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#IMMUNE Train-The-Trainers

The Side Effects of the Social Media Business Model

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1. Introduction

When it comes to advertisement the social media business model is working. Social media platform operators collect data about internet users to infer their interests and desires. They supply them with personalised advertisement that is matching these interests assuming that users make a corresponding purchasing decision. But it does not stop here. Social media platform operators also personalise all the other content that is presented to the users. They choose content that is provoking some kind of reaction by the user and is maximising the Engagement Rate. The users' reaction is supplying even more data to the platform operators who become even better in estimating the users' interests and desires and are able to provide them with advertisement that is even better aligned with their interests and desires.

When it comes to advertisement internet users do indeed welcome personalisation.¹ It reduces the flow of digital content that is little to not relevant to the user and therefore increases the user experience. However, the entire advertising business model of social media platforms has serious negative side effects. This relates to how we see ourselves and others and our ability to lead social and political debates and come to viable societal and political solutions.

This view is shared by prominent figures in the tech-world. To quote Chamath Palihapitiya who is a former developer at Facebook: *"The fast-acting, dopamine-driven feedback loops we have developed are destroying how society works (...). No social discourse, no collaboration; (...) Now I think we've reached a really bad state. It undermines the foundation of people's behavior toward and among each other. And I don't have a good solution for it. My personal solution is that I just don't use these tools anymore".*²

Sean Parker who was the first president of Facebook expresses similar concerns: *"We have to give you a little dopamine kick every now and then, so to speak, because someone has liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. (...) That's a feedback loop for social recognition (...) exactly what a hacker like me would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in the human psyche. (...) The inventors, the creators - people like me, Mark Zuckerberg, Kevin Systrom from Instagram, all these people - understood that on a very conscious level. And we did it anyway (...) it literally changes your relationships with society and with each other. (...) It probably has a negative impact on productivity. Who knows what it will do to our children's brains".*³

¹ See e.g. [1]

² Quote taken from Lanier (2018): p. 16

³ Quote taken from Lanier (2018): p. 15

In conclusion, the widely accepted and applied business model of social media and other online platform operators pose different dangers to liberal democracies even without the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation. It has the potential to drive societies apart and forestall constructive political and societal collaboration. Propagandists have understood this destructive power and aggravate the side effects by systematically spreading their manipulative content.

2. Impact of Online Media Consumption on the Individual

A high variety of empirical studies show a clear trend in the average media usage: online media increasingly dominate our general media consumption habits. According to the ARD/ZDF Online Study 2021, 55% of the German population above 14 years of age use online media on a daily bases. The average duration of their usage is 136 minutes as compared to 100 minutes in 2018. 64 minutes are attributable to video, 56 minutes to audio, 20 minutes to text. Considering age categories separately one realizes that the younger the respondents of the study the more they use online media. Respondents in the youngest age group 14-29 report a total of 269 minutes of online media consumption – the highest of all age groups: 142 minutes are attributable to video, 105 minutes audio and 32 minutes to text – on a daily basis.

This trend is reflected in our news consumption as well. Asked for their major news sources by the *Flash Eurobarometer News and Media Survey 2022* the respondents say that even though TV is their primary news source, 88% of the respondents get at least some news via their smart phone, computer or laptop. 43% use websites of the news sources, 31% read articles or posts that appear in their social network. The younger the respondents the more likely they are to get their news from social media sources: 43% in the age group 15-24 claim to do so in contrast to 24% of the older generation above 55 years of age. Furthermore, 70% of the respondents use exclusively cost free news services.

These figures are revealing because they show that an increasing share of our online media and news media consumption is subject to the dynamics of online media distribution systems. These are predominantly based on personalised advertising which means that an increasingly large share of our news consumption is proposed to us by anonymous recommender algorithms that do some form of filtering for us. This filtering is done on the basis of extensive data-mining and analysis of our previous online activity. The fact that 70% of the survey respondents use news services that are free of charge corroborates this conclusion because if a service is said to be for free it is most likely entirely based on advertisement or some form of online marketing. Non-representative (non-random) surveys done during the #IMMUNE project find even more astonishing figures. Thereafter, youngsters at the age of 15-16 spend between four to eight hours on social media – mostly on TikTok – and receive most of their news from there.

