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Public Debates in Social Media : A Virtue-Epistemological Analysis

Abstract: Does social media influence our ability to extract valuable knowledge from public debates? This is the question that I address in my current research. The architecture of social media platforms offers the possibility to get instant replies that challenge the point of view advanced by an user, thus encouraging awareness of one's own fallibility. It also allows for deliberative groups to be created with the purpose of discussing a specific topic, which means that an user can easily find multiple perspectives on an issue *in one place*. Yet, by taking all participants *on stage* and explicitly counting the number of visualizations, appreciations, and distributions of their contributions, social media affordances encourage an exaggerated quest for getting attention and saving one's *face* in confrontation with possible counterarguments. In addition, by capitalizing on our natural curiosity and lack-of-thoroughness in inquiry, social media affordances tend to encourage our engagement in debates that belong to domains in which we lack basic knowledge, which makes us easy targets of distorted, decontextualized or outright false information. Moreover, even when the data presented by participants to an online debate is truthful, our mode of engagement with it in social media tends to decrease our chance to transform that data into personal knowledge, since we seldom have the patience to analyse and fully grasp its context, activities that would be necessary for its successful integration in our web of meanings. I identify one epistemic vice that underlies most of these problems and discuss a set of actions that would help users overcome its consequences, in order to make social media debates more cognitively fruitful.

Keywords: public debates, social media affordances, epistemic vices, epistemic virtues

1. Theoretical background and purpose of my investigation

Social networking and media-sharing platforms online, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, or YouTube are often hosting various forms of public engagement with controversial issues (Mărgărit 2018, 196-201, Miller 2017, 252-258, De Zuniga and Liu 2017, 193-195, Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017, 365-375, Chadwick, O'Loughlin and Vaccari 2017, 220-223, Meikle 2016, 124-132, Orr et. al 2016).

Political authorities, activists, or simple citizens compose posts or create videos that explicitly engage with a controversial public issue, write commentaries on such posts, join groups dedicated to the discussion of that topic, sign online petitions and invite others to do the same, or share links to web addresses that contain (video) materials in support of their point of view.

Some of these interventions are explicitly deliberative, engaging the production of arguments or counterarguments on a topic (Orr et al 2016), others reflect a radical spirit not open to debate at all, urging the audience to take a specific stance on a public issue (Mărgărit 2018, Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017), while still others are only done with phatic purposes, without delivering substantial content (Miller 2017).

What most authors in this field seem to be concerned with is whether people who have previously shown interest towards a public issue in social media have also subsequently taken real-life actions in that respect (votes, protests, boycotts) and how these actions were influenced by their social media activity.

In this context, I propose a slightly different approach: I switch the emphasis from *action* to *knowledge*, trying to find out

if social media affordances influence our ability to extract valuable knowledge from public debates, either as participants or as followers (or even “eavesdroppers”) of these debates.

This approach is inspired by authors who have analyzed the cognitive gains that public debates may bring to the audience and the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to maximize those cognitive gains (Sălăvăstru 2009, 38-47, 52-57, 111-117, Fouke 2009, 2, 14, Țuțui 2015, 189-192). The focus of my investigation is on the audience that is following the debate with the intention to find out more about the public issue that is discussed. As we shall see, the border between audience and participants is rather flexible in social media debates, which brings about new challenges from an epistemic point of view.

In looking at the influence exerted by social media affordances on the debate process and its cognitive consequences, I am drawing on the tradition of affordance-focused investigations of media tools (McLuhan 1962, Marwick and Boyd 2010, Rathnayake and Suthers, 2018). This approach is based on the belief that, by looking at the design and the features of a product or service, we can infer the uses that the majority of people will give to it. However, it must be said that an affordance-focused perspective does not fully exclude the freedom of people to be creative or unpredictable in the use of the tools that are at their disposal. In fact, it is precisely within this freedom that epistemic virtues can actually be exercised. If certain affordances of social media platforms nudge us in an epistemically vicious direction, we can exercise virtue to resist this pressure. On the other hand, if certain affordances of social media platforms nudge us in a cognitively-productive direction, we can exercise epistemic virtue to turn that possibility into reality. However, in all cases, understanding the pressures towards vice that a context may exert on us is an efficient mode to clarify the aim of our exercises towards virtue.

