

Digging for engagement - the role of social news websites in liberal individualist democracies

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Abstract

After a brief introduction (1), I provide a descriptive overview of social news sites (2), and argue that they are important constituents of the political public sphere (3), in their dual capacity as media organs (3.1) and as discursive spaces (3.2). In order to evaluate their performance in this dual role - i.e. in order to find out whether or not their contribution is rendering the political public sphere more, or less, democratic -, I turn to a specific understanding of democracy (4). I argue that, based on the normative assumptions on which liberal individualist democracy is conceptualized, the political public sphere should be characterized by a substantial realization of the idea of freedom of expression. In other words, the political public sphere should be a resource for citizens to exercise their rights to information, expression and participation in public debate. From the perspective of media outlets (4.1.1), I argue that the substantial realization of freedom of expression (or lack thereof) can be measured through the dimensions of *content diversity*, *source diversity*, and (content) *quality*. From the perspective of social news sites as discursive spaces (4.1.2), the corresponding dimensions are those of *participant diversity*, *ideological diversity*, *focus* and *civility*. I conclude (5) by arguing that such an analysis of social news sites is an important first step to take in the analysis of their role in democracy - even though further research is needed to explain *why* social news sites perform the way the do.

1. Introduction

My doctoral research project studies social news websites (e.g. *Digg* (2011), *Reddit* (2011) and *Newsvine* (2011)). It is a piece of evaluative research: it derives normative standards from various conceptual models of democracy, and applies these standards to empirical data collected on social news websites. In doing so, it tries to establish how, and to what extent, such sites contribute to a democratic public sphere¹.

This working paper briefly introduces social news websites, and attempts to conceptualize their potential democratizing role in the political public sphere in a particular conceptual model of democracy. This model embodies a *liberal individualist* tradition².

2. Social news websites...

Social news websites aggregate and filter previously published online contents of the web. They do this by taking advantage of their communities: users submit various material, and vote on others' submissions. Those articles that receive most of the votes end up on the front page, and less popular articles are "buried:" moved to less visible areas of the site.

Social news sites can be conceptualized as media outlets that provide a compilation of the contents of other media; and this compilation of news items (and other articles) reflects a certain "common opinion" of the sites' user communities.

At the same time, such sites also provide space for discussion about each submitted article. The editorial process is based on voting, but the scope of user interaction expands beyond that: users can create discussion threads and establish networks, through which they can communicate and follow each other's activities. (Hence the term "social" news sites.)

What I described briefly above are some of the basic common features that social news sites tend to share. But it is important that they also tend to differ in the concrete form or implementation of these, and other, features. With the words of Goode (2009), their *organizing software code* is different - and their looks already hint at important differences. (Consider the screenshots of the opening pages of *Digg*, *Reddit* and *Newsvine* (Figures 1 - 3).) The comparative analysis of different sites is expected to lead to testable hypotheses about how various elements of the organizing software code could affect the democratic potential of social news sites.

1 On evaluative media performance studies, see McQuail (2010: 353 - 366).

2 My original plan had been to examine here communitarian/republican and deliberative models too. But due to the length restrictions of this paper, I ended up dealing only with the liberal individualist variant.

