, structure, and networked misogyny.* Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com

hegemony that patriarchy has socially constructed for them, but what can be harmful because of its necessary and obligatory character.

At the time Dr. Bliss came up with the concept of toxic masculinity, feminism was beginning to branch out and give voice to women's need to take their space in society, as well as in the political and the professional environments. Due to this evolution, the mythopoetic men felt that their voices had been muted, "though Bly and others are careful in not blaming feminism for this"[42]. The biggest mistake human beings, especially those who label themselves feminists, can make is to believe that feminism only concerns women. Feminism is about men: about men who oppress women, because they themselves are oppressed by toxic masculinity. A conception of masculinity that leads them to think that women should live by conforming to standards opposite to those to which they feel obliged to conform to. Toxic masculinity, in fact, affects not only men, but also women by enforcing and encouraging beliefs and attitudes about serious typical gender roles for both men and women[43]. As stated earlier, toxic masculinity undermines the mental health of men, but also that of those around them. Men raised in patriarchal society will identify with the ability to dominate and believe that exerting power over women is a right, but sometimes even a duty to meet the standards of masculinity. These beliefs may in the long run lead to a spiral of violence that in the worst cases will result in episodes of feminicide.

Toxic masculinity not only sees women as inferior, but also repudiates those men who do not fit the clichés of masculinity and who, having freed themselves from the standards imposed on them as men, are able to be comfortable with their personalities. Male children and adolescents, due to patriarchal heritage, grow up feeling compelled to be strong, so when faced with problems and adversities they do not give free release to their emotions. "These regressive traits for men can lead to harmful effects, like to their mental health"[44]. Statements like "real men don't cry" can seriously affect men's mental health, rendering them inhibited and forcing them to self-censor their feelings, sorrows and suppressing their weaknesses. In

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[42] Messner, M. A. (2000). "*Essentialist retreat: the mythopoetic men's movement and the Christian promise keepers*". In *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements.* Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press. 17–23. ISBN 978-0-80-395576-9.

[43] Ward, L. M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. (2006). "*Breasts are for men: Media, masculinity ideologies, and men's beliefs about women's bodies*". In *Sex Roles*, 55, 703-714.

[44] Kupers, T. A. (2005). *"Toxic Masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison".* In *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 713-724.

fact, hyper-rationalization is one of the distinctive prerogatives of toxic masculinity: emotions such as affection, love, and fear are demolished and rationalized. Even anger, the most irrational extreme of our emotional spectrum, is justified through reasoning, which is why it is the only emotion to be legitimately demonstrated by men: it is seen as a tool of domination over women. As stated before, the primary and fundamental goal of the feminist battle is to disqualify gender as a criterion or parameter of judgment, thus allowing equal opportunity. It goes without saying that unhinging male stereotypes would be a great step toward equality. On the one hand, informing and educating men on the subject mobilizes a moral universe of belonging and allows people to feel part of a larger social project, whose goal is clear and unequivocal: to eradicate what is poisoned in gender stereotypes. It would, therefore, allow men not to be indirect victims of their own behavior. On the other hand, given that toxic masculinity has obvious strong consequences toward other men, toward oneself, toward women, and toward queer people, its eradication would benefit the direct victims of this toxicity, that is, the categories of people just mentioned. It is therefore necessary to admit that this social construction of the male gender is harmful because it allows patriarchal structures to be fomented. It is harmful because it hurts society as a whole.

Toxic masculinity appears as a kind of inverted mirror of what Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad have called "confidence culture"[45]. Decades of advertising, lifestyle television, literature and social media content devoted to self-improvement have led young women to believe that it is more important to engage in working on themselves to regain their self-esteem than to struggle against structural inequality mechanisms that legitimize a certain idea of femininity as lacking. Similarly, men are invited to struggle with the meanings of their own masculinity, to reclaim a healthy masculinity, instead of becoming aware of the practical and political consequences of their gendered behaviors. It is therefore of common interest for men to be included in the feminist battle. Despite this, the issue does not seem of paramount importance in equality battles and public debate: it seems of utmost relevance instead to create catch-all content based on the exclusion of men from feminist struggle and the ridiculing of feminists by echo chambers where sexism and machismo are rampant.