Epistemic virtues are abilities and patterns of behaviour that can be cultivated to help us control and direct our information-seeking, information-receiving, information-processing, and information-transmitting patterns so that we increase our chances to acquire truthful data about reality and transform this data into personal knowledge that we can further use and share with others (Heersmink 2018, 2, Hyslop-Margison 2003, 323, Miller and Record 2017, 1948).

A few examples of epistemic virtues that are recurrent in the scholarly literature on this topic are: openness to new perspectives on an issue; thoroughness and accuracy in processing the data that is available on a topic; diligence and patience in following a topic until it is clarified; awareness of one's own cognitive limitations; openness to revision of one's own epistemic positions upon the discovery of sound counterarguments; ability to distinguish (and reject involvement in the discussion of) subjects that are beyond one's *practicability* area (subjects that require a higher level of skills and knowledge that one possesses at a given moment in time, as shown in Miller and Record 2017, 1948).

In what follows, I will outline some of the potential cognitive gains that public debates are generally offering to their audience.

2. The epistemic dimension of public debates

Public debates have long been perceived as a source of valuable information for the public attending or watching them: in the confrontation between the two or more conflicting sides involved in a debate, due to the constraints exerted by participants on one another, a lot of important data will come to surface (Sălăvăstru 2009, 56). By following public debates, people learn (more) about pressing issues that affect their lives as citizens in a democratic society. A debate on a given issue can help clarify the intentions of their leaders, can make salient the concerns, frustrations, and aspirations of their fellow citizens, or bring light on aspects of a public issue that they had not taken into consideration before (Fouke 2009, Țuțui 2015).

This does not imply that people fully believe in the honesty and completeness of the data provided to the public by participants in a debate. Most people are not naïve at all in this respect: it is an almost universally known fact that participants to a public debate attempt to frame everything according to their own interests, often intentionally leaving out important facts (Hoffman 2011, 136), thus lying by omission. Yet, it is undeniable that it is more difficult to attempt the convenient framing of an issue in the context of a debate than it is in the context of a speech delivered in a campaign or in a pre-arranged friendly interview with a (paid) admirer that is working as a journalist or as a podcaster.

In debates, there usually is confrontation, conflict, clash of ideas and powers of will, a fight in which participants do not enter to find out the truth, but to impose their own perspective on reality to the audience (Sălăvăstru 2009, 10-12). Nonetheless, the public attending or watching the debate can have epistemic gains from this clash of ideas: the exchange of replies between participants, while each is trying to gain argumentative terrain, eventually offers a rich picture of what is valuable and what is questionable in each of the positions that are advanced.

Apart from the entertaining experience of attending the "fight" itself, apart from yearning to see their own interests articulated loudly enough for the world to take notice, many people watch debates with the purpose of extracting knowledge on a topic that is of immediate interest to them and upon which they need to make a decision. This extraction can take place either directly (the information revealed explicitly by each of the participants) or indirectly (the audience can draw conclusions from the nonverbal cues or the rhetorical repertoire of each participant).

The public often holds participants under the suspicion that they may be trying to divert attention from the challenge received in the form of a question or a counterargument, and the public knows that the participants are there with a particular interest – of their own or of the social group they are representing. Therefore, reading between the lines, making sense of what speakers are *really* saying beyond the well-crafted phrases, commenting and developing counterarguments or ironies help followers of a debate in their own pursuit of (situational) truth and (collective) meaning.