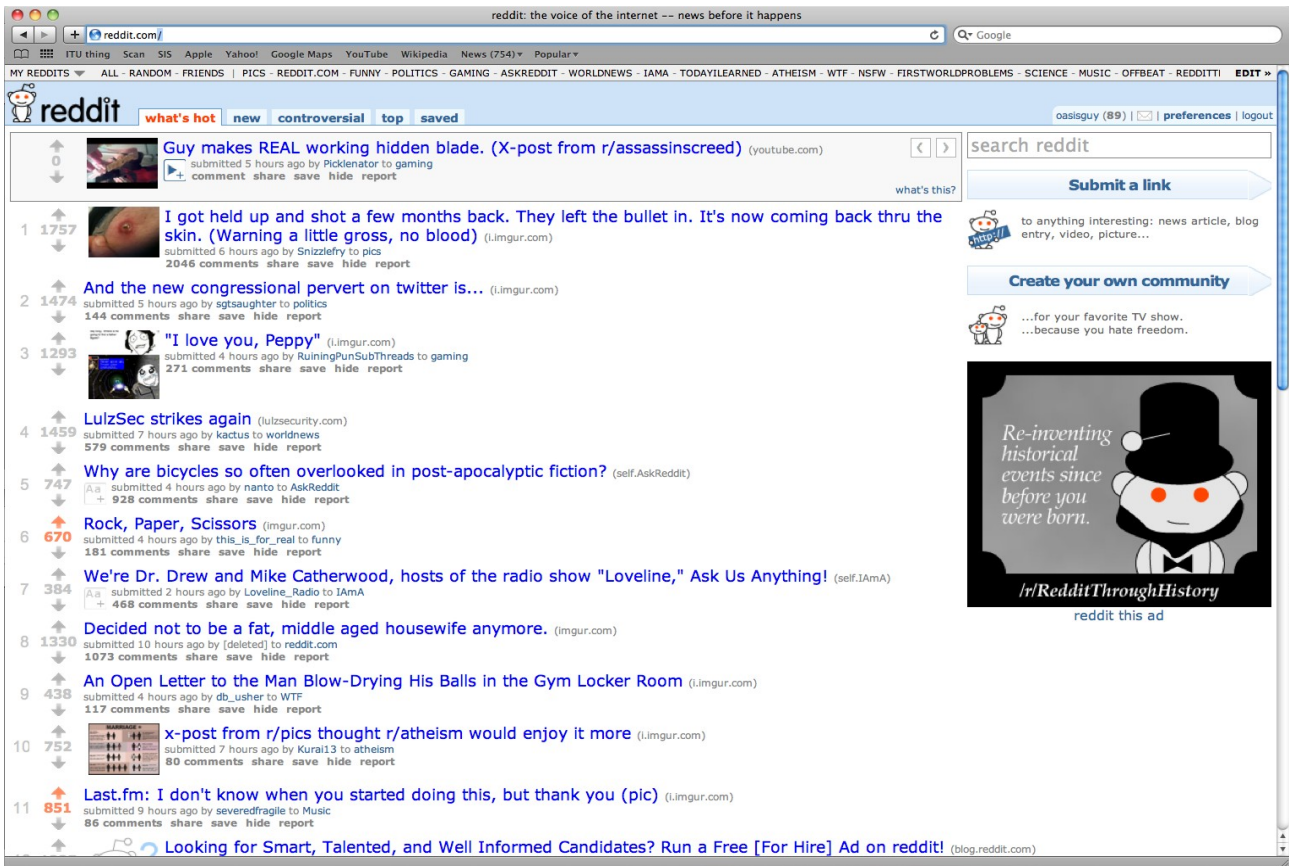


Figure 1. The front page of Reddit.

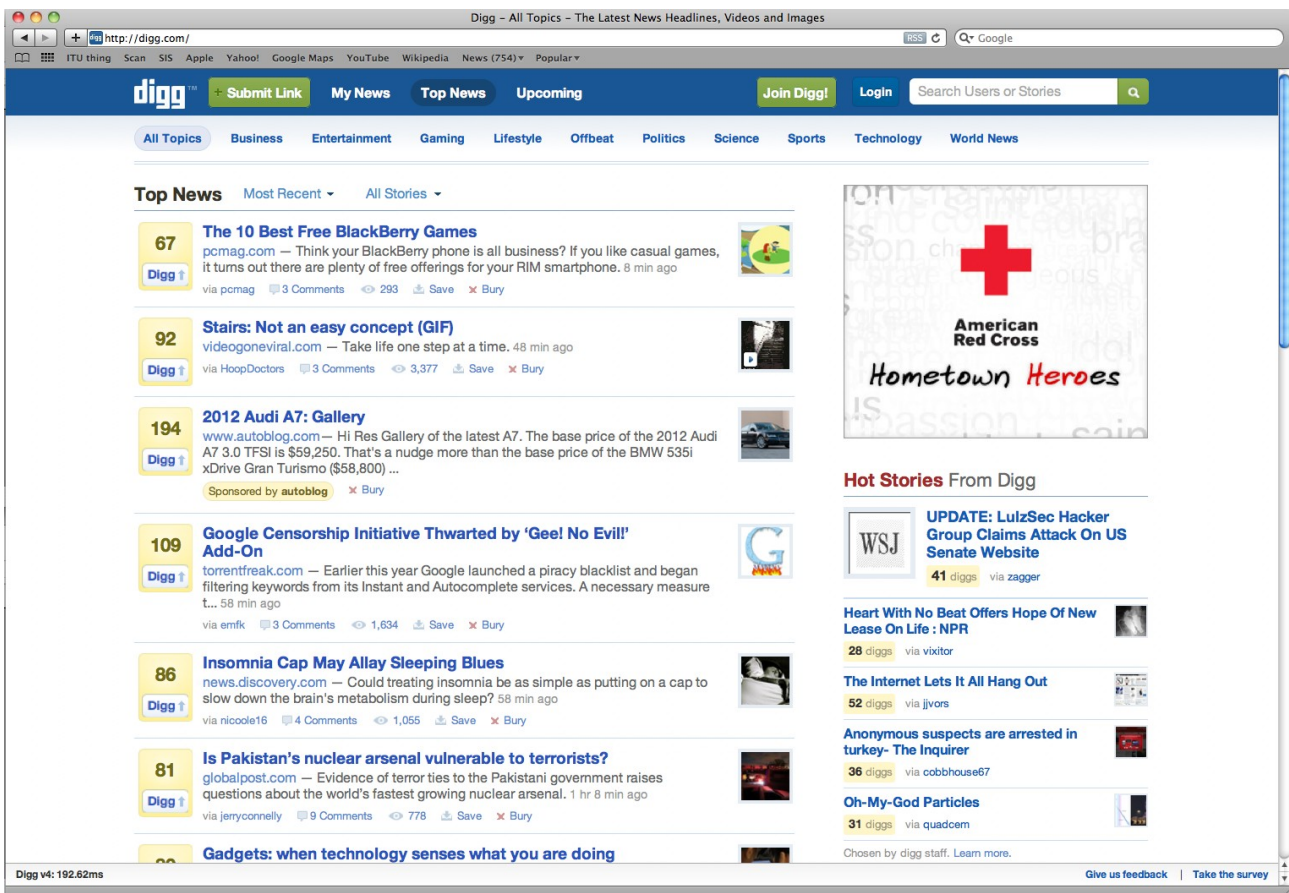


Figure 2. The front page of Digg.



Figure 3. The front page of Newsvine.