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[45] Orgad, S., & Gill, R. (2022). *Confidence culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sociologist Robert Merton discussed how divisive and exclusive the concept of group, defining social in-groups and out-groups[46]. This division is exactly what radical feminist rhetoric, within its filter bubble, has nurtured: it has reversed the process of prejudice of which women have been and still are victims, and it has woven around men a narrative network analogous to that from which they wanted to free themselves. The fundamental core of a movement that aims to achieve equal rights should be to disqualify gender as a criterion or parameter of judgment, positively and negatively. Radical feminist rhetoric, on the contrary, risks to exclude men from their own battle fueling gender discrimination and division, mainly because it recognizes its algorithmic effectiveness and inclination to be viral. Men should be directly involved in the battle for gender equality. Feminism aims to overcome gender inequalities and rigid gender roles that affect both women and men. Involving men in the feminist movement is critical to creating meaningful and lasting change in society.

Creating content on social media that primarily targets women, especially if already engaged in the fight for gender equality, highly limits the impact and effectiveness of the message. It is important to engage and educate all members of society, regardless of their gender, in order to create an inclusive movement that promotes equality for all. At the same time, it is important to recognize that women have historically suffered more from gender inequality and have often been the leading voices in the struggle for their rights. Women-focused content can provide a safe space to discuss the specific issues that affect them and to strengthen solidarity among women.

However, it is essential that men are not excluded or ignored in this process. They must be invited to participate, listen, learn, and actively engage in promoting gender equality. Working together as allies can help create meaningful cultural change and build a more equitable society for all genders. Engaging men in the feminist battle is crucial to the evolution toward a more equitable society. Creating inclusive content on social media that addresses gender inequality and promotes open dialogue between men and women can foster more effective progress in the fight for gender equality.

The feminist struggle in 2021 is still, at its base, a struggle for survival. This is why one cannot risk that, given the power of virality proper of their content, the echo chambers in

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[46] Merton, R. (1948). *"The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy"*. In *The Antioch Review*, 8, 193-210.

which radical feminism ferments might end up distancing even more men from the gender equality cause and representing, in the common understanding and public opinion, the entire feminist movement.

Conclusions and Solutions to the Issue

The analysis carried out in this paper forces us to learn about the degradation of traditional information methods. This thesis has explored the concept of public opinion, the role of communication models, the impact of social media on information dissemination, and the case study of social justice warriors and radical feminism. Through this examination, several significant findings have emerged, shedding light on the challenges and implications associated with public opinion formation and communication in the digital age.

The historical origins and development of the concept of public opinion highlighted its importance in democratic societies. Proving the existence of public opinion as nothing more than a social construct underscored the need for effective communication channels. However, the decrease in political participation and the rationality underlying political ignorance pose significant obstacles to achieving a robust and uninfluenced formation of public opinion.

The two flows communication model, particularly the role of opinion leaders, highlighted their influence in shaping public opinion and driving social change. The advent of social media has revolutionized communication dynamics, providing new platforms for opinion leaders to disseminate their views. Nevertheless, the impact of social media on information and journalism is a double-edged sword. The potentially positive, but concretely negative role of opinion leaders in spreading false, inaccurate or strategically aligned news is an undeniable contemporary social plague. Through the interpretation of social media filtered by knowledge of the two flow communication model, the role of confirmation bias and the phenomenon of the polarisation of opinions were analysed, since they find their ideal terrain on social media. Contemporary media use reveals a degradation of journalism, with sensationalism and clickbait often overshadowing factual reporting. Additionally, social media has contributed to political polarization, creating filter bubbles that reinforce individuals' existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Algorithms and confirmation bias have been studied because of their fundamental role in further exacerbating this issue by filtering information tailored to individuals' preferences.

Furthermore, the case study of social justice warriors and feminism demonstrated the complexities of social movements in the age of social media. The term *Social Justice Warrior* has assumed diverging connotations over time, shifting from a compliment to an insult. This reflects the polarization and contentious nature of online discourse. Feminism, as a historical and ongoing movement, has been both empowered and undermined by social media, with instances of radicalism and extremism often dominating the online conversation.

