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The Dumbed-Down Discourse Dilemma

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ABSTRACT *Some critics worry that the average quality of public discourse in liberal democracies is deplorably low. An example of this is that superficial media content enjoys a much broader audience than highly informative content. States can take various measures to improve the quality of public discourse. For example, states can implement strong incentives for private outlets to produce content of high quality. Should states implement such measures? This article argues that answers to this question face a dilemma. Accepting the existence of a dumbed-down discourse is difficult because of several negative consequences that dumbed-down discourses create. Improving the quality of public discourse is problematic because some of the most promising interventions to improve discourse quality cannot be justified in ways that are compatible with liberal neutrality. The article assesses two possible solutions to the dilemma and finds both of them wanting.*

1. Introduction

The way in which public discourses in liberal democracies ought to be regulated is subject to heated debates. For example, there is disagreement over the requirements of freedom of expression and its implications for the regulation of disinformation and hate speech.[1] There is also significant debate about problems associated with polarization and fragmentation of discourse, as well as the phenomenon of populism.[2]

At the intersection of these debates lies a problem that has to do with the quality of public discourse. Some critics worry that the average quality of public discourse in most liberal democracies is deplorably low.[3] In particular, there is increasing concern over the prevalence of so-called 'brain rot' content, which can be defined as content that is both highly captivating and very trivial. Relatedly, we are witnessing outcries over so-called 'AI slop' and a tendency towards the so-called 'enshittification' of content on various digital platforms.[4]

While these pejorative terms are normally used to describe digital content, they can also be interpreted to apply to more traditional media formats, such as newspapers, magazines, and TV programmes. For example, there are many who worry that highly sensational and superficial news sources, such as the 'yellow press', enjoy a broad audience while highly informative and well-researched newspapers struggle to sell enough copies to make ends meet.[5]

States can take various measures to improve the quality of public discourse. Consider some examples. States can fund public broadcasting agencies that provide the public with highly informative content. States can issue media vouchers that citizens can direct to news providers that meet an independently monitored quality threshold.[6] States can also take steps to redistribute media ownership to create so-called 'media commons' and ensure a more broad-based ownership of news media.[7] Several measures haven been

proposed to specifically improve the quality of digital content that is curated by social media platforms. For example, states can require social media platforms to make transparent how their algorithms operate and require a vetting process to ensure that algorithms comply with safety and accuracy standards.[8] Further to this, social media platforms can be required to employ independent fact-checking and to label content that is false or misleading. Other measures include forcing social media platforms to inform users why specific content is recommended to them, as well as legal options for individuals to sue information providers when false content causes harm.[9]

Should states endorse and implement such measures? This article argues that answers to this question face a moral dilemma. The existence of dumbed-down discourses is problematic because of harmful effects that they create and because dumbed-down discourses are often the result of unintended processes and market failures. Improving the quality of public discourse is problematic because it cannot be justified in ways that are compatible with liberal neutrality.

The article assesses two promising avenues to justify discourse-improving policies. The first of these appeals to individuals' interest in participating in a deliberative democracy. The second potential justification appeals to individuals' fundamental interest in forming a conception of the good life. My main claim is that neither of these avenues succeeds in offering a politically neutral justification for improving public discourses. This should not be understood to imply that no politically liberal justification for improving public discourse can exist. However, it shows that such a justification is surprisingly difficult to identify. Liberal proponents of discourse-improving interventions must look beyond their standard repertoire of justifications to show how their agenda can appeal to all reasonable citizens.

To preview, my analysis is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 explain why there is a conflict between the value of liberal neutrality and the proposal to improve the quality of public discourse. Section 4 assesses the value of democratic deliberation and its implications for discourse quality. Section 5 discusses the value of ethical deliberation – understood as the capacity to form a conception of the good life – as a basis for justifying improvements of public discourse. Section 6 concludes.

Before I begin, it is worth clarifying two things. First, this is a *normative* analysis of proposals to improve the quality of public discourse. My goal is not to add to the extensive body of empirical research on discourse quality. Rather, I draw on this research to assess the strength of moral considerations that lie on either side of the debate about improving public discourse. Second, I do not take a stance on the contentious question of whether the quality of public discourse has worsened over time. Complaints about dumbed-down discourses have always existed and some scholars even claim that we have seen improvements in discourse quality over time.[10] My analysis is based on the less controversial observation that the share of low-quality information in many contemporary societies is relatively high, when compared to the share of high-quality content.