3. ...and their democratizing potential

There has been much talk about how the decentralized, egalitarian network of networks known as the internet could lead to a better, more democratic organization of certain areas of our lives (see e.g. Benkler 2006, Gillmor 2009). The internet's democratic potential is supposed to stem partly from the fact that it renders participation in public affairs - in politics as well as in cultural and economic consumption - easier for an increasing number of citizens. In many areas of public life, we have to deal with middlemen or gatekeepers - may they be journalists, politicians, salesmen, record companies, publishing houses, teachers or libraries -; but the net offers tools to get around these, should we like to do so.

But academic literature also reminds us that, on the one hand, this increased participation might not happen, or might happen in a way that would strengthen already existing inequalities in societies or create new ones (regarding media consumption in general, see e.g. Murdock and Golding 2005). In addition, some scholars maintain that this increased participation might not even be, per se, a good or desirable thing (e.g. Keen 2007).

From the point of view of democracy, this second type of problem is normative. Various concepts of democracy differ over the role they cast on citizens. Depending on the conceptual model one subscribes to, some participation might be good, and some bad; some beneficial and some detrimental. This is why it is important to establish clear conceptual distinction between various models of democracy, and to evaluate the role of social news sites against these clear normative conceptual backgrounds.

Accordingly, the first step in the evaluation of social news sites is to give an account of the sense in which they offer "increased participation to citizens." I do this by making the analytical distinction between social news sites as media outlets and as spaces for discussion. The second step is to outline various conceptual models of democracy; and the third is to evaluate the results of the first step in the light of the second.

As Peter Dahlgren pointed out (2011, personal conversation; see also Dahlgren 2009: 65), such an undertaking is bound to lead to fuzzy results. Empirical results will not conform easily to neat conceptual models derived from normative statements.

An alternative approach, with a mindset closer to that of cultural studies, does look attractive. Instead of trying to force empirical observations to match preconceived expectations, one might take the route of empirical, qualitative, interpretive analysis of what democratic communication on social news sites actually is (as opposed to what it should be). Based on such an analysis, one could then distil a conceptual model of democratic communication which would arguably explain the actual process of communication much better than any normative model could ever do.

The reason I chose not to take this alternative route is that I want to keep the focus on democracy as a normative concept - one that ultimately cannot be defined based on empirical observations.

There will always be a gap between the normative ought of democracy, and its actual practice. But the point of my research is precisely trying to measure this gap, and see how it could be shrunk. We need yardsticks to measure democratic communication. But democracy is by definition a normative concept³, so the only way to establish these yardsticks is to take the route of normative theorizing.

With the words of Douglas Adams: reality is frequently inaccurate. Capturing those inaccuracies so that we can take steps to correct them - this is what my project is about.

3.1. Social news sites as media outlets

As outlined above, the primary self-professed function of social news sites is to give a compilation of online mass media contents. Such sites *aggregate* and *filter* previously published online contents, and the term "contents" here refers to the widest possible array of technologically mediated information. It includes textual newspaper articles from the mainstream as well as from obscure media outlets; video clips, images, audio files, and any given combination of these, and all that in a huge variety of formats.

On the one hand, this filtering process is important both for audiences who have to cope with an increasingly overwhelming abundance of information, and for content producers, for whom social news sites represent platforms where they can compete for attention with each other on (almost) equal, meritocratic grounds⁴. Naturally, this is especially important for outlets of critical, advocacy media.

On the other hand, the agenda set by social news site users can also affect the agenda of other media too. There have been a number of cases where what we normally term the mainstream media picked up or incorporated into their material stories that first broke on social news sites⁵ (e.g. BBC Technology News (2011), Latif (2011), Petrou (2011), Samways (2011)).

From the point of view of democracy as a system of social organization, all this matters for the same reason as mass communication, in general, matters. Namely, it is through the mass media that most people, most of the time get access to, get informed about, and get to influence the political process in society - whether in its formal or in its extraparliamentary avenues (e.g. Dahlgren 2009, Habermas 2006, Hjarvard 2008, Papacharissi 2009).

Social news sites - and networked digital media in general - give an unprecedented chance to

3 Cf. Körösényi's attempt (2005) at creating a "fully descriptive, non-normative" model of democracy. In my view, the attempt remains unsuccessful; and the author also concedes that even his model has ended up having "normative potential."

4 In the ideal case scenario, the only factor deciding whether an item gets to the front page is its perceived quality, as opposed to factors related to the financial, economic or political power of a certain publisher. Once submitted, an obscure blog post has just as much chance to make it to the front page as an article from the *New York Times*.

5 Digg is run by a company independent of media organizations, but Reddit belongs to the portfolio of worldwide magazine publisher *Condé Nast* (Condé Nast Digital 2011), and *Newsvine* is a brand of *MSNBC* (Newsvine 2011). Thus from a business perspective, they are part of the mainstream - yet their audiences and editorial principles (and, perhaps, contents) distinguish them from more traditional media outlets.

citizens to influence the mass media, to supply them with new pieces of information and opinion, to correct their perceived errors, to re-contextualize and explain their contents, to give voice to those unheard, etc.; and all this influence is potentially of political import. Involvement with the mass media is, at least potentially, political involvement⁶.

But unlike more straightforward forms of political activism - from attending demonstrations to having a career as a politician -, this kind of media activism is quite undemanding - especially so on social news websites. This kind of activism takes advantage of the resources (human, financial and other) of the news producers. It lets others do the hard work of original reporting or news production, and puts audiences in the role of gatekeepers.