To address these challenges, several solutions can be considered[47]. First, promoting political education and engagement is crucial to counteracting the decrease in political participation and addressing the rationality underlying political ignorance. This can be achieved through educational reforms, public awareness campaigns, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

Second, social media platforms and algorithms need to be transparent and accountable. Implementing measures to counteract filter bubbles and confirmation bias, such as promoting diverse content and providing users with alternative viewpoints, can help mitigate the polarizing effects of social media.

Governing dissent, reconciling different ideas that are the core values of a democracy, worthy of being called such, can be scarcely achieved. Indeed, it is not impossible: if platforms were properly equipped with collaboration, proposition and participatory consensus features according to appropriate participant engagement logics, the damage would certainly be contained. But before dealing with the functions of social platforms specifically, we should take a step back to the accuracy of the information.

Educating users free themselves from their filter bubbles, even with the only purpose of encouraging and fostering fact-checking, would be a significant starting point in solving the issues raised up to this point. It would be dangerous to forget that attitudes arise from the values and beliefs of individuals[48]; it is therefore of paramount importance to appeal to people's values, which are becoming increasingly distant from the search for the truthfulness

[47] Stroud, N. J. (2017). "*Understanding and overcoming selective exposure and judgment when communicating about science*". In *The Oxford handbook on the science of science communication*, edited by K. H. Jamieson, D. M. Kahan, & D. A. Scheufele. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 377–388

[48] Perloff, R. (2023). "*Attitudes Definition and Structure*". In *Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the twenty-first century.* Routledge, 83-110.

of facts, from democratic and growth-oriented confrontation, in favour of a move towards ghettoisation of passive and influenced thought and rational ignorance.

Equally crucial is to encourage people to de-sublimate the figure of influencers, the redefined opinion leaders. It is a proven fact of empirical evidence that the age at which people approach technology and social media is getting progressively lower. People should, for this reason, be taught from an early age to use their critical intelligence to foster individual thinking, in an attempt to defeat the omnipotence of the ignorant who portray themselves as omniscient, and to combat the dictatorship of massifying opinion.

In addition it would be helpful to find out which journalistic techniques fuel civil public debate, mitigate polarisation and increase trust in the reliability of the content itself. Reaffirm the value of media ethics when faced with the prospect of Generation Z becoming radicalized for violent extremism by educating news journalists, both online and offline, on how to avoid the traps of fearmongering, stereotyping, confirmation bias, fake news, and the creation of "media panics." What would be also useful is for the editors of the most accredited newspapers to think about an editorial set-up that is immune to the polarising mechanisms of populism[49], creating content that is both popular and trustworthy, capable of engaging readers in a constructive and non-divisive manner, thus reconnecting people with the traditional media.

Lastly, fostering responsible and constructive online discourse is essential. Encouraging respectful dialogue, fact-checking, and promoting empathy can contribute to a healthier digital environment where social justice movements like feminism can thrive without being overshadowed by extremism.

In conclusion, understanding the complexities of public opinion formation, communication models, social media's impact on information, and the challenges faced by social justice movements is crucial in navigating the digital landscape. By implementing the suggested solutions, society can endeavor towards a more informed, inclusive, and constructive public debate that fosters positive change and social progress.

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Estratto in Lingua Italiana

Recenti studi sociologici circa la comunicazione nell'era digitale hanno evidenziato diversi risvolti emblematicamente negativi sulla struttura sociale ed il dibattito pubblico, successivi e consequenziali all'avvento dei social media. Una crescente varietà di pratiche umane che si basano in massima parte sui mezzi di comunicazione moderni, infatti, ha reso le piattaforme digitali un aspetto centrale della quotidianità dei più. In particolare nelle società democratiche prospere, il panorama mediatico è prevalentemente caratterizzato dalla digitalizzazione e dal dominio dei social media.