This rampant exposure to the dynamics of social media and online communication is leaving its marks on the youngsters and impact how they behave in society and, in particular how they view themselves in society. Although research in this field is still rather young – due to the actuality of the technological development – some of these impacts are empirically well confirmed. The most important ones are reported in the following sections.

2.1. Inattentional Blindness

The term Inattentional Blindness is known since the late 1990s and describes a situation in which people’s attentiveness is so much focussed on certain issues or happenings that they completely overlook everything that is happening outside their focus. If one imagines the attentiveness of a person as a cone of light that is directed at something, inattentional blindness means that they fail to see everything that is outside that cone of light.⁴

Online media in general and social media in particular are masters in capturing our attentiveness. That is no wonder: the largest tech companies of our planet with the smartest computer scientists and psychologists work relentlessly on methods and strategies how to best capture our attentiveness in order to make money out of it. Their effectiveness means that we become blind for everything that is outside our social media world. We surrender ourself completely to the content that the platform operators choose for us. Thereby, we lose some degrees of our freedom to think and act because we are constantly subject to manipulative attempts by advertisers or other actors that want something from us. Social media operators know our weak points very well and use them to implant thoughts and opinions into our minds.

Furthermore and equally importantly, we also lose our senses for the actual world around us. In a study on how our smartphone consumption impacts our behaviour Kushlev et al. (2019) found that people tend to smile less at each other because they are so tied up with their smartphone applications.⁵ “Facebook researchers found that one in eight of their users report engaging in compulsive use of social media that impacts on their sleep, work, parenting or relationships”.⁶ In fact, these findings show that our everyday physical life becomes rougher. Unfortunately, our digital life cannot compensate for this as the next sections will demonstrate.

⁴ [3]

⁵ [4]

⁶ [5]

2.2. Individual Stress through Social Media

“The social comparison theory, which goes back to the social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954) and has since been intensively developed further, assumes that people base their self-assessment on other people: We process information about other people automatically or specifically in relation to our own person (Wood 1996). Social comparison refers to individual characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness, social status, professional or athletic performance). Social comparisons have cognitive (self-assessment, self-concept), emotional (self-esteem), as well as motivational and behavioral aspects (self-development, self-efficacy). Three types of social comparisons can be distinguished:

- **Upward Comparison**

People compare themselves with persons who are superior to them with respect to a certain characteristic of interest. On the one hand, this can serve as an incentive to improve their own performance if they believe that they can manage to do so (e.g., amateur athlete compares herself with professional athlete). On the other hand, an upward comparison can also affect one's sense of self-worth if reaching the standard of comparison is impossible. The negative consequences relate, in particular to unattainable beauty ideals and have the potential to harm the own body image and therewith the self-esteem. This can lead to concrete disorders like eating disorders, depression, sports addiction and the like.

- **Downward Comparison**

People compare themselves with persons who are inferior with respect to a certain characteristic of interest. The process of comparison increases their self-esteem and can be helpful in coping with difficult life situations (e.g., a cancer patient compares himself with a more seriously ill patient and then evaluates his situation more positively). However, the positive effect of the downward comparison requires that the comparing person has the ability to differentiate his or her own situation with the other person's situation. On the downside, however, a downward comparison can also lead to a kind of assimilation with the even more disadvantaged person and therefore have the tendency to see things even more negatively.

- **Horizontal Comparison**

People compare themselves with persons who have similar characteristics or prerequisites with regard to a specific characteristic of interest. This type of comparison promotes realistic self-assessments” (Döring, N. (2013): p. 300 – own translation).

Personal stress through social comparisons have traditionally been researched in relation to celebrities and public figures that people compare with. But ever since average people have the possibility to present themselves to a large audience via their social media accounts we need to view the issue of social comparisons differently. People do not only compare themselves to celebrities any more but also to everyone in their social network that they also have direct real-world relations with. One can assume that the related comparative stress is therefore higher. The reason is that there will always be someone in our social network who looks to be more attractive, successful or fitter than ourselves. At the same

time these people are no celebrities so the question why I am not as attractive, successful or fit weighs even more.