The actual procedure of gatekeeping is quite simple on social news sites. Users can express their editorial decisions by a click of a mouse button, and the sites' software architecture takes care of the rest - its algorithms calculate which items will be put on the front page, and which ones will be removed from there.

Gatekeeping, however, amounts to more than simply deciding what pieces of news get past the community filter: it also involves re-framing and re-contextualization. When a new item is submitted to a social news website, it is given a title - which may not be the same as the original headline -, and, as mentioned above, users can also comment on each new submission, potentially putting them into new contexts. An example of this process is the practice of re-publishing material in order to ridicule it or to point out its deficiencies. In this case, material gets republished precisely because it's perceived to be so (hilariously or outrageously) *flawed*. Goode (2009) refers to this activity as "metajournalism:" the secondary, reflexive, interpretive treatment of mass media material, potentially by political motivation.

Such reflexive media activism is expected to render the media system more democratic in the sense of putting more power to the hands of the readers to influence the news agenda.

As I've outlined above, the precise interpretation of the adjective "more democratic" depends on one's chosen concept of democracy - but a problem of definition also pops up in connection with the concept of "the media system."

While recognizing that any given country's media system is bound to be a complex and heterogeneous establishment riddled with contradictions, normative theories (Christians et al. 2009) still tend to treat "the media" as a distinct societal institution (see also Hjarvard 2008). This does make sense from a theoretical standpoint. But there is a gap between the abstract level of "the Media" as a societal system, and the individual media outlets that we as citizens engage with, and it is debatable how overarching normative standards concerning "the Media" should, or could, be translated to the level of individual media organs.

For instance, if we stipulate the normative claim that the Media should represent a wide variety of views, does this mean that each and every news media outlet has the obligation to cover a variety of viewpoints, or is it also acceptable (or even preferable?) if citizens could pick and choose from a large set of highly partisan outlets, *the totality of which* would give a heterogeneous overview of the state of things? On what level are we to apply the normative implications of conceptual models of democracy?

Curran (2005) proposes an approach to bridge the gap. In his view, the best solution would be to distinguish between a number of structural parts within the Media system as such, with each part having their own set of tasks and preferred characteristics. E.g. media in the *private sector* should be subject only to minimal regulation, while *civic sector* media should support activism in the civil society (Curran 2005: 139).

⁶ Culturalist approaches to the study of communication (Dahlgren 2009: 5) would take this assertion as a starting premise. What I'm emphasizing here is that citizens' engagement with the mass media - including the "mere" act of informing oneself - could be interpreted as political activism even in the paradigm of traditional, administrative science.

In Curran's model, social news sites should be regarded as part of the *commercial* sector: they are run by profit-oriented business organizations, and financed by advertising revenues. But if we simply acknowledged this fact and decided that such sites should not be subject to normative constraints beyond the most basic measures regulating commercial publications, we would turn a blind eye to a paramount feature of such sites, namely that they are open for republishing any kind of material from any other media sector.

Social news sites are radically open. They are not public service outlets, but they can take over and re-publish news from public service broadcasters. Neither they are, per se, advocacy media - but they also provide an outlet for critical, minority views. Importantly, they are also open to foreign media - and foreign, "non-citizen" participants too.

In short: the most important democratic potential of social news sites lies in their inclusive and comprehensive nature. Recognizing this openness as a key strength, I decided to analyse them as representatives of the Media system as such. This means that I attempt to derive, from conceptual models of democracy, normative standards concerning "the Media," and apply these standards directly to the individual news sites⁷.

It needs to be noted that failure from this perspective could be success from another one. If social news sites are found to be ideologically one-sided, homogeneous and biased, that would not be a welcome result from the overarching "Media system" perspective. But as individual media organs, such sites could still be positive assets to democracy, for instance because they help foster political activism by creating tight-knit, supportive communities (see Mutz 2006). Nevertheless, this would mean a failure to take advantage of such sites' unique, higher-level potential.

3.2. Social news sites as discursive spaces

The mass media are important in the political process, but they are by no means the only factor that is important. The media stand in complex and interactive relationships with citizens, other groups and institutions of the society, and the cast and crew of formal politics; and it is in the *political public sphere* (e.g. Habermas 1996: 304 - 308; 360 - 366) where these relationships are nurtured and maintained. Politics might not be all about talking, but informing about politics, forming views and opinions and getting politically active in general does involve a lot of discussion with fellow citizens - as well as with representatives of various organizations and bodies. (See also Manin's principles of the representative government, notably that "policy decisions [are to be] taken after discussion [...] which takes place within the public" (1994: 165).)

The internet provides formidable opportunities for creating discussion forums: discursive spaces with the explicit aim of helping the public exchange of views and information. Computer networks can get around a number of barriers (from physical distance through status inequalities to censorship) that would preclude some citizens to conduct a discussion in real life. Therein lies another aspect of their democratizing potential⁸.

Social news sites combine the dissemination of content with the creation of such discursive spaces. In fact, their organizing software code - particular features of their structure and mode of operation - suggest that they could be better at it than blogs or discussion forums (see Janssen and Kies (2005) on "strong" vs "weak" discursive spaces).

