

***#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media.***

By Sunstein, C. R.

Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2017, 328 pp.

ISBN: 9780691175515

A Book Review by

*Dev Krause*

Université d'Ottawa, Canada

---

Cass Sunstein's *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* surveys the current effects of modern communication technologies – particularly the internet – on democracy. *#Republic* was preceded by two other works by Sunstein (which constitute the basis for this 2017 new publication): namely, *Republic.com* (2001) and *Republic.com 2.0* (2007). The main thesis put forth by Sunstein in this third version of the book may thus be familiar to some readers: communication technologies such as social media can lead to socio-political fragmentation, radicalization, self-segregation, the formation of deliberative enclaves, and the rapid spread of misinformation. Without exposure to diverse information and conflicting perspectives, the deliberative culture needed to sustain democracy in a particular community is threatened in Sunstein's view.

In the first chapter, Sunstein discusses our increasing ability to construct a Daily Me. Sunstein borrows the term Daily Me from Nicholas Negroponte to describe our increasing ability to explicitly control the information that we see and hear: “you could design a communications package just for you, with each component fully chosen in advance” (2017, p. 1). The internet enables “people’s growing power to filter what they see” and information providers’ “growing power to filter [information] for each of us, based on what they know about us” (2017, p. 6). Sunstein argues that while the Daily Me has yet to truly emerge, the internet has inched us closer to its full realization.

Sunstein explores the problems associated with the internet’s apparent tendency to create niche communities of like-minded individuals in “An Analogy and an Ideal” in chapter 1 and “Polarization” in chapter 3. He argues that the Daily Me jeopardizes democratic cohesion and consensus formation by facilitating highly insular and personalized information ecosystems. By insulating themselves in niche communities, individuals and the groups they belong to become increasingly prone to polarization: the tendency of groups to take-on more extreme positions when surrounded by a spectrum of like-minded peers. In order for deliberative democracy to survive, it must possess a communication system devoted to facilitating unwanted/unplanned and shared experiences (2017, p. 202).

In Chapter 4, Sunstein offers an incisive review of social science literature that has immense explanatory potential for group behaviour in social cascades. The rapid communication embedded in the internet and its ability to facilitate insular and polarizing communities can catalyze the spread of misinformation through cybercascades. In cybercascades, individuals parrot information without relying on their personal judgements, or simply to maintain a positive reputation amongst their societal peers.

*#Republic* then turns to the importance of shared experiences as a form of “social glue” necessary for democratic sustainability. General-interest intermediaries, according to Sunstein, are an essential mechanism for maintaining this social glue. Sunstein’s faith in the internet as a general-interest intermediary extends only as far as its ability to mimic traditional media. The only examples Sunstein provides of internet-based general-interest intermediaries are “ABC, CBS...the New York Times, the Washington Post...and many more” digitalized forms of traditional media (2017, p. 152). Sunstein accurately advocates for the spirit of general-interest intermediaries (exposure to diverse opinions), but I believe that the idealized way in which he conceptualizes their real-life manifestations slips into the sort of nostalgia he explicitly seeks to avoid. The paper newspaper that Sunstein upholds as the ideal general-interest intermediary is no more effective as a “menu of options” than Reddit’s /r/all or the front page of Wikipedia. Further, his wife’s preference for paper newspapers has no bearing on the efficacy of internet-based general-interest intermediaries; it merely reflects his nostalgia for an era of general-interest intermediaries that has long passed (see pp. 152-153). He even acknowledges the failures of general-interest intermediaries on multiple charges: shallow topic presentation; prejudices and biases; and constant pressures to increase viewership (2017, p. 43). Sunstein, however, does not admit that all of these charges can inhibit a general-interest intermediary’s ability to display a broad range of topics and views.

Chapter 6 argues for a shift in how we conceptualize communication technologies and social media. Instead of “asking how they affect us as consumers,” we should be asking “how they affect us as citizens” (2017, p. 157). This chapter is *#Republic* at its best: it weighs the benefits of the internet against its deficits while providing meaningful insights into our current consumerist culture. In these pages, Sunstein puts forward the view that a society based solely on unmitigated choice, and rooted in the unilateral pursuit of consumer sovereignty, is essentially an unfree and undesirable one. If we managed to (re)think of ourselves as citizens first and consumers second, we might be able to produce a society that is both desirable and conducive to freedom.

Sunstein moves on to discuss the regulation of the internet in terms of property rights by referencing the previous regulation of other communication technologies – such as radio and television. I believe that Sunstein’s decision to conceptualize the internet as readily regulatable at the national level is highly problematic. Governments cannot enforce property rights or regulations on the internet like they do within the geographic confines of a particular state. Sunstein fails to account for the fact that the internet transcends American borders and is therefore uniquely suited to evading the government regulations that typify previous generations of communication technologies. A 2015 report by the European Commission concluded that shutting down piracy websites was not only ineffective, but made piracy websites “more resistant to future interventions by law enforcement” (Aguiar et al., 2015, p. 1). There will always be states willing to turn a blind eye to illicit server hosting, just as there are states that facilitate tax evasion and money laundering.