However, we cannot adopt an oversimplified view of this tension, as if direct participants would presumably be guilty of distorting reality according to their own interests, while followers would somehow be truth-holders by default. On both sides, there can be voluntary or involuntary omissions of important aspects of reality. On both sides, there can be selfish or selfless intentions. On both sides, there can be more mechanical repetition of higher-level manipulative framing than original thoughts or personally checked information.

Not every reply shared by a follower of a debate is an epistemic contribution in its own right, neither if we look at it from the point of view of the intentions with which it is uttered, nor if we look at it from the point of view of its outcome, consisting in the cognitive gain it can bring to listeners (or readers, for that matter). Replies of all sorts, purportedly containing counterarguments or new perspectives on what participants are saying, can often be symptoms of an illusionary sense of superiority towards the participants who are in the middle of the argumentative fight. But as a communicative practice, training to reply constantly to public debates can be a useful exercise in maintaining an awaken spirit, a sharp mind, and a healthy community in which intersubjective reality-checks are frequent.

All this cognitive tension between participants, on the one hand, and between participants and audience, on the other, is as old as debates themselves, as a genre. One distinctive novelty brought by social media to this picture is that all these reactions towards the participants in a debate, once expressed in a rather private context, can find a place on a public scene and sometimes further gain a significant level of visibility and influence (Chadwick, O’Loughlin and Vaccari 2017, 220-223, Meikle 2016, 78).

In the following section, I propose a closer analysis of some of the epistemic challenges of this transformation.

3. Social media affordances for public debates

Social networking and media-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, YouTube are now hosting a new type of debates, unseen in traditional media: political figures, ordinary citizens, entertainers, PR specialists, superstars, spin doctors, activists, corporate executives, online influencers, fake-account holders, and even bots are participants to these new debates. The participants are not in the same studio, as it happened in television. Yet, they are in the same (virtual) place. Such debates are often taking place simultaneously with a piece of news or a debate in traditional media. Many users are regularly engaging in *second screening* (De Zuniga and Liu 2017, 193-195), described as the simultaneous exposure to a debate and its social media commentary.

In what follows, I invite readers to review some of the social media affordances that are relevant for this new type of debates and for their epistemic dimension.

Aggregators: groups and hashtags. Users who are interested in a specific controversial issue can mobilize others and create *Facebook groups* with the purpose of centralizing and discussing the main arguments in favour or against a particular thesis statement (Orr et. al 2016). In the same commentary-aggregating direction, *hashtags* (the „#” sign followed by a keyword) can be used to organize information on the same topic and thus create momentarily-connected groups, whose members are interested in a topic and are contributing with their own perspectives on it (Meikle 2016, 20, 75-76, Rathnayake and Suthers 2018, 7-10).

An important epistemic gain of such efforts is the fact that the user can find all information *in one place*. The multiplicity of perspectives on an issue that can be discovered by users is priceless in its diversity and accessibility. There are many documented cases in which television only echoed the agenda of state authorities and politicians tried to withheld information from the people, and therefore activists used social to reveal important information that had been hidden from the public (Orr et al, 2016, Mărgărit 2018).

Still, each user will need significant amounts of attention, diligence, patience, thoroughness to make sense of the information that is contained in the replies given by other users, as well as selectivity and discernment to decide which opinions should be treated as reliable. Such discernment is difficult to have if one is not familiar with the domain of the debate.

Status updates and direct replies. Social media users can take a stand on a public issue by publishing an original status on that topic. Although brevity has long been considered a virtue in social media, nowadays we see influencers, activists, and public intellectuals writing *status updates* that are well-developed, sometimes with multiple paragraphs and parentheses. But even on the other platforms, where brevity is imposed (for example, on Twitter one can only publish 280 character-long *tweets*), the deliberative nature of user activity is still manifest in the published content. People offer proof in support of their point of view, by offering links to web addresses that contain documentaries, news, or opinion statements and they introduce such proof by means of a short phrase meant to explain how that material confirms their position.