7 What would the failure of social news sites mean in this case? What if it is found that they are but partisan, biased, single-minded echo chambers with little care for diversity, equality or freedom of speech? Such a result could indicate a.) the failure of such sites to adequately represent an otherwise highly free and democratic media system, and b.) the success of representing a media system that is itself repressive and undemocratic. Evaluations of media systems, such as those provided by the Freedom House or Reporters Without Borders, could provide help in interpretation.

8 Sunstein (2007) and others offer important reminders about the flip side of this potential - i.e. how online discussion forums can work to the detriment of public communication.

There are a number of ways in which the combination of news dissemination and discussion is realized on such sites. The most obvious example is that of separate discussion threads being created with every new submitted piece - this is similar to the comment area that can be seen on blogs or conventional online newspapers.

But in some cases, the comments constitute the news item itself, as exemplified on Reddit by the "IAMA... AMA" topics. IAMA stands for "I am a[n]...", and AMA abbreviates "Ask me anything;" news items filed under this topic are public interviews with celebrities or people with some specific experience or knowledge (see *Figure 4*). Such open interviews are a paramount example of an attempt at cutting the middlemen of professional journalists, while still relying on allocative media infrastructure, in a conversation between persons of interest and their fellow citizens. They are also an example of metajournalism turning into first-order journalism or content production, representing, on behalf of the conversants, a higher level of potentially political activity and engagement than what is normally associated with using social news sites.

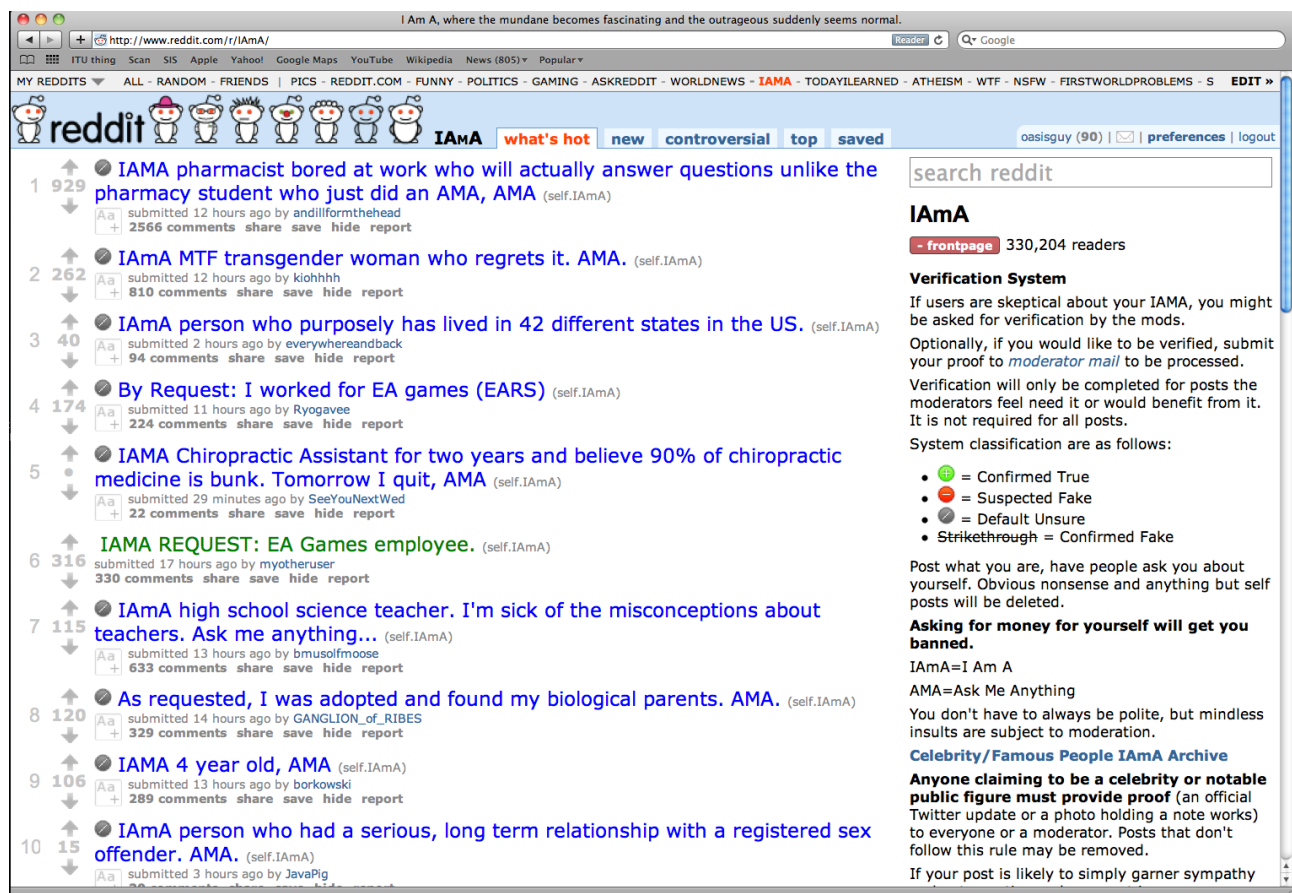


Figure 4. The IAmA section's front page on Reddit.

To sum up, I propose to study the democratizing potential of social news sites along two dimensions: first, from the perspective of such sites as media outlets or organs of metajournalism; and second, from the perspective of social news sites as discursive spaces. It is in these two roles that social news sites *perform* the political public sphere. My project consists in evaluating this performance, based on the normative expectations that models of democracy have towards the political public sphere.

