"Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform," edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker

Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker (Eds.). *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 345 pp. £22.99. ISBN 9781108812894 (Paperback).

Reviewed by: Daniel Kreiss, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, USA* DOI: 10.1177/1940161220985078

One lens onto a field is through works that purport to be at the center of it. Nate Persily and Joshua Tucker's significant edited volume recently published with Cambridge University Press, *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, draws together a group of leading scholars of social media and politics from prominent institutions in the United States and Europe. The book is an essential read for the sweeping and routinely insightful up-to-date "reviews of the literature on disinformation, polarization, echo chambers, hate speech, bots, political advertising, and new media" (p. 2). Taken together, the chapters expertly weave together a set of interdisciplinary literatures which span everything from conceptual and empirical research to policy analysis.

The book aims at nothing less than to claim and define a new field that is "forming" and "take stock of what we know, what we need to know, and how we might find it out" (p. 1). While I applaud the ambition, scholars have been studying social media and democracy for more than a decade, and the Internet and democracy much longer still. Read charitably, such a statement of a "forming" field reflects the perplexingly common view that this is a new field because the central concerns—including disinformation, polarization, and bots—are ascendent as a set of research questions in powerful quarters since the 2016 Brexit and U.S. presidential election. Even more, social media and democracy provide a comparatively new set of concerns for many legal and political science scholars, as opposed to the communication and media studies researchers who have worked on questions relating to the Internet and democracy since the 1990s—and things such as "propaganda" for much longer. For example, while the study of propaganda dates from World War II, the study of disinformation as it is presently conceptualized is far more recent, dating from 2017 (Freelon and Wells 2020).

Seriously taking up and detailing the state of our knowledge on the prevalence and spread of mis/disinformation, social media's role in polarization, and the work of bots to manipulate public opinion, as well as outlining a refreshingly expansive set of concerns around platforms and their role in content moderation and potential policy interventions, are important contributions. Indeed, the opening half of the book features empirically oriented literature reviews on many issues that have received widespread scrutiny since 2016, especially mis- and disinformation and polarization, as well as the growing role that platforms are playing in global electoral politics. The second half of the book meanwhile details various proposals to regulate platforms, fact-check misinformation, and build more transparency into national and global information systems—central concerns over the past five years.

However, in seeing the study of "social media and democracy" as an "emerging field" (p. 3), the volume erases much progress already made that should rightly fit under this label. When the focus is narrowly on disinformation and related concepts developed mostly in reaction to the outcome of the 2016 Brexit and U.S. presidential election, many other developments in studies of social media and democracy disappear. A few prominent examples of significant things missing from this volume include any mention of the influential work on "hashtag activism" (Jackson et al. 2016) and any serious discussion of Black Lives Matter—one of the most influential social movements of the past twenty years in the United States and organized substantially on social media (see Freelon et al. 2016). Indeed, Black Lives Matter receives only *four* cursory mentions. Occupy Wall Street zero. #MeToo, only *three* (see Mendes et al. 2019). Almost entirely missing is any serious engagement with the two decade-plus old literature on campaigns during the Internet era (e.g., McIlwain and Caliendo 2011), save for an excellent chapter on online advertising by leaders in the field.

If it is an "emerging field" then, it is a narrow one in its jurisdiction, and generally concerned with social media and democratic ills, not the potential of social media and social movements to create "radical possibilities for contemporary democracy" (Jackson et al. 2020: xxxviii). I appreciate that social media and democracy as an object of study is now attracting legal and policy scholars as well as the computational social scientists that are well represented in this volume. This is undoubtedly a good thing, as these scholars bring a focus on disinformation and polarization to already long-standing and well-established research emphases on the social media tactics of campaigns, civic participation and social movements on social media, the effects of social media appeals on voter attitudes and behavior, and social media as proxies for public opinion.

That said, there are clearly blind spots that come with such a narrow definition of the field and claims that it is new, as well as the fact that this characterization and much of the research collected here appears to have taken shape in response to a set of political crises since 2016. As this volume aims at field definition, my purpose here is to raise a set of critical questions before we travel too far down a path of conceptualizing social media and democracy in particular, and ultimately narrow, ways.