L'obiettivo di questo elaborato è di determinare in che modo sia possibile arginare le conseguenze del monopolio dei social media sull'informazione moderna. Per raggiungere tale intento si è partiti da un'introduzione sull'evoluzione del concetto di opinione pubblica. Dalle πόλεις greche, dove le persone si riunivano per discutere su questioni collettive e, soprattutto, per ottenere accettazione sociale, passando per l'Illuminismo, epoca a cui si associa e riconduce la maternità dell'espressione stessa, fino all'era moderna, si sono ripercorse le *nuances* di significato che il concetto di opinione pubblica ha assunto nel corso degli anni.

A seguito di questo riepilogo storico, si è passati a discutere la sussistenza stessa dell'opinione pubblica: il sociologo Pierre Bourdieu ha sostenuto, nel suo scritto *Communication and Class Struggle*, che l'opinione pubblica non esiste se non sotto forma di illusione fornita da coloro che hanno interesse ad affermarne l'esistenza. Una volta dimostrato empiricamente che catturare il comune sentire è da sempre un desiderio dei leader politici ed economici, si è concluso che, come suggerito da Susan Herbst nell'opera *Media, Culture and Society,* l'opinione pubblica è un costrutto sociale.

La forza inarrestabile di questo concetto, più che la sua natura, viene poi scandagliata nel prosieguo dell'elaborato, rimarcando quanto l'avvento dei social network abbia contribuito a ricollegare le opinioni dei singoli, ma ancor di più ad influenzarle.

Per sostenere tale tesi, in aggiunta, è stata presa in considerazione l'ignoranza razionale, specialmente nel contesto della limitata partecipazione politica osservata nel mondo digitale. Esaminando i fattori che contribuiscono allo scarso apporto individuale nelle discussioni politiche e nelle attività sui social media, si è ottenuta una comprensione approfondita dell'interazione complessa tra tecnologia, populismo, dinamiche sociali e processi democratici. Quando il costo di raccogliere informazioni sufficienti su un

argomento, per sviluppare un'opinione obiettiva su di esso e per prendere una decisione informata, supera potenzialmente il beneficio che la logica prevede di ottenere da quella decisione, l'ignoranza sull'argomento in questione è definita razionale. Tuttavia, si è dimostrato come ciò non implichi una altrettanto consapevole scelta di assoluta disinformazione nelle persone. Infatti, gli utenti decidono di ricorrere a scorciatoie informative, quali i social media, per acquisire celermente un'infarinatura di conoscenze su un argomento determinato e di tendenza.

Questo *excursus* è stato di fondamentale importanza per discutere la relazione tra i social media e la decadenza del giornalismo. Correlazione che si è provveduto ad analizzare nel contesto di ambienti mediatici sempre più digitali e dominati dai social media, ossia le scorciatoie informative sopracitate. Si è poi condotta un'analisi approfondita del suddetto fenomeno, utilizzando lo studio del modello di comunicazione a due flussi. Si è spiegato che questo paradigma comunicativo,   introdotto nel 1955 da Lazarsfeld e Katz nell'opera *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*, dichiara l'inesistenza di un flusso continuo di informazioni dai media ai destinatari finali. Al contrario, esso procederebbe dai media ai cosiddetti opinion leaders, individui socialmente influenti all'interno di un certo gruppo sociale.

La polarizzazione dell'opinione pubblica e la disinformazione dilagante sono state ricondotte, in parte, all'emergere di nuovi opinion leaders nell'ambito dei social media: gli influencers. Queste figure, infatti, promulgano informazioni informazioni sbrigative, decontestualizzate, ingannevoli ed imprecise, al servizio degli algoritmi di Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok e altre piattaforme social. I valori fondamentali del giornalismo, ovvero la trasparenza, la veridicità e la credibilità, sono stati riportati affinché si comprendesse perché si è parlato dell'avvento dei social media come del declino del giornalismo.

La ricerca intende inoltre evidenziare il ruolo degli algoritmi nella polarizzazione del panorama informativo delle piattaforme dei social media. In particolare il presente lavoro fornisce prove sull'esistenza, le cause e gli effetti delle echo-chambers e le filter bubbles online, provvedendo anche a delineare una netta distinzione tra i due concetti. In entrambi i casi, gli algoritmi presentano selettivamente informazioni che si allineano alle convinzioni e alle preferenze preesistenti degli utenti, limitando l'esposizione a prospettive differenti.