It is these conceptual models that I turn to next. I briefly describe an ideal type of democracy, based on the works of Elster (1997), Habermas (1996 and 2006), Dahlberg (2001) and Held (1987).

4. A conceptual model

4.1. The political public sphere in liberal individualist democracies

In the model of liberal individualist democracy, the political process of will formation is a private one. As the name suggests, individual citizens are the centre of such a model; citizens that are above all concerned with the pursuit of their own self-centred interests⁹. The political process is considered to be means to an end: to realizing the greatest personal liberty for all citizens. Democracy works to the extent that it fulfils this aim.

There is an obvious tension between "the greatest liberty" and "for all citizens." In principle, everyone should be free to do as they wish to do - so long as they don't infringe upon anyone else's liberty. But what, in practice, should count as an infringement on someone else's liberty (with the words of J. S. Mill: as "harm") is very much debatable. Models of democracy labelled liberal individualist could be strikingly different to each other based on the answer they give to this question.

But in abstraction, such models are generally in agreement about three basic rights of citizens concerning the media and the public sphere: the rights to *expression* (and public representation of one's own views), to *information*, and to *participation* (in debates about matters of public concern) (Murdock 2002, see also Hartley 2007). I use the term "substantial freedom of expression"¹⁰ to capture all of these three different rights; and I define liberal individualist models of democracy as such models in which the role of the public sphere in general - and of the media and social news sites in particular - would be to establish the largest possible degree of substantial freedom of expression. (Admittedly, this definition only concerns the communicative aspect of democracies. The realization of substantial freedom of expression is a necessary, but in itself not sufficient condition of democracy.)

The first aspect of this freedom of expression is what Murdock refers to as "representation." In order not to confuse this aspect with the idea of political representation, I prefer the term "expression:" this right enables citizens to have their voices heard. Citizens should be free to express their thoughts and points of view, and they should be able to *represent* (hence Murdock's term) these thoughts in publicly accessible forms - i.e. in the mass media. In liberal individualist models, individuals' freedom of expression is a fundamental right, worthy of support without further need for justification.

But at the same time, this freedom can also be seen as means to an end: namely, to the end of pursuing one's interests in the most efficient manner possible. We necessarily rely on mediated information in many areas of conducting our lives, and it is therefore desired that this information is available in the first place. This is what the second aspect of "substantial freedom of expression" covers: the right to *information*.

Such a perspective also entails requirements concerning the quality of this available information (McQuail 2010: 199). The larger pool of information we - as liberal individual subjects - have at our disposal, the better we are equipped to make satisfying decisions about the conduct of our lives - *as long as* this information is also truthful and reliable.

Finally, the third field that my concept of freedom of expression covers is that of *participation*: not only should citizens be free to express their own thoughts and to be informed about those of others, but they also should have the capacity to meaningfully participate in debates about public matters. This aspect translates into normative imperatives concerning not only the media, but the public sphere in general: it should, in fact, be *public* - that is, open to everyone, and eliminating to the largest possible extent the practical barriers which could hinder participation in the public debate

⁹ On the other hand, these self-centered interests need not be *selfish* - a rational individual citizen might well consider his best interest to be serving the interests of others.

¹⁰ As opposed to a merely "formal" freedom of expression.

and exchange of information.

Is the substantial freedom of expression - enough?

According to McQuail (2010: 192), a commonly endorsed list of values that public communication should champion includes the related trio of freedom, equality and diversity, as well as truth and information quality, and, notably: *social order and solidarity*.

Views vary over what constitutes an acceptable social order and level of solidarity; that is, where the boundaries of *individual* freedom lie. Barber (1984) underlines a basic issue of liberalism, arguing that this tradition tries - and mostly fails - to reconcile three conflicting aspirations - an anarchist one (where the individual interests are sacred), a realist one (which recognizes the need for some kind of a common ground between citizens, and for an external force to guarantee individual rights), and a minimalist one (which acknowledges the need for a state but tries to limit its interference on the matters of individuals).

Which is to say that a conceptualization of liberal individualist democracy that doesn't consider the values of "social order and solidarity" can perhaps be regarded as deficient. "It is wonderful to have a lot of high-quality information at our disposal - but we also need some kind of common value orientation that would guarantee at least a minimal level of cooperation among citizens," a counterargument might go.

Yet in my conceptualization of the liberal-individualist model, these latter values are bracketed. While recognizing the importance of a set of common and shared values, my model argues that the public sphere should be concerned with probing and questioning these values, always prioritizing the individual and the private before the communal and the public¹¹. A liberal individualist public sphere should give voice to those calling for greater solidarity and a stronger communal background - but it should equally support those who argue to the contrary.

To sum it up: I define liberal individualist variants of democracy as ones that require the public sphere to contribute to the fullest realization of *substantial* (as opposed to merely formal) freedom of expression. This would mean that citizens should not only be able to freely express whatever they want, and to obtain truthful and reliable information and a wide range of opinions about public matters, but also to meaningfully participate in the debate and information exchange about these issues.

4.1.1. Social news sites as media outlets

Social news sites *as media organs* are performing democratically to the extent that they contribute to the realization of this freedom of expression, i.e. by publishing diverse and high quality information.

I thus propose the following conceptualization of the substantial realization of freedom of expression: it is to include three dimensions of *content diversity*, *source diversity* and *high information quality*.