2. The Dilemma

The first horn of the dilemma arises from the observation that public discourse in liberal democracies is of much lower quality than we might want it to be and that this creates

various negative consequences. To better understand this observation, it is helpful to clarify what it can mean for a public discourse to be of low quality.

Philosophers and empirical researchers have dedicated significant attention to the question of how discourse quality can be conceptualized and measured.[11] At a conceptual level, a discourse might be deemed to be of high or low quality depending on (a) how close to the truth average contributions to the discourse are, and (b) how socially relevant contributions are. Here, I do not engage with the difficult questions of how exactly we should define the contested terms of 'truth' and 'social relevance'. I assume that there is a meaningful way of defining these terms and that these terms can be helpfully invoked in definitions of discourse quality.

Empirical approaches to studying discourse quality can be grouped into two types. One type of approach uses surveys to assess individuals' *subjective assessments* of various types of media content to determine whether this content is perceived to be of high or low quality. From this perspective, a given discourse is of poor quality when a large number of respondents perceive it to be of poor quality. Surveys of this kind measure the quality of media content through the use of proxies, such as trustworthiness and credibility.[12]

A second type of approach analyses media *content* and judges the quality of this content against a list of pre-determined criteria.[13] For example, researchers have measured the share of 'hard news' in newspapers, the amount of political information in TV programmes, and the diversity of frames in news reporting.[14] Similarly, the Discourse Quality Index determines the quality of discussions of a given topic by measuring (a) whether participants in a deliberative process have roughly equal voice, (b) the extent to which speakers offer justifications for their views and make their views accessible to rational critique, (c) the extent to which speakers offer justifications for their views that are acceptable to all reasonable individuals, (d) the extent to which speakers are respectful of other groups and of counterarguments, (e) the degree of interactivity between participants, (f) the degree to which participants attempt to achieve consensus, and (g) the extent to which participants are sincere.[15]

Many commentators draw on this research to establish that we should worry about the quality of public discourses in liberal democracies.[16] For example, we might worry that sensationalist reporting, gossip, half-truths, brain rot, and misinformation are so prevalent that they dominate the formation of public opinion and that they crowd out highly informative content.

A consequence of this can be that individuals are more likely to commit mistakes when they take important decisions. An example of an important decision is the design of political systems. In democracies, individuals must use their political judgement to vote and to co-determine the design of societies' basic institutions. We can expect the outcomes of democratic decision processes to be the worse and the more harmful, the less informed and the less competent individuals are.[17] In extreme cases, 'A largely uninformed citizenry, unprotected against misinformation and fake news, might easily fall prey to demagogues and end up favoring policies that undermine basic democratic values'.[18]

Ill-informed decisions can have harmful effects not only at the level of politics, but also in the private realm when individuals make choices regarding how to live their lives. For example, individuals are likelier to enjoy good health the more educated and informed they are.[19] Since public discourse plays an important role in informing and educating individuals, we can speculate that high-quality discourses help individuals avoid risks that can negatively impact their health.

Here, I do not have enough space to review all the ways in which dumbed-down discourses might cause harm. I merely want to establish that dumbed-down discourses have some harmful effects and that these harmful effects provide us with a reason to prefer high-quality over low-quality discourses.

Concerns about dumbed-down discourses are fuelled not only by the harmful effects of these discourses, but also by the mechanisms through which these discourses emerge. Importantly, there is reason to think that dumbed-down discourses are the unintended product of a vicious spiral and market failures that make it difficult for many individuals to develop preferences for information of high quality. I will explain both of these in turn, starting with the vicious spiral. The vicious spiral has three elements, each of which appears to be rather innocuous. However, taken together, they generate a worrying outcome.

The first element of the vicious spiral is that individuals often form preferences, values, and beliefs spontaneously, as an unintended side-product of exposure to information on a given topic. What this means is that there are many cases where we do not consult a source of information, say, an online magazine, with the intention of forming a view on a particular subject. We frequently browse information without a clear intention of forming a view on a specific subject. For example, we might browse the newsfeed on our devices, TV channels, or newspaper displays without aiming to form a specific view. Rather, we encounter information that arouses our interest and continue to engage with this information once our interest has been aroused. A side-effect of such encounters is often that we form a view on a particular subject. In many cases, this happens very quickly. In other words, the time that passes between exposure to information and view-formation can be very short. Research in political psychology suggests that a very large share of our views, preferences, and opinions is formed quickly, and as a result of exposure to unexpected information.[20] We can refer to this element of the vicious spiral as *spontaneity*.