Facebook researchers have confirmed this assumption by their own internal research about user of their Instagram platform. The company's researchers found that Instagram is harmful for a sizable percentage of its users, most notably teenage girls. And teen boys aren't immune either. In the deep dive Facebook's researchers conducted into mental health in 2019, they found that 14% of boys in the U.S. said Instagram made them feel worse about themselves. In their report on body image in 2020, Facebook's researchers found that 40% of teen boys experience negative social comparison.

Another major stress factor is known as the **"Fear of Missing Out" (FoMo)**.⁷ It describes the individual's fear to miss out on important events or information that are taking place in their network. This fear is making social media users spend enormous amounts of time on the platforms and engaging in enormous amounts of interaction. This fear impacts the users even when they are not busy with their social media profile. A part of their mental capacity is used up for worrying whether they are being left out of something. Tragically, considering the size of most digital social networks there is always something happening and the users constantly miss out on something. So, their fear is repeatedly confirmed because they realise that this something has indeed taken place without them being present.

2.3. Lack of Authenticity

Social media give us the possibility to control the image that we communicate about ourselves. Therefore, it should be no surprise that social media profiles and the entire image of personalities on social media should generally be treated with a grain of salt: they do generally not mirror the actual self but either the ideal self or the ought self of the people. Positive sides of the personality are highlighted while the negative ones are hidden. "Unlike a mirror, social media profiles are a form of sales presentations that are edited versions of the self that allow people to put their best self forward" (Cohen et al. 2020, p. 181). Letting people engage with their own social media profile may improve their personal well-being. "Toma and Hancock (2013) demonstrated that engaging with one's Facebook profile can be an important source of self-affirmation, as social media profiles raise the awareness of values, meaningful relationships, and other essential aspects of the self-concept" (McMahon, C.: 2019). However, this also contributes to the fact that what we see on social media is little authentic. It is rarely the reality but rather a fabricated vision of it. It has more to do with how the people designing their profile see themselves or would like to be seen. In turn, this means that the stress that many people experience through social comparison is not based on reality but the expression of an artificial world. A conscious usage of social media may be a remedy to this issue.

⁷ [7]

2.4. Social Codes of Conduct

It has become evident during the Coronavirus Pandemic: digital communication is able to substitute for personal encounters and physical meetings to some extent. Various digital tools can be used to keep communication and collaboration in private and work related contexts alive. However, the loss of direct interpersonal contact sets narrow limits to the extent to which online meetings can fully replace face-to-face meetings. This indicates that online communication is governed by other rules than physical communication and that someone who is capable of the one can nevertheless have deficiencies in the other.

Accordingly, if users spend most of their time online – and communicate mostly online – they develop deficiencies in communicating face-to-face in real world contexts. Even more so: if youngsters and adolescents are predominantly socialized in online for a they do not learn how to act during physical encounters. This phenomenon has already been observed and described in the context of online gaming addiction. The psychologists Adam Alter writes: *“The addictive online friendships that attract young role-players are dangerous not because they have too much to offer, but because they lack something crucial: the opportunity to experience what it means to simply sit together and talk to the person across from you. The staccato on the keyboard and even interactions via webcam follow a completely different rhythm and transmit messages with a much lower bandwidth. Even the smell of another person or sustained eye contact, which is only possible with people present, are important. This may be very pleasant in the short term, but they will still starve in the long term”* (Alter A. 2019: p.228).

On the impact of online gaming during the time when youngsters develop social skills Alter writes: *“Children acquire different mental abilities during different critical growth periods. As young as four or five, they learn languages with great ease; after that, they learn a new language only with considerable effort. The same is true for the acquisition of social skills - and the ability to navigate the complex world of teenage sexuality. If children do not get the opportunity to interact face to face, it is very likely that they will never learn these skills”* (Alter A. 2019: p. 231-32).

2.5. Intellectual Shortcuts: System One and System Two Thinking

According to the social psychologists Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky humans have two distinct thought systems [10]. **System 1 Thinking** is based on instincts and emotional judgements, is working subconsciously, is always active and is working along patterns and stereotypes. To the contrary, **System 2 Thinking** is based on logical appreciation and analysis, is a conscious act, comparatively slow, intellectually demanding and therefore rarely active. Now, these two thought systems are confronted with the speed and directness of the internet. Stimuli are reaching us via different channels – emails, messenger, social media – and in extremely short intervals. They are attracting our attention through

push messages and audio-visual signaling. We are constantly confronted with new information that is demanding something from us.