1.) Content diversity. The contents of social news sites should be diverse. In agreement with McDonald and Dimmick (2003), I understand diversity here as a two-dimensional concept, involving both a large number of topics covered, and a high degree of evenness in the distribution of these topics. Such a formulation of diversity is thus taken to manifest both *freedom* (the lack of which would preclude a large number issues to be present in the media) and *equality* (the lack of which would mean that certain issues or points of view are overrepresented).

Without going deeper into details of operationalizing diversity, I'd like to briefly draw attention to the problem of the level, or scope, at which this variable is to be measured. On the one hand, it is possible to conduct measurements on the complete, total content output of social news sites - as carried out by Meraz (2009). Alternatively, it is also possible to focus on contents that are ostensibly

¹¹ In the case of what I label communitarian-republican models, these priorities switch places.

political - i.e. published under one of the explicitly political sub-pages of such sites. I believe that arguments could be made for both of these approaches, but for a closer look, I would advocate the latter one, considering that focusing on a narrower segment of the public sphere (e.g. that of the political) would provide a stabler common system of reference, in which results of the analysis could be better interpreted. Perhaps the two approaches could complement one another; one providing a loose overview of "the Media as such," and the other measuring the performance of the media in a particular area.

2.) Source diversity. Social news sites are expected to take advantage of a diverse pool of sources. As above, diversity here would refer both to a large number of sources, and to a high degree of evenness in their distribution - i.e. to the fact that a few particular sources don't dominate the agenda.

I use the term "source" to refer to publishers of the raw material of social news sites¹². The analysis of their diversity is especially important, considering that one of the main promises of social news sites is to level the playing field between media outlets, professional or amateur, critical or mainstream. If the internet in general provides tools that enable virtually everyone to communicate on the mass level, and if social news sites provide means which are supposed to further amplify this democratization of communication, will this actually, in practice, work? Or will a handful of established media outlets still retain a hold on setting the media agenda?

3.) Quality. Contents on social news sites should represent a certain high quality.

Following Westerstahl, McQuail refers to "objectivity" as a complex concept to measure the overall "truth and information quality" of media. In my research, I plan to take advantage of this framework, but I find the term "objectivity" misleading - it seems to limit the application of the framework to factual news reporting - while in fact it "recognizes that objectivity has to deal with values as well as facts, and that facts have also evaluative implications" (2010: 201). Thus I prefer the purposefully loose and generalizing term of "quality."

This measure is based on two dimensions: factuality and impartiality; and these are further conceptualized as compounds of *truth*, *informativeness* and *relevance* (comprising factuality), and *balance* and *neutrality* (comprising impartiality).

As mentioned above, the "news" concept of social news sites is very much in flux; or to put it another way, there are as many different understandings of what "news" is, as there are users on such a site. As anyone could confirm after spending some time browsing Digg or Reddit, everything can count as "news" - even material that's considered outdated even by offline standards.

Which is to say that material on social news sites is unlikely to be organized according to the distinction between *news* as factual information, and *commentary*. Thus, the *quality* measure employed in the analysis needs to be such that it can be applied to both kinds of articles. I believe this measure to be so: it examines both the extent to which articles are opinionated, and the extent to which the opinions represented in them are balanced. It is expected to measure the ideological diversity of the output of social news sites - or the lack thereof, which might possibly be masked by the high nominal diversity of contents and of sources.

¹² Arguably, it is important to distinguish between primary sources (of original content production) and secondary ones (which rather channel and repackage already published content, without significantly contributing to it); as this would hopefully enable to measure the extent to which "metajournalism" must rely on original content producers.

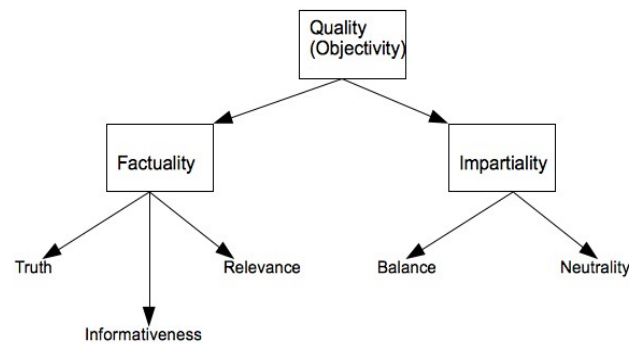


Figure 5. Components of a "quality" concept; adapted from McQuail (2010: 202).

4.1.2. Social news sites as discursive spaces

Social news sites as discursive spaces provide an opportunity whereby users to the site can, in a very literal and direct sense, practise their freedom of expression. By posting messages in discussion threads, users can *represent* their personal points of view, and *inform* about and reflect on others' - thus: *participate* in debates about public matters. In the discussion threads, users can offer their personal interpretation of published news articles; or otherwise engage with them on a personal level¹³.

As argued above, the quality of information is an important measure of social news sites *as media outlets*. However, this particular measure is of considerably lower importance from the perspective of social news sites as discursive spaces.