People can also participate in social media debates by writing in the *commentary* section of their opponent's page, making the commentary visibly counterposed to the initial ideas. They can further receive replies – either in the form of a comment on the same page or in the form of a new post created by another person on another page, and so on. The exchange of replies can continue, while many other users can express their support or rejection by means of further comments, written posts on their own page, response-videos or *emoji* reactions. Every reaction can in turn stir another spontaneous sub-debate, either echoing the official one, or relating to a sub-cluster of controversial ideas contained in the initial one.

Apart from using the „reply-to-post” button, one can also *tag* a person or an institution (by using the @ sign before their virtual identity), thus explicitly addressing them or referencing content on their social media page. The addressee will be notified automatically, and so the *tag* can also function as a visible reply to a previous argument advanced by opponents.

From an epistemic point of view, the major gain of potentially getting replies is that users can see the limits of the point of view they expressed. However, disrespectful or ignorant counterarguments can make users lose their willingness to themselves in social media. An unmoderated comment-section can create a general feeling of chaos, hostility, confusion, and distrust among users in social media who have opposing takes on a public issue.

However, even if all replies were relevant and elegantly expressed, a problem would still persist: the fact that most of these exchanges of replies are taking place in open sight (with other users

watching) increases the reluctance to admit having made a mistake, especially if one has developed the image of an all-knowing person who gives verdicts on the workings of this world. Many users are visibly preoccupied to save “face” (the respectability and deference that a person feels she can claim for herself) more than they are preoccupied to make responsible corrections on previous posts.

A possible solution would be for users to rediscover private messages for replies they give to others. Too often, we rely on public comments when criticizing a point of view or when answering a critique. But this progressively creates the tendency to write something just to shame the other person, or just to show superiority towards her. Care for truth is sometimes trampled by interest to show others that the person writing was wrong and the person doing the critique is right. Indeed, private replies may decrease the number of publicly visible arguments and counterarguments, yet it would increase the number of self-corrections employed on previously published material. Self-correction after private critique is much less humiliating than self-correction after public shaming – the latter obviously mobilizes all self-defence and self-righteousness mechanisms available. Of course, an even superior solution would be for all users to renounce pretensions of final verdicts and infallible approaches – to express themselves in more moderate terms, to allow for nuances, questions, and open-endedness in their inquiry, so that when they are shown to be wrong, there would be room for self-correction without reasons to feel humiliated.

Uptake. In a social media debate, users often rely on previous content published by someone else, a content they share on their own page, thus making it known to more people (Rathnayake and Suthers 2018, 7). Users can simply reproduce (“share” or “retweet”) the post written by somebody else without making any commentary of their own. If the respective post is a contribution to an ongoing debate on a public issue, then the distribution will count as support in favour of the side taken by the author of the post or video. The followers and friends of the person who has distributed that material can in turn offer their arguments in support or against the position that is expressed. Sometimes, users add personal commentary and personal nuances to the shared material. The comments that introduce the shared post may have a framing effect on what is distributed, especially if the author is an influencer.

Relying heavily on *basic uptake* (distribution without any comment) in social media debates can sometimes be seen as taking the easiest road possible, because it is an effortless activity. Also, because it

involves sharing wisdom that is not one's own, the user can be accused of wanting to seem more well-informed and socially-engaged than it is the case. On the other hand, *basic uptake* can be a good strategy in supporting a point of view. If one realizes that there is an exceptional writer or speaker out there who makes the most important points in a clear and articulate manner, why not popularize the views of that person, instead of offering a rather pale or semi-incompetent (albeit original) plea in favour of a cause one is devoted to? Most people have seen in social media appalling defences of the cause they adhere to, situations which enact the motto „with such friends, who needs enemies?”. Not everyone has the background knowledge and the argumentative force to support a cause in the best possible way (Sălăvăstru 2009, 67-81) and perhaps it would be a cognitive gain for everyone if only the best speakers of each side would do the talking.

