

Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2021). *Outside the bubble: Social media and political participation in Western democracies*. Oxford University Press. £64/£18.99. pp 302.

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The impact of social media on democracy remains contentious. Digital technologies can facilitate deliberative and civic-minded activities but, through echo chambers and filter bubbles reinforcing beliefs and prejudices, can drive anti-democratic behaviour. These questions are explored in Vaccari and Valeriani's research. The comparative survey research across eight European countries and the USA covers over a third of the world's active social media users, living within a range of political and media systems. The core hypotheses point to social media affordances offering new routes to political engagement and participation based on experiences gained using these platforms closing participation gaps between engaged and disengaged citizens. The experiential variables examined are the levels of political agreement one is exposed to, accidental exposure to political news and to targeted electoral mobilisation. The arguments are laid out across two theoretical and four empirical chapters, each starting with vignettes which set the topics in context. Contesting the ideas of filter bubbles, Vaccari and Valeriani argue users can filter out political news or opposing views, but not all will. Information cascades can overcome individual preferences, but the danger is they favour certain voices. Thus, the work explores to what extent social media experiences advantage extreme and populist voices as extant research suggests. The findings are finally tested against political and media systemic variables exploring if national and contextual differences moderate the relationships between social media political experiences and political participation.

The data shows echo chambers are not prevalent, only 15% see one-sided supportive content online compared to 32% offline. The most active and engaged users carve out echo chambers, a minority of those surveyed. Equally, only 14% have no experience of accidental exposure to political news and nearly one third recall receiving mobilisation messages. All these variables impact participation: experiencing accidental exposure and being mobilised increases participation, especially among those least engaged and attentive during elections. The research also suggests there is a cycle of engagement and exposure. Exposure leads to engagement, but greater engagement leads to further exposure especially on Facebook where algorithms deliver content that appears relevant based on previous behaviour. Hence social media is found beneficial for closing engagement gaps across different social groups. Experiencing one-sided arguments further boosts participation, suggesting echo chambers support engagement. This may be problematic if a well-informed, pluralist debate is seen as central to democratic life. Fears voters who support populist or ideological extreme parties receive a participatory boost are falsified. These users are already highly engaged; the participatory boost is among voters who self-define as centrist. Hence, political experiences on social media adhere to the 'rising tide' model, lifting all political boats, the least ideologically extreme being lifted to a greater extent among those least interested and attentive. Systemic factors have little impact, suggesting social media platforms offer universal affordances. However, context may matter. If politics is contentious it may drive engagement on social media and trigger a cycle of increased engagement and exposure.

The work is important but cannot resolve the many controversies. Participatory forms included in the survey cover six high effort forms of electoral participation excluding voting; a wider menu of options encompassing monitorial and expressive forms of participation may capture social media effects better. The focus on elections also means activities driven by non-electoral organisations are not included, an important but separate area of democratic life. The discussion would also benefit

from greater clarity about the differential effects of exposure to information via all media, so offering insights into the holistic experiences of citizen engagement with political information. Furthermore, some measures of the content respondents were exposed to, its relevance or resonance, would be useful to understand how experiences increase participation. The limitations are recognised and offered as pointers for future research.

The importance of the work is the challenge it poses to established shibboleths. Participation is heightened through accidental exposure to political information, but the greatest effect is if content reinforces pre-existing attitudes. Thus, we see social media as apolitical, able to enhance democratic life or acting as a disruptive force. This explicitly raises the question whether equal participation across society is good for democracy. Highlighting that 'unusual subjects' (p. 224) are encouraged to engage raises questions about the quality of their participation. Does engagement driven by accidental exposure to one-sided information produce anti-democratic patterns of participation? Further research on the drivers of engagement, particularly encompassing non-electoral politics, is just one of the many interesting avenues this work opens for researchers. In highlighting democracy is not a set ideal end point for society, but its nature is contested and in constant flux, this important research shows to understand how democracy will evolve requires us to pursue Vaccari and Valeriani's agenda examining the impact experiences in the media environment have on the patterns, forms and outcomes of user's engagement and participation.

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Short Biography

Dr Darren G. Lilleker is Professor of Political Communication in The Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University and Convenor of the Centre for Comparative Politics & Media Research. Dr Lilleker's expertise is in the intersecting areas of political campaigning and public engagement in politics, and in particular how public engagement can be potentiated and facilitated using innovations facilitated by digital technological developments and how people experience politics and are disaffected by that experience. He has written on this in *Political Communication and Cognition* (Palgrave, 2014) and in *The Psychology of Democracy* (2021).