Being confronted with this information overload, our brain processes all the presented information along its System 1 Thinking. Accordingly, we perceive the content, we categorize them according to what we know and believe and make emotional judgements. Due to a lack of time and mental capacity our brain takes shortcuts in order to make sense of the presented information. Our System 2 Thinking is seldomly activated in such an environment. We rarely deal with the information in depth, do not question it, do not research other points of view and do not compare it with our own value system.

Therefore, in an online world a message has the best probability of being heard by the users if they have the capability to reach users' System 1 Thinking. They use eye-catching slogans that are immediately understandable, have emotional content that addresses basic feelings and has a certain recognition value in terms of addressing issues according to known and familiar patterns and to not challenge our thinking. Online marketers and manipulators of any sort know this and adapt their online material in order to place their specific message. Subsequently, online communication is increasingly becoming more superficial, emotional and works best if it operates with some form of stereotypes. Considering the fact that recommender algorithms present the content that we most likely engage with, one can assume that this trend is pushed with automated pace and quasi industrial power.

Positive-Negative-Asymmetry

Related to the differentiation of System 1 and System 2 thinking is the *Positive-Negative-Asymmetry* which is also known under the term *Negativity Bias*. According to this internet users do not react to all emotional presentations equally. Negative information catches our attention more strongly and with higher probability than positive information. We are more likely to react to "conflict, controversy, aggression, destruction or death" (Peter, C. and Brosius H.-B., 2013: S. 469).⁸ Users' tendency to react more to negative news and reports has a re-enforcing effect in an algorithm-driven digital world. As a reminder: powerful artificial intelligence algorithms analyse with which content users have engaged with most in their past online activity and present them similar content that will most probably engage them again in the future. So, if we reacted to negative content more than to positive ones in the past these recommender algorithms will present us more negative content than positive ones in the future. Hence, the news feeds in social media profiles will most probably be more negative – more aggressive, conflictual and destructive than it would need to be and probably than the reality actually is.

⁸ [11]

Besides, the issue of emotionality and the *Negative-Positive-Asymmetry* is not exclusive to social media. By competing fiercely with other newspapers and diverse online media, even traditional media outlets adapt their news coverage and present content which easier to digest, less differentiated, and more sensational. The authors Johann Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge described this issue already in the 1960s and wrote about *negativity* as a news factor.⁹

Confirmation Bias

Another related phenomenon is the so-called *Confirmation Bias*. It describes the fact that news are more likely to be classified as true if they correspond to one's own view of the world. According to Montag (2021) "it seems to be less strenuous for our brain to process information that does not contradict the existing views" (Montag 2021: p. 211 – own translation). Again, our brain is taking a shortcut in order to arrive to a conclusion: Instead of objectively analysing the genuine truthfulness of a news item, it falls back on our past experiences and emotional affiliations. These judgements may or may not be correct or false.

2.6. Online Disinhibition Effect

It is probably a safe assumption that every internet user has already experienced extraordinary strong language in online communication that is beyond any scales. May this be in comments to news articles, to posts, tweets or even in average email- and messenger communication. In fact, this phenomenon is psychologically well researched and called the online-disinhibition effect. Accordingly, people treat other people differently when they communicate online – especially if they are anonymous. They tend to lose (large) parts of their self-restraint. Suler (2004) identifies five factors that contribute to this:¹⁰

Dissociative Anonymity

When people communicate under a pseudonym or in an anonymous forum they tend to detach, in some parts, from the moral and ethical beliefs that they usually hold in their everyday life. They also seem to detach from some of their own personality traits. Accordingly, they write or say things to their counterpart or to the entire world that they would never say face-to-face or in any other meaningful relation.

Asynchronicity

There is usually no direct feedback when we communicate electronically. On the one hand the sender of a message needs to wait at least until the addressee has typed or recorded in his or her answer. On the other hand the addressee can choose when and how to answer and can take some time to reflect

⁹ [12]

¹⁰ [13]

on it. His or her words can be friendly and conciliatory or aggressive and sharp. However the messenger decides, empirically, the words become more drastic and extreme because they need to make up for the missing body language and physical presence. This increases the probability of misunderstandings.