The second element of the vicious spiral is self-reinforcing loops that make it the case that individuals that are currently exposed to information of poor quality are more likely to be exposed to information of poor quality in the future. Consider the example of political election campaigns. Polls often find that the average voter has little interest in politics. Political consultants use such findings to recommend that candidates use snappy soundbites and emotional statements instead of detailed facts and careful argumentation.[21] As a result, voters are exposed to superficial election coverage and consequently forgo opportunities to acquire more detailed knowledge. This outcome is then detected by pollsters and sets off a self-reinforcing dynamic.[22]

Similar dynamics can be found in other areas of life. For example, advertisers might observe that the average news consumer has little interest in complex information and careful argumentation. News outlets use this observation as a basis for editorial decisions, with a view to attracting as many readers as possible. Consequently, readers forgo opportunities to acquire greater knowledge. This in turn feeds back into advertisers' market research.

Self-reinforcing dynamics of this kind are further amplified by a psychological fallacy that is often referred to as 'confirmation bias'. Humans are more likely to engage with information that confirms their pre-existing views than they are to engage with information that challenges their views.[23] This fallacy has been described as one the most widely accepted results of research on human psychology.[24]

The effect of self-reinforcing dynamics can be a kind of path-dependency whereby individuals initially form a preference for information of poor quality and are subsequently unlikely to question this preference because they lack opportunities to engage with alternative information of better quality. We can refer to this dynamic as *endogeneity*.

The third element of the vicious spiral is *time scarcity*. The amount of time that individuals can dedicate to informing themselves is sharply limited. Individuals must weigh the time they dedicate to informing themselves against alternative uses of their time. After meeting the demands of economic subsistence, social obligations, and personal care, we often have little time left for sophisticated deliberation.[25]

Taken together, *spontaneity*, *endogeneity*, and *time scarcity* create a vicious spiral. An abundance of superficial content to which individuals are frequently exposed makes it the case that many individuals spontaneously form preferences for superficial content. Subsequently, *endogeneity* and *time scarcity* make it the case that individuals are unlikely to revise their preferences for information of poor quality. Once there is substantial demand for information of poor quality, the vicious spiral ensures that this demand perpetuates itself over time. What is worrying about this is that the vicious spiral is unintended, in the sense that it does not result from deliberate decisions to prefer low-quality content over high-quality content. This means that individuals' preferences for content of low quality carry less normative weight than they would carry if the vicious spiral did not exist.

Apart from the vicious spiral, there is a second explanation why low-quality content, such as sensationalism and gossip, is very prevalent. This explanation has to do with the tendency of markets to underprovide public goods.[26] Highly informative content is a public good because it benefits individuals in various ways. However, producing information of high quality is expensive and has limited potential for monetization. An example of this is investigative journalism. Uncovering political corruption, corporate crime, and other important issues often takes a very long time and costs large sums of money. Once a story is published, its content is to some extent non-excludable in the sense that it can easily be replicated by other news outlets. This in turn limits its potential for monetization. Moreover, news consumers are often not willing to spend significant amounts of money on journalistic products of high quality. Sensational stories, on the other hand, are cheap to produce and sell well.[27] The upshot of this is that in the absence of incentives, regulations, and subsidies, markets cannot be expected to produce high-quality information and therefore fail to provide us with an important public good. This provides us with another reason to be wary of dumbed-down discourses. The fact that they are partly the result of unintended market failures means that there is a *pro tanto* reason to reject them.[28]

Let us take stock. I have explained that dumbed-down discourses are concerning because of their potential harmful effects. I then established that there is an additional reason to worry about dumbed-down discourses that has to do with the unintentional nature of the mechanisms through which they arise. We are now in a position to ask whether these concerns can ground a justification for policies to improve discourse quality. For example, should states implement incentives for private outlets to produce content of high quality?

Many commentators and politicians argue for such measures because these promise to alleviate the above-mentioned harms that are associated with dumbed-down discourses.[29] However, these measures face an important objection, which constitutes the second horn of the dilemma.