Operata la suddetta distinzione, si è dimostrato che gli algoritmi facilitano la creazione di bolle di filtraggio per scopi di carattere economico e politico attraverso vari meccanismi; tra questi vi sono le raccomandazioni di contenuti personalizzati, la pubblicità mirata, la massimizzazione dell'interazione degli utenti e l'amplificazione di contenuti popolari. In un contesto sempre più frammentato, in cui si delineano masse divise in distinti gruppi uniti da un pensiero comune quanto impersonale, i membri delle bolle informative, isolati e alienati dagli utenti che hanno diverse visioni politiche, consumano solo indicazioni e notizie che rafforzano le loro convinzioni.

Dimostrando che gli utenti provenienti da camere di risonanza distinte e contrastanti raramente interagiscono e che, quando ciò accade, la discussione sovente degenera, si è comprovato che la digitalizzazione estensiva non è una condizione sufficiente per favorire il dibattito pubblico. I social media avrebbero dovuto garantire l'accesso alle informazioni e la partecipazione al dibattito, due pilastri della democrazia; risultano invece responsabili della polarizzazione estrema dello spettro politico, nonché dell'esacerbazione della disinformazione. Come suggerito da Putnam nel suo studio *Bowling Alone*, infatti, il mondo virtuale non incoraggia la prossimità degli utenti a punti di vista dissimili. È proprio a causa di questo meccanismo che le informazioni diventano sempre più opache, condizionate da mode e tendenze: le bolle informative rappresentano uno stimolo, per gli editori e i leaders di opinione, per condividere contenuti sensazionalistici, ad alto impatto emotivo e, talvolta, distanti dalla realtà. L'analisi approfondisce, in sintesi, come questi spazi che risultano nell'isolamento degli utenti, emersi per omofilia o per opera degli algoritmi, vengano utilizzati da leaders politici od influencers per perseguire i propri scopi.

Obiettivo del presente studio, come anticipato, è indagare le sfaccettature emblematicamente negative dell'avvento dei social media. Approfondendo le basi teoriche e le ricerche empiriche, sono stati esplorati i metodi attraverso cui le piattaforme dei social media sono diventate terreno fertile per il populismo e la proliferazione di ambienti estremisti.

Per fornire evidenze empiriche, a supporto delle suddette ipotesi, si è presa in considerazione, come *case study,* la ramificazione radicale del movimento femminista. Il femminismo, come movimento storico e permanente, è stato sia potenziato che minato dai social media, con casi di radicalismo ed estremismo che spesso dominano la conversazione

online. L'esame delle sue manifestazioni più estreme e controproducenti, passando per una riflessione sulla mutevole connotazione del termine *Social Justice Warriors,* dimostra come le piattaforme dei social media, tautologicamente influenzate dagli influencer, possano diventare veicoli per la diffusione e l'amplificazione di ideologie polarizzate e spesso divisive.

In definitiva, questa rigorosa analisi dei temi sopra menzionati mira a offrire soluzioni potenziali alle sfide sociologiche e politiche derivanti dal moderno panorama informativo sulle piattaforme dei social media. Attraverso una comprensione approfondita delle dinamiche celate dalle piattaforme digitali, delle loro implicazioni e delle possibili conseguenze, l'auspicio è di contribuire allo sviluppo di strategie e approcci in grado di affrontare le problematiche di polarizzazione, populismo ed estremismo nel mondo digitale.

In conclusione, lo studio condotto nel presente elaborato si avvale di prospettive interdisciplinari provenienti dalla sociologia, dalle scienze politiche e dagli studi sulla comunicazione, col fine di mettere in luce l'interazione complessa tra social media, influencers, algoritmi ed opinione pubblica. Il completamento di questo scrutinio si prepone, auspicabilmente, di servire come base per proporre soluzioni potenziali al fenomeno sociologico e politico esaminato e per promuovere una società digitale più informata e coinvolta.