Solipsistic Introjection

If online users communicate digitally they usually do not see each other (except of videoconferences, of course) and are missing the entire body language, facial expression, and the tone of the voice of the respective other. Therefore, they rely on an extremely narrow bandwidth of information when they interpret the words of their counterpart. This can lead to dramatic misunderstandings. In fact, with so little information about what the counterpart would like to say the interpretation of their words has more to do with the individual's own mood and mindset than with what the counterpart wanted to express. We tend to rather understand what we want to understand than what our counterpart really expressed.

Dissociative Imagination

It seems to be the case that people tend to take online communication not as seriously as physical communication. They view digital communication like a game. So just like in a game they test certain behaviours and try things out that they would never do in a physical communication setting. They use different language or make different claims. This is an important impediment for a meaningful communication.

Minimization of Status and Authority

Status and authority of a person are minimized in remote communication. Therefore, people tend to be less respectful with superiors, supervisors or other people that have a certain social status. Apparently, the authority of personalities has a lot to do with their physical presence, their body language and their maturity in dealing with interpersonal encounters.

2.7. Imbalanced Perspectives – Echo Chambers

Module two dealt with it in greater detail: personalisation has the effect that internet users are confronted with those and only those contents that the recommender algorithm assumes to be interesting to him or her. Their estimation is based on the analysis of the user's previous online activity and the online activity of the user's friends and contacts. The user is not presented any content that reduces his or her engagement rate. Subsequently, the user is rarely or not confronted with anything that is challenging him or her. New perspectives, thoughts, styles, and kinds will not reach the user or only to a very little extent. Users who spend most of their time online may find themselves trapped in an Echo Chamber.

Although research is still in its infancy here, it is plausible to assume that this has a negative effect on the users' creativity. If users are only confronted with content that they know or that they are more or less familiar with and therefore are not receiving new and fresh input their thought processes will most likely be poorer and less multifaceted. This has implications for our ability to communicate with other people, in particular people who have different views on the world. Due to the fact that users do hardly perceive that other views and opinions exist it becomes more difficult to have a meaningful exchange about these views and, eventually to find common ground.

A related phenomenon is the so-called "Shift of the Base-Rate" (Montag, 2021: p.207). It describes the tendency of people to normalize circumstances and facts that they are permanently exposed to. Accordingly, people may get used to the highly disadvantageous or abnormal situations and cease to regarding it as something special. Therefore, if internet users or social media users are permanently confronted with content that is exhibiting abnormal or problematic content they may normalise this as well which will, eventually, impact their behaviour vis-à-vis other people.

A related negative impact becomes obvious if one considers the fact that people's habits are not necessarily positive and not necessarily indicate joy or amusement. Often enough personal habits are destructive and simply unhealthy and would actually be needed to be abandoned. A recommender algorithm that is presenting content that targets these habits again and again makes it even harder to get rid of them. This may become extremely problematic if we talk about serious disorders like eating disorders, addictions or even suicidal thoughts. In such cases the recommender algorithm may provide the users with content that is deepening their personal despair and may even put their health at risk.

3. Impact on the society

3.1. Impact on our live together

Considering all the individual psychological effects of extensive online and social media communication that have been described in the last section it is not far-fetched to assume a negative impact on the entire society. There is no doubt that the technological development has made life easier in many respects and is giving us opportunities to connect, communicate and express ourselves that are unprecedented in human history. However, the entire technological development took a somewhat problematic turn when the advertisement based business model and the related methodologies were developed. Their economic success lead to ever more sophisticated persuasion and manipulation approaches and observation tactics.

Taking all the individual psychological effects together one can predict: In sum, the rules and processes of modern digital communication make the living together rougher. The *information overload* makes us passive because we are constantly busy with processing new stimuli. By spending more and more time in online fora with our online contacts we increasingly lack the room for own thoughts and ideas. We forfeit our creativity and, eventually, also our individual freedom to think for ourselves as we are presented all the opinions and views that we apparently need in pre-processed bits and pieces by the respective recommender algorithm at work. Having our attentiveness captured by digital tools and applications we develop an *inattentional blindness* that makes us less attentive, careful, thoughtful and considerate in relation to our direct environment. The *emotional stress* from the permanent social comparison and the *FoMo* does not contribute to a balanced mood and a harmonious coexistence either. *Heightened emotionality* makes us exaggerate even smallest issues and the *Negativity Bias* and the algorithmic overrepresentation of negative online content poisons the public communication and the mood of each individual. This does not remain without consequences.