I want to be clear that none of the orientations in this book—or the things missing from it—are the individual failure of any of the scholars in this volume. They reflect

the institutionally organized knowledge structures of an emerging constellation of research work that I suspect stem from the particular disciplines that are feeding into it, incentive structures both internal and external to the field, and racial structures of knowledge production that define the academy and many disciplines more broadly. As such, to focus on the field's oversights through the lens of this volume, at the risk of overgeneralization in the remainder of this review I will mostly refrain from discussing individual chapters and address the book as a whole.

To start, the field as represented in this volume has a number of baseline assumptions that characterize its central areas of concern. First, in general the volume privileges the analysis of media problems over political ones. The study of things such as mis- and disinformation is often deeply presentist—where growing partisanship, polarization, and rising distrust is understood primarily as a technological and media phenomenon, not a historically constituted political (and often racial/ethnic) problem in countries such as the United States (McAdam and Kloos 2014). What are fundamentally political issues, such as conflicts over social status, power, capital, and identity that drive electoral outcomes (Gest 2016; Mutz 2018), often are reduced in the emerging field to epistemological and perceptual issues—problems of media and information, and not indicative of fundamentally different group identities, interests, values, or threats.

Relatedly, with few exceptions (i.e., the Nielsen and Fletcher chapter of this volume on the relationship between media landscapes and democracy), the focus is on the pervasiveness and potential effects of disinformation on individuals in the mass public, not the role of elites in the crafting and dissemination of disinformation—especially on social media. Indeed, elites are rarely discussed in this volume, even though they are often primary sources of mis- and disinformation, which in turn reveals the fundamentally political nature of the problems facing western democracies such as the United States (see Benkler et al. 2018). In addition, the focus is often solely on social media, to the general exclusion of consideration of social media's role in a much broader media ecosystem. Rarely do researchers analyze the broader hybrid media system (Chadwick 2014) and, as a consequence, information problems appear to be the narrow purview of social media. For a volume that takes disinformation as a central object of concern, it is striking that Fox News and Breitbart receive virtually no substantive discussion, despite being central to disinformation and propaganda on social media and beyond it during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Benkler et al. 2018).

All of which in turn reveals a generally limited conceptualization of democracy in both this volume and the "emerging" post-2016 field. There is virtually no consideration of how social media and the Internet more generally are a part of polities with their complicated political, social, racial, and economic histories. The ascendent post-2016 configuration of the field generally lacks a robust theorization of democracy and deep historical analysis of the democratic West, reflected most clearly in the limited normative prescriptions of quality information, deliberation, social cohesion, and civic integration—a point I return to in greater detail below. This reflects a much more sustained focus on individuals and their attitudes, as well as platforms and governance, then political institutions and problems as they shape social media

use and are shaped in turn by it—which require very different democratic understandings and normative considerations.

To take one example, various chapters in the book hold up things such as polarization as being driven by social media, state that it is normatively undesirable, and see it as a cause of other things (potentially violence). Often the historical aspects of polarization are overlooked (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). Instead, the focus is on how polarization is, or is not, *caused* by social and digital media through phenomena such as echo chambers. The significant underlying roots of polarization that elites and social media amplify are often left out of the picture. This includes the explicit white racial status appeals and demeaning constructions of racial and ethnic difference that accord with America's racist history routinely made by the president of the United States (Jardina 2019: 232). Race is but one example; how class affects polarization, social media, and democracy (Schradie 2019) is also generally absent from this volume and literature. In other words, the structure and informational affordances of social media itself is the primary object of analysis in this emerging field. Meanwhile, the focus is often squarely on the potential consequences of polarization driven by social media, not the underlying causes and consequences of polarization that manifest *on* social media.

Beyond that, normatively why should scholars be concerned with mitigating polarization over and above valuing social justice and political equality?