Emoji-based reactions. Although difficult to include in the category of „affordances that are relevant for social media debates”, *emoji* reactions can express support or rejection for one side of a public debate. Their number and their valence can matter in several ways.

Emoji-reactions can induce a certain reception of an argument: if users read an argumentative post met by hundreds of “fury” *emoji*-s, they may tend to expect the argument itself to be something worth viewing and worth being furious about. It is as if a combination of *agenda-setting* and *priming*-effects is operating through *emoji*-s: if something has many *emoji*-reactions, it implicitly has many views and (on an *ad populum* basis) users may infer that it is something they must look at; at the same time, the emotional valence of the *emoji*-s will prime users to expect a sort of experience when reading the respective post and can even influence their own evaluation of it.

Of course, their nonverbal character does not place them among the significant forms of participation to a debate. In addition, their ambiguity further decreases their power as potential meta-discursive tools. I often find it hard to understand what position towards the argument is actually expressed by means of *emoji*-s. For example, I have noticed that the “crying” *emoji* can be used in debates to express suffering in solidarity with the writer, or being hurt by the situation the author of the post is describing, but it can equally refer to the disappointment that the post itself is causing. It can mean group *crying-with-you* (when you recount the hardship that your activist had to get through to organize a protest), *crying-about-an-outcome* (sharing your pain that the law we supported did not pass) or *crying-because-of-what-*

you-said (I have seen opposing activist groups place “crying” *emoji*-s if they find a counterargument to be offensive, disappointing, or unfair).

A non-idealistic view of these social media affordances reveals to us that we are dealing with a system largely based on “phatic culture” by design (Miller 2008, 394-398, Grădinaru 2018, 466-469): being in contact with each other is what these platforms are essentially about, not substantial content-transmission, much less valuable deliberation on a public issue.

Their business model is keeping people engaged with the platform for as long as possible, because the value of their business is directly dependent on the time users allocate to the platform. In other words, social media platforms are media companies whose media is user-generated, but they are media companies nonetheless, and their advertising revenue is dependent on the same metrics as in the case of traditional media (Meikle 2016, 2, 17). Just like in the case of traditional media, light-heartedness and superficial *uptake* of information are part of game. This is what attracts users, this is what has a „viral” potential.

Unsurprisingly, it is not valuable and reliable information that gets more likes and shares on a regular basis. Posts that are critical, ironical, or cynical tend to get more attention in social media than well-documented, intellectually-responsible, and implicitly more moderate content (Lanier 2018, 39-53, 85-92). Posts that are light-hearted, such as memes or jokes, can seduce the audience into taking sides, even in a serious conflict (Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017, 375).

Social media algorithms will further place popular posts in the list of recommended content, making it visible to more and more users (Lanier 2018, 12-16). This will decrease the chances for responsible and nuanced approaches to a public issue to gain the attention they would deserve. Users, too, often judge the quality of a post by the number of appreciations it obtains. The philosophical platitude that „a thing is not what they say about it” is perhaps less obvious now than ever. What *they* say about it has become a major criterion through which we explore reality.

The situation is made worse by the fact that users tend to get into debates in domains they are not familiar with. If social media platforms would create a feature that would ask users to make explicit *how* they are saying what they are saying we would often find mentions such as #NP(*no proof*), #LBC (*lacking basic context*), #CFI (*citing favourite influencer*). But users do not just get into debates in which they are incompetent because they had planned to. The affordances of the

platform nudge them in this direction. Notifications, recommendations, news feeds - all these tools are heavily capitalizing on human curiosity. And so users end up jumping from one subject to another, training themselves to ignore their cognitive limitations.

Many of the social media affordances are systematically amplifying a fundamental epistemic vice we all share: the willingness to get into “small talk” on big issues, the joy of jumping easily from one subject to another without approaching anything thoroughly. There is a technical term for this epistemic vice: *Gerede* – sometimes translated from German as „idle talk”, „small talk” or „idle chatter”¹.