3.2. Impact on our democracy

Impact on how our democracy is lived

A very distinct effect of online and social media communication can be observed on the quality of our political system in liberal democracies. In order to understand why liberal democracies have come so much under pressure recently it is helpful to refer to the System 1- and System 2 – Thinking model by Kahnemann and Tversky that was presented in the previous section. Thereafter, **System 1 Thinking** is based on instincts and emotional judgements, is working subconsciously, is always active and is working along patterns and stereotypes. To the contrary, **System 2 Thinking** is based on logical appreciation and analysis, is a conscious act, comparatively slow, intellectually demanding and therefore rarely active.

According to the author Jamie Bartlett “modern democracies aspire to run on ‘system two’ logic, and its ideal citizens are McLuhan’s literate men. Its institutions are arranged to arrive at logical, thought-out, fact driven decisions” (Bartlett, 2018: p. 35).¹¹ So, in an ideal world, societal and political deliberation and decision-making processes are well-balanced, rational, solution-oriented, and constructive. The resulting political decisions can therefore be assumed to be purposeful, well-balanced in terms of spreading loads and benefits evenly and fairly, legitimate and widely accepted.

“The internet, by contrast, more closely resembles ‘system one’: everyone and everything is immediate, instinctive and emotional” (Bartlett, 2018: p.35). It is governed by negative emotionality,

¹¹ [14]

superficiality, one-sidedness, radicalism, aggression and a lack of authenticity. There is reason to fear that political decision-making in liberal democracies will adapt to the communication dynamics of the internet which will, eventually, lead to a decrease in the quality of the democratic decision-making processes as well as the quality of the resulting political decisions.

More concretely, hyper-personalization and the formation of Echo Chambers would undermine societal communication, harm the social debating and discourse skills and lead, eventually to separation of social groups who are incapable of finding common ground. This would soon be reflected in the way politics is done by the elected representatives who increasingly engage in *Tribal Politics*. This is marked by the attempt to prevail politically at all costs instead of finding a mutually acceptable compromise. In the end, such a society as a whole as well as all its parts will lose because of irrational political decisions and internal conflict.

On top of all that is the problem that fake news are additionally poisoning social and political discourses in an increasing rate. This is no surprise because their structure and make-up matches the type of information that spreads best in the internet. Fake News is emotional, negative, simplistic and does without a differentiated representation of reality.¹²

Impact on how our democracy is practiced

The method of *segmentation* that allows advertisers to categorize internet users and to adapt advertising messages according to their individual characteristics is equally applicable to political communication. Based on extensive databases provided by social media portals and other data brokers, political entrepreneurs can segment the electorate according their socio-demographic characteristics and provide them with tailor-made political messages – political messages that are supposed to have the greatest effect on them. This practice is called *microtargeting* and is commonly used in many electoral settings today.

Microtargeting is, however, controversial because there are issues with political accountability and transparency. If politicians supply different societal groups with different political content – the content they would like to hear – it becomes unclear which politics the politicians really stand for. The voters do not have a common ground upon which they take their election decision and the politician can more easily pull back from positions he or she held in the past. As a consequence, the political discussion and especially the election campaigns become even more arbitrary than they already are because politicians tend to make promises to all kinds of groups knowing that they can hardly held accountable afterwards.

¹² [15]

In the past microtargeting was done with the assistance of the large social media platform operators. They know their systems best and can sell this knowledge to political parties and candidates. Already this puts them into a very strong position vis-à-vis politics. But, due to the fact that much of political campaigning is taking place online and especially on different social media platforms, the entire political world is dangerously dependent on social media platform operators. In principle, their housekeeping rights give them the right to favour certain political parties or candidates over others and treat their messages more favourably.

But even without such dark hypotheses one thing is clear: politicians adapt their communication to the style that is common on social media. And, as we already know, this communication is emotional, has to be easily digestible and is therefore simplistic and little differentiated. Therewith, the political communication adapts to the **System One** dynamics in the internet at the expense of **System Two** dynamics of an ideal democracy.

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