In this latter role, such sites are the equivalents of coffee house conversations, dinner table talks, and overhearing politically charged conversations in the pub. Since these discussions take place in a written form, and they are published on the internet, a number of basic rules will apply to their contents - e.g. moderators are expected to remove messages that violate the code of conduct of the site and/or explicit laws concerning online publishing. But beyond that, they are highly informal. These discussions are the product of private and anonymous individuals' contributions, not subject to institutional control. This also means that the quality of the information content of these contributions is expected to fluctuate wildly. But liberal individualist democracies recognize that everyone should be able to freely express themselves, even in erroneous ways, because a.) this is a fundamental right of every individual, and b.) collecting the largest possible pool of personal opinion is expected to help everyone pursue their self-centred interests in the most efficient manner possible. Taking part in conversations helps to transform ill-constructed views into better constructed ones; or to put it another way, partaking in a conversation is expected to help reaching higher levels of reflexivity - a better understanding one's own views.

Having said this- anything doesn't go. The substantial realization of individual freedom of expression should not limit others' participation.

Deliberative democrats would argue that conversation begins with listening. Liberal individualists might not go so far, but they would certainly claim that conversations should provide opportunities for all of the parties involved to speak; in this sense, they should begin with taking turns in being silent (even if not listening). Denying others the chance to speak should not be tolerated.

Participants to virtual conversations don't share a physical space, so there is little chance of actual physical confrontation developing between them. Filibustering - obstructing the debate with a prolonged speech - won't work either, as participants are not forced to take turns in the discussion.

¹³ This engagement can take many forms. Consider, for example the user called **sure_ill_draw_that** on Reddit whose main contribution has been to illustrate conversations.

But there are at least three other ways in which someone can hinder others' participation; namely, a.) spamming and/or taking the discussion off topic, b.) being offensive and verbally abusing others (a particular case of "flaming"), and c.) combining these two activities in what is known as trolling. Trolling is defined as "luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions" (Herring et al. 2002), often over highly controversial claims presented in highly abusive language. The presence or absence of such activities on the discussion boards of social news sites is thus taken to indicate the extent to which users are hindered in, or discouraged from, participation.

Thus, I propose the concept of "substantial realization of freedom of expression," as perceived on the discursive spaces of social news sites, to consist of the following dimensions.

1.) *Participation diversity.* As described in 4.1.1., a 2-dimensional concept of diversity is to be used, measuring both the number of participants to a debate, and the evenness of the distribution of the messages between these participants. A claim often levelled against online forums is that the distribution of contributions follows a power law curve, where a small number of core participants are responsible for a large majority of contributions, thereby dominating the agenda (Hogan 2008, Meraz 2009). I propose the participation diversity measure to confirm or refute such a claim.

2.) *Ideological diversity.* Conversations on social news sites are not to be subject to the same complex quality standards as published media contents. But the substantial realization of freedom of expression does imply that a diverse range of views is heard (however carelessly developed these views are). Thus I propose to measure the diversity of not only the contributors themselves, but also of the views that their contributions represent. Once again, diversity here is a two-dimensional concept.

3.) *Focus.* However informal the virtual conversations on social news sites are, they should remain on topic; most importantly, they should not be taken over by spamming or trolling. A primal, direct interpretation of the idea of "freedom of expression" would argue that contributors should just as well take the conversation wherever they want, and flood discussions with whatever they please to. But this interpretation, as I argued above, is limited: not only does it fail to acknowledge citizens' rights to *information* and *participation*, but it also ignores the fact that one person can curb others' *representational* rights by burying their contributions under heaps of spam.

As a starting point to the operationalization of the dimension of focus, I plan to use Stromer-Galley (2007), Stromer-Galley and Martinson (2009) and Herring et al. (2002).

4.) *Civility.* I understand this measure as the absence of verbal abuse. Papacharissi (2004) and Freelon (2010) point out that online civility might differ from its offline counterpart. We tend to use different standards of manner in informal, asynchronous, online debates than in face-to-face conversations. More specifically, Papacharissi (ibid) underlines how "politeness" is to be understood in a much more flexible way online than off, and how the blunt and often confrontational tone of online messages could go hand in hand with their civic, democratic potential.

But a distinction still shall be made between contributions to a discussion that are, on the one hand, constructive, and that, on the other hand, are actively trying to disrupt the flow of the debate, e.g. by insulting others, or using other means to discourage them from participation. Hence the use of the civility component in my planned criterion.

4.1.3. Summary

A paramount feature of liberal individualist models of democracy is their emphasis on citizens' rights to information, to the public representation of their views, and to participation in public debates. My concept of the *substantial realization of freedom of expression* incorporates all of these three dimensions; and I plan to evaluate the contribution of social news sites to liberal individualist

democracy by measuring the extent to which they manifest such a substantial realization of freedom of expression.

From the perspective of social news sites as media organs, this is measured through the three analytical dimensions of *content diversity*, *source diversity* and *quality*.

From the perspective of social news sites as discursive spaces, the principle of freedom of expression is translated into the four analytical dimensions of *participant diversity*, *ideological diversity*, *focus* and *civility*.

5. A final note on future results - and their explanations

It is one thing to measure media performance and practice, and another to seek explanations for the results arrived at. I believe that both of these tasks are important, but it is also important to ask the first question first - that is, to establish *what* social news sites are doing, so that we can ask the question of *why* they are doing it.

As mentioned earlier, the comparative analysis of social news sites might conceivably lead to testable hypotheses that could explain why each of them tends to perform the way it does. But even if this is not the case, and I end up only with hunches, vague ideas, or less, about how a site's audience, structure or features influence its contents, I still believe it is important to give a descriptive account of social news sites - one that could inform further research.

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