4. *Gerede* – a built-in epistemic challenge of social media debates

Gerede is defined by Heidegger as that dialogue in which speakers assume they „have the possibility to understand everything without a previous appropriation of that which is understood” (Heidegger 1927/2019, 230). In *Gerede*, a lot of unclarified things are taken to be self-understood, while swift and unconsidered conclusions are often drawn on the spot. The liveliness of the ensuing dialogue feeds our illusion that we are doing something important by expressing our point of view on the given topic (Heidegger 1927/2019, 237-241).

When engaging in *Gerede*, we speak lightly and superficially on many topics, reproducing what is palatable about them according to what *they say* (an impersonal *they*, vaguely represented in our mind as the voice of what we assume to be socially-rooted common-sense). Self-importance and the illusion that we are contributing to the workings of this world are characteristic features of *Gerede*.

Gerede is definitely not the invention of „social media”. It is a distinctively human tendency, as Heidegger so extensively explains. He sees it as being tied in with curiosity and willingness to feel we are connected to other people in a common-sense (in fact, mediocre) approach on how (all) things are. *Gerede* is a mode of engagement with

¹ I use the original *Gerede* as a technical term, because I want to distinguish it from the usual meaning of „small talk”/„idle talk” that is often related to explicitly phatic communication. As far as I understand the coverage of this concept in the work of Heidegger, it does not include only replies that lack content and that are meant to reinforce relationships or confirm the value of a communication channel. *Gerede* is more encompassing and it includes not just talk about trivial issues, but trivial talk about serious issues (cf. Heidegger 1927/2019, 230-241).

reality, more than it is a conversation strategy, although it is most visible in conversation, when we are ambiguous, superficial, and we tend to artificially homogenize heterogeneous realities, when we express opinions that we believe to be popular even though we do not understand them².

The prominence of a *Gerede* mode of engagement in social media can be devastating, especially when serious subjects are debated (Makhortykh and Sydorova 2017, 376-377). What is worse, since its prominence in social media is *by design*, the more we want to be successful on these platforms, the more we will tend to adopt this mode of engagement as a default option. Because posts written in a *Gerede*-style tend to attract more appreciations and reactions, more participants will try to adopt it.

Most people who contribute to an online debate do it in the hope that someone will engage with their contribution and will find it useful or valuable. Even if some replies can be written only with expressive purposes, only for the sake of truth, or only for an abstract/imaginary/universal audience, users know that they will be able to measure the „impact” of they what they wrote or said in a video.

In social media terms, “impact” is measured in quantitative terms - “how many?” is the core-question: how many opened the post, how many shared it, how many liked it, how many commented on it. Because users constantly get this feedback from the platforms, and because they know other users can see this feedback that they got, there is an obvious pressure for the user to consider “projected uptake” of the message when composing it (Rathnayake and Suthers 2018, 2). When considering how the message will be received, the author of a post will be pressured to adopt a *Gerede*-style in composing the material he wants to present to the public.

² Embracing cliché, stereotypes, but also the jargon of a certain group (Heidegger includes scholars and scientists as well) can increase our feeling that we are connected to some public source of truth even though we are not sure what we are talking about, we are not accurate, nor thorough, nor clear in our thoughts and our expression. When being in a *Gerede* mode of engagement, we are not open to a deeper level of understanding, which in turn makes us ever more distant from our true being (*Dasein*) and more and more engaged into developing a “they” self (*das Man*), a virtual identity modelled according to what we take to be the expectations of others from us.

But the orientation towards *Gerede* can have other undesirable effects on our social media engagement with public debates, too. By the cognitive solicitation it creates (stirred by the crowding of information from different sources, information that we only skim, but not absorb), and by the perceived liveliness (coming from the instant feedback we get from others, as well as the instant publishing possibilities), *Gerede* can actually end up replacing the real cognitive effort that we should have done in order to understand the topic (Heidegger 1927/2019, 236-241). Living under the illusion that we are already knowledgeable and we can convince other people of our point of view, we fail to acquire even the basic meta-knowledge of distinguishing between what we really know and what we do not on that topic.