This leads to the most glaring omission in much of the post-2016 field: the absence of a "racial analytic" (Chakravartty et al. 2018) informing research on things such as disinformation. While many researchers are at pains to parse the distinctions between concepts such as "misinformation," "disinformation," and "propaganda" and bring analytical rigor to the epistemological issues involved, in this volume there is virtually no discussion, except in passing, of the racial basis of many attempts at disinformation or propaganda (e.g., Freelon et al. 2020; Howard et al. 2018) or the largely white, right media ecosystem in the United States (Benkler et al. 2018).

Alexandra Siegel's excellent chapter most clearly identifies this as a problem in her review of online hate speech. Noting that "surprisingly little is known about the prevalence, causes, or consequences of different forms of harmful language across diverse platforms" (p. 56), Siegel focuses on the legal and other literatures that have done a much better job conceptualizing the presence and effects of hate speech, identity, and racial structures than the field the book describes. And, we know even less about all the white racial appeals that fail to be coded as such because "whiteness" is often construed as the absence of race (Brock 2020). Siegel provides a comprehensive overview of the empirical and legal definitions of hate speech, as well as the existing interdisciplinary literature's many limitations and the approach that various online platforms have taken to this type of content. While some veins of the literature offer broader conceptualizations of hate speech that more clearly detail the racial structures of communication and the complexity of textual interpretation, as Siegel notes they are limited by single-platform studies and English-language bias.

Siegel's chapter does much to substantively detail the scope of the problem of hate speech linked to racist and sexist ideologies, identities, and movements. As Siegel notes, targets of online hate speech are "primarily attacked on the basis of their

ethnicity, physical characteristics, sexual orientation, class, or gender" (pp. 64–65). The implication is that only by understanding racial, gender, and class histories, and their legacies, can we understand why hate speech, disinformation, propaganda, and polarization take the form that they do. And, hate speech is not only prevalent on platforms, it potentially gives rise to ethnic conflicts and racial violence.

Making this chapter stand alone while others generally ignore the question of race and ethnicity, save for passing mentions of white supremacists online, speaks to the substantive importance of the problem. The field generally separates inquiry into race and ethnicity, or identities more broadly, out as a separate domain. In this, it fails to treat race and ethnicity (and class and gender) as constitutive of social discourse on social media, let alone social and political life more broadly. And, this approach implicitly treats race as something that only happens to people who are not white—as if images of a white Jesus arm wrestling the devil and Yosemite Sam in front of a Confederate flag, two of the Russian Internet Research Agency's graphic disinformation images from 2016, were *not* appeals to whites every bit as racial as content targeting black Americans.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the field that has been ascendent since 2016 and more broadly many academic disciplines have generally elided racial difference as a difference that matters (White 2020), from the workings of democracy and the structure of inequality to the experiences people have with social media and powerful institutions. What Charles Mills (2017: 71) calls a "white epistemology of ignorance" is particularly clear in research work that too often takes as its normative and empirical foundation a set of claims that western democracies are historically socially integrative, multicultural, and pluralistic—and that white racial supremacy is a historical anachronism, or the purview of racist individuals participating in white supremacist movements, not a structuring aspect of political and social life in the West and beyond it. As Mills (2017: 69) argues, this includes "political science representing racism as an anom-aly to a basically inclusive and egalitarian polity." Or, as Meija et al. (2018) put it in their sweeping critique of the field and indictment of the "post-truth" formulation: "current scholarship and reporting often reproduces the myth that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth, and, consequently, intersects with a neoconservative nostalgia for a post-racial past that never existed."

Indeed, one would think that a field concerned with social media and democracy would have a substantial discussion of America's racial democracy, or the racial and ethnic histories of subjugation and colonialism perpetrated by present day western democracies such as Britain for whom slavery in the Caribbean was central to its ascent as a global power (Brown 2020). It is impossible to understand social media and democracy without accounting for the historical, racial, and institutional contexts that gave formative shape to our present politics, for they explain why disinformation and polarization take the specific forms they do. To take the United States alone, it is striking how the field somehow ignores the presence of white "authoritarian enclaves" in the South through 1972 (Mickey 2015), marking the United States as a multicultural democracy for a short period of less than fifty years. Or, that a field concerned with social media–driven polarization fails to see historical antecedents in the regimes of

racial terror that lay beyond the U.S. south, their history obscured by the myth of "southern exceptionalism" which enabled the "north" to stand for an idealized America (Lassiter and Crespino 2009).