In Chapter 8, Sunstein conceptualizes freedom of speech in terms of a commitment to democratic ideals, rather than solely consumer sovereignty – a theme that recurs throughout *#Republic*. For Sunstein, in order for free speech to remain fully consistent with democratic ideals, it cannot be considered in absolute terms; free speech has limitations in particular circumstances. *Terrorism.com*: Chapter 10 provides a stimulating continuation of Sunstein’s probing of the limits of free speech by exploring the use of the internet as a terrorist recruitment device. Through social media, terrorists can act as “polarization entrepreneurs” who radicalize isolated and vulnerable individuals to construct “enclaves of like-minded people” (2017, p. 238). Sunstein excels in navigating through the limitations on free speech while respecting its cultural and political importance in the United States.

“Proposals” : Chapter 9 outlines a series of highly questionable and antiquated proposals on how democracy can address a fragmented communication system. Sunstein correctly identifies some of the problems associated with modern communication technology – the risk of fragmentation, polarization, and insulation – but his solutions are impractical. Deliberative domains, voluntary self-regulation, and “serendipity buttons” are far from “modest and incremental” proposals (2017, p. 233). Moreover, by advocating for private solutions as the best solutions, rather than government mandates, he undermines his own call for government regulation in Chapter 7. Sunstein has personal experience with the self-interested behaviour of broadcasting corporations as a member of the President’s Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters (p. 196). Why would he expect them to act in the public interest, without being induced by regulations, vis-à-vis the internet? It is idealistic – and contrary to capitalism – to expect private websites to provide a link to their competitors on their own accord: actively encouraging the transference of the scarce commodity of users’ attention to another website is a loss in potential advertising revenue.

Sunstein concludes #Republic by offering-up the words of John Stuart Mill and John Dewey as emblematic of his most general topic throughout the book: to explore the preconditions for maintaining a vibrant, democratic republic and in particular, those preconditions tied to current technologies. Sunstein’s desire to promote a communication system that “provides a wide range of experiences – with people, topics, and ideas – that [people] would not have specifically selected in advance” is admirable; however, the means he prescribes to achieve these ends are questionable. Creating ‘deliberative domains’ where people could discuss contemporary issues with “competing points of view” through the establishment of “agreed-on facts” is untenable (p. 217); it is increasingly difficult to establish “agreed-on facts” in the social media era. The notion of “serendipity buttons” is equally problematic. Why would a social media platform create a button which takes you to opposing views on another website and in turn deprive themselves of your attention? I agree with Sunstein that the degree of control that individuals have over the information they consume is certainly cause for concern; however, he fails to fully acknowledge the internet’s power to facilitate access to conflicting views, diverse peoples, and new information – particularly when compared to traditional communication technologies. Garret (2009) has noted that the fragmentation risk commonly associated with the internet “appears to have been greatly overstated” (p. 281). Gentzkow and Shapiro came to this conclusion by leveraging the ‘isolation index.’ The isolation index provides insight on the tendency of netizens to consume media which falls within their ideological/political beliefs. For example, it will measure if a conservative netizen only consumes media from foxnews.com, or if a liberal netizen only visits nytimes.com. Based on their sample and isolation index scores, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) conclude that there is “no evidence that the internet is becoming more segregated over time” (p. 1799). In fact, ideological segregation on the internet has declined as its user base has grown (p. 1819). The face-to-face conversations Sunstein idealizes throughout #Republic, however, are markedly more likely to cause ideological segregation than interactions on social networks (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1831). These findings have emerged in response to Republic.com (2001) and Republic.com 2.0 (2007); however, Sunstein dedicated no substantive space in #Republic to responding to the criticisms he faced for either of these books. By failing to address findings such as these, Sunstein appears to have succumb to the ideological segregation he explicitly seeks to avoid.

## References

- Aguiar, L., Claussen, J., & Peukert, C. (2015). Online Copyright Enforcement, Consumer Behavior, and Market Structure [EUR - Scientific and Technical Research Reports]. The European Commission. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from: [https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/JRC93492\\_Online\\_Copyright.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/JRC93492_Online_Copyright.pdf)

- Garrett, R. K. (2009). Echo chambers online?: Politically motivated selective exposure among Internet news users<sup>1</sup>. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(2), 265–285.
- Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2011). Ideological Segregation Online and Offline. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126(4), 1799–1839.

---

### About the Reviewer

**Dev Krause** is an undergraduate in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa. In the fall of 2020, he will be a MPhil candidate and holder of a Gonville/Bauer studentship at the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College.

---

### Citing this book review:

Krause, Dev. (2019). [Review of the book *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*]. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 11(2), 120-123.