From this point of view, we can say that, despite heightened engagement in what appears to be deliberative speech, it often happens for users to know less and investigate less on a topic because they are in a *Gerede* mode of engagement. What can seem to be intellectual hyperactivity, in fact turns out to be intellectual chaos and even avoidance of doing the actual thorough and patient work that would need to be done on a cognitive level in order to grasp the context of the topic that is debated.

Vincent Miller (2008, 2017) raised this problem in what regards social media activism, by pointing that too many people comfort their consciousness with the false appearance that they have done something for a cause only by displaying (often nonverbal) support for it in social media. He showed that many reactions that are described by researchers as “political participation” are, in fact, “political communication” - in fact, after closer investigation of the data provided, readers of his work can see that “communication” is an overstatement, too, and what we often see is politics-related chatter, nonverbal expressions of support, approval expressed only for the sake of belonging to a group (Miller 2017, 254, 259).

There is yet another problem stemming from our *Gerede*-orientation. *Gerede* stimulates our being in an alert-activist mode permanently, which incites us to shame someone who is writing something we do not agree with and ally with others against that person or institution. In this mood, there is a lot we can say or write, becoming more and more convinced of our self-righteousness, even if our discourse is marked by ambiguity and lack-of-proof all the way down.

People tend to get polarized and inflated from insignificant divergences of opinion, for example if an advertisement is or is not guilty

of *gender-based discrimination* (because the ad is implying that there are only two genders, while LGBTQI activists claim to have discovered many other intermediary states) or *fat-shaming* (because the ad is suggesting that a natural, low-calory diet may save one from serious health problems). Pointless debates, in which the two sides are not listening to each other, and sound arguments are severely ignored, are nowadays frequent on social media platforms.

Nowhere can somebody find a reply saying “Yes, on this point you are right” or “Maybe I overreacted a bit in my complaint”. Such reaction would probably be seen as “treason” on the part of the rest of the group, who are convinced of their (complete and impossible-to-shatter) righteousness of their own cause. The outrage of “Black Lives Matter” that was dramatically displayed on a physical level in the United States during the events of June 2020 is in fact boiling symbolically in social media on a daily basis, with a discourse often marked by *Gerede* at its base: from a grain of truthful data and justified complaints on a specific situation, appalling conclusions are drawn without any justification and exaggerated corrective measures are heavily employed against a person, a group, or an institution.

All in all, if we look deeply at this phenomenon, we notice that *Gerede* motivates higher engagement with social media, yet decreases our chances for authentic epistemic gains and for responsible behaviour in what concerns the transmission of knowledge. It is as if platforms were specifically designed to capitalize on this human weakness and amplify it. Are you then inevitable victims of it? Can we conclude that cognitively fruitful debates can only happen outside social media?

Not necessarily. Our propensity for *Gerede* can be used in our advantage, under certain circumstances. Researchers (Orr et. al, 2016, for example) who have analysed deliberative groups on Facebook have explicitly made this recommendation: if we want to debate a public-interest issue, we must have a significant number of the people debating who actually know what they are talking about (ideally, people who are successful professionals in that field). They should be invited to join the group on a long term. If there is disagreement on a topic even inside a professional category, representatives of both sides should participate in the debates of the group, and people should pay close attention to what the specialists are saying. It is important for the non-specialist audience to really listen, to really be curious about complex realities, and to check in honesty what they know with specialists who are willing to debate it.

Another important step is to engage with fewer topics. We need the courage to narrow down our circle of interests and areas of inquiry. If we want to take advantage of the wide range of opinions available on a single subject online, we must not pursue too many subjects at the same time. Before engaging in a controversy online, we should ask what is our purpose, what we know, what we do not know, what it is that we want to find out, what use we want to give to that information.