In sum, any analysis of disinformation or polarization that fails to proceed from the deep-rooted political, social, and racial contexts within which they take shape is bound to be limited. The foundations of many western democracies riven by race, identity, and inequality are revealed on social media. I suspect that the ways that social media both reflect and work upon these divides have not surfaced on many research agendas due to racial structures of knowledge production, and because it is far easier to discuss the epistemological status of disinformation or its distribution in the public sphere in a non-political and non-partisan way than it is to analyze such things as identity appeals to whites that accord with racial power. I accept a key point of the book —that we need "greater access to social media data to better inform legislation concerning disinformation, hate speech, political advertising, and other online content" (p. xvii) amid a call for more public-facing research. Data and public-facing work alone, how-ever, will not make up for the limits of a newly ascendent field's historical understand-ing and analysis when it comes to conceptualizing democracy and its problems.

This ambitious edited collection reveals both the considerable strengths and significant limitations of an increasingly central domain of inquiry into contemporary democracies. The book captures the impressive advances made in the field's conceptualization and documentation of things such as misinformation and disinformation, polarization, and platform governance. It offers new thinking into platforms and models for their governance. At the same time, like the field these scholars seek to chart, it is too often blind to political problems, elites and institutions, and racial and class structures. Not all volumes will define an emerging field in the same way—but it is clear that this book captures an important constellation of research interests now deeply influential across disciplines and in public policy conversations. That said, there are alternative ways to define the field and its purview much broader than what is collected in this volume. It is striking, for instance, the comparatively greater sys-tematic treatment of things such as political history, race and ethnicity, and elite dynamics of misinformation in another recent edited volume that draws together his-torians of science and technology and politics, public policy and legal scholars, soci-ologists, communication scholars, and political scientists under the banner of *The Disinformation Age* (Bennett and Livingston 2020).

All of which is to end with a plea for reflexivity as a field as we move forward. As we take up the crucial questions of our time, we must as readily examine why these are questions and not others. As we craft research agendas, we must be aware of the structures of knowledge production that have defined some things as problems, while leaving others outside the scope of inquiry. And as we ground our work in nor-mative claims, as a field we must interrogate what we mean by "democracy" and renew our commitments to values such as political equality.

Acknowledgment

References

Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston, eds. 2020. *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brock, André Jr. 2020. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Vol. 9. New York: New York University Press.

Brown, Vincent. 2020. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Chakravartty, Paula, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain. 2018. "#CommunicationSoWhite." *Journal of Communication* 68 (2): 254–66.

Freelon, Deen., Michael Bossetta, Chris Wells, Josephine Lukito, Yiping Xia, and Kirsten Adams. 2020. "Black Trolls Matter: Racial and Ideological Asymmetries in Social Media Disinformation." *Social Science Computer Review*. Published electronically April 7. doi:10.1177/0894439320914853.

Freelon, Deen, and Chris Wells. 2020. "Disinformation as Political Communication." *Political Communication* 37 (2): 145–56.

Gest, Justin. 2016. *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howard, Philip N., Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiou, John Kelly, and Camille Francois. 2018. *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018*. University of Oxford. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/senatedocs/1/.

Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. 2019. "The Origins, and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22:129–46.

Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2020. *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jackson, Sarah J., and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2016. "#Ferguson Is Everywhere: Initiators in Emerging Counterpublic Networks." *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (3): 397–418.

Jardina, Ashley. 2019. White Identity Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McAdam, Doug, and Karina Kloos. 2014. *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Post-War America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McIlwain, Charlton, and Stephen M. Caliendo. 2011. *Race Appeal: How Candidates Invoke Race in US Political Campaigns*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller. 2019. *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back against Rape Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mills, Charles W. 2017. *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mutz, Diana C. 2018. "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (19): E4330–39.

Schradie, Jen. 2019. *The Revolution that Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.