Raising the quality of public discourse above and beyond the standard that is currently provided by wealthy democratic societies might violate the requirement of liberal neutrality. The idea behind this requirement is the following. States are very powerful entities that routinely coerce us and that shape our lives in many ways. For example, states force us to pay taxes and to abide by the law. Given our moral status as free and equals, this coercion is in need of justification. After all, we are born into societies that are ruled by states and we as individuals have neither created this rule nor have we explicitly consented to it. This is troubling because we are rational creatures who can decide for ourselves how to lead our lives. To make their rule over us acceptable, states must offer good reasons that we can endorse in light of our status as free and equals. Crucially, states must justify their rule to citizens of modern liberal societies, where a plurality of lifestyles and conceptions of the good life exist. States must offer justifications that do not invoke any particular conception of the good life. This is because doing so would signal a lack of respect toward those citizens who do not agree with this particular conception of the good.[30]

When states attempt to improve the quality of public discourse, they appear to violate the requirement of liberal neutrality because not all reasonable citizens will agree that it is valuable to do this. We can expect that there are at least some individuals whose conception of the good does not require access to a public discourse of particularly high quality. These individuals can complain about subsidies and coercive regulation to improve the quality of public discourse on the grounds that this one-sidedly benefits those whose life plans benefit from access to sophisticated information while not benefiting their own conceptions of the good.

This should not be taken to imply that *all* policies and institutions whose effect is to improve discourse quality are incompatible with liberal neutrality. For example, the provision of quality public schools foreseeably improves public discourse because it enables children to understand and appreciate debates about complex social issues. Similarly, protecting freedom of conscience and freedom of the press is conducive to discourse quality because it protects individuals from censorship and indoctrination. Social media regulations to curb the spread of disinformation also likely improve public discourse because they decrease our exposure to false beliefs. Public schools, basic liberties, and disinformation controls are supported by reasons that all of us can endorse in light of the shared interests that we hold in virtue of our status as free and equal citizens. For example, we have a shared interest in being free from manipulation and indoctrination and this interest can justify some interventions, such as controls on disinformation. I will say more about this in Sections 4 and 5. For now, I simply submit that *some* discourse-improving measures are compatible with the liberal constraint.

But this is not true for all improvements. Recall that we are assessing relatively ambitious proposals, such as promoting high-quality journalism through a system of subsidized vouchers that all citizens receive and that they can use to consume the content of outlets that meet demanding quality standards. Once basic liberties are protected and basic education is offered to all citizens, the question of how far discourse quality ought to be further enhanced becomes contentious. This is because measures to improve discourse quality are costly. This is true not only for a system of subsidized media vouchers, but also for many other interventions such as regulations of social media content. To illustrate, social media providers currently seek to maximize users' engagement and thereby generate large amounts of advertisement revenue. The foreseeable effect of many regulations of social media algorithms is that users will engage less compulsively with their devices and thus

shrink advertisement revenue. This in turn reduces the amount of taxes that states can in principle extract from social media providers.[31] Measures to improve discourse quality are also costly in the further sense that states must spend resources on implementing, monitoring, and enforcing these measures. This costliness makes discourse-improving measures contentious because reasonable citizens will disagree over how scarce resources ought to be spent. Those with relatively little interest in regularly digesting high-quality information can object to these measures because they seem to one-sidedly benefit individuals with preferences for high-quality information.[32]

This suggests that we face a dilemma. States can either comply with liberal neutrality or implement ambitious policies to improve discourse quality. The remainder of this article discusses two potential solutions to the dilemma – the value of democratic deliberation and the value of ethical deliberation. Discussing these two values is promising because they constitute the flipside of the two kinds of harms that I discussed above. Recall that the first kind of harm created by dumbed-down discourses is that they can impair the quality of democratic outcomes. The second harm is that they are likely to impair individuals' wellbeing because they increase the risk for individuals to commit mistakes in their private lives. Focusing on these two values is also promising because they are frequently invoked by politicians and activists to justify discourse-improving policies.[33] I now turn to discussing these two values, starting with democratic deliberation.

3. Democratic Deliberation

It is widely accepted that healthy democracies must enable individuals to deliberate and participate in democratic processes. The epistemic requirements of deliberative and participatory democracy are often thought to be quite demanding and therefore capable of justifying strong measures to improve the quality of public discourse.[34]

To understand why this might be the case, it is helpful to sketch a demanding ideal of democracy and ask what kind of public discourse might be needed to enable this ideal. Demanding conceptions of democracy insist that democracy consists not only of formal rights and procedures, such as the right to vote and competitive elections, but also of substantive opportunities for participation and deliberation.[35]