If we discover that the topic is within our epistemic reach, then we should continue following the debate, with all the precautions mentioned until now. If the topic is beyond our epistemic reach, and we realize that we do not have the critical mass of knowledge on that topic to understand things in their proper context, then it is better to avoid any exposure whatsoever to the topic.

Another solution would be to explore alternative forms of the *Social Internet*, as many specialists in the field (Tristan Harris, Cal Newport, Jaron Lanier) have repeatedly suggested. Debates between bloggers who are passionate by a field look very different than debates in social media platforms. Writing about a topic on a blog can be an occasion for the writer to centralize the information that is available, to analyse and select case studies, to see more clearly (and help others see more clearly) what each side of a debate is actually proposing, what are the implications, what are the alternatives, what is the background knowledge needed to understand both. Blogs have a different pace, a different atmosphere, and – most importantly – built-in features that encourage focus and in-depth research a topic, as well as a smaller circle of people to debate with.

5. Conclusion

It is a certainty that someone wanting to understand the *content* of a debate and to know the main arguments that were issued, can no longer ignore what is being debated in social media on that topic. By following attentively what people in social media are saying on a topic, one can become familiar with the full range of personal experiences and professional perspectives that need to be taken into account before deciding on a given topic (Orr et. al 2016). This multiplicity of perspectives, made so easily accessible to everyone, announces immense potential cognitive gains. Yet, it can also create problems for the user who will have to sort the wheat from the chaff, in an attempt to extract valuable pieces of information.

To transform this potential cognitive gain into actual cognitive gain, users must epistemically virtuous behaviour by selecting the posts they read, the domains and the people they engage with, as well as the mode of engagement they allow themselves to enter. One particularly dangerous mode of engagement is what Heidegger describes as *Gerede* – the tendency to speak about diverse topics we do not grasp, based on an illusion of self-righteousness and an implicit promise that we are taking part in the meaning-making process of the world.

In this mode, we become easy targets for distorted or decontextualized information that can push us into participating in debates whose aim and scope we do not understand fully. We can say or share this distorted or decontextualized information. *Gerede* seems to be helping us see more, read more, comment more – in social media terminology, *engage* more with various topics. Some researchers take this to be an open gate to more knowledge (Chadwick, O’Loughlin, and Vaccari 2017, DeZuniga and Liu, 2017), and maybe under certain circumstances it can be. But in most cases it is the opposite of knowledge, because it rests on impatience, superficiality, and rejection of alternative or deeper perspectives on a public issue that is debated.

Throughout this work, I have suggested a set of solutions that could be employed in order to escape these behavioural tendencies that social media platforms are cultivating. Some of them may need to be supported by further empirical research. Yet, one overarching solution would be for users to make efforts into regaining contact with their personal context, to clarify their values, their models, their intentions. Once this clarification is made, they should restrict their social media diet to a limited number of interactions (Newport 2019). Debates can be fruitfully included in this diet, of course, but further research into that topic, even by following debates on different platforms, should be seen as a *sine-qua-non* condition to be fulfilled before drawing any conclusion or openly opting for one side of the debate.

We are trained by social media affordances to think that our contribution is significant to *mankind*, but we must acknowledge the fact that this is an illusion. Social media platforms are flourishing on this illusion, while in fact it is not us that contribute significantly to the framing of an issue in an abstract public sphere : it is the social media framings that we encounter that contribute significantly to our view on the world. We are renouncing more and more of our intellectual courage and authenticity each time we accept to *share*, *like*, or *comment* on topics that we do not really understand in their full context, but were

“delivered” by social media algorithms in our social media *feed*. Being “fed” daily on this mode of engagement, we will grow further and further away from reality and from ourselves, while in the meantime celebrating the vast amount of new and interdisciplinary “knowledge” we think we gain.

All in all, perhaps we would be better off in our cognitive lives if we understood that following or taking part in social media debates is not the end-point, but the beginning in our process of acquiring knowledge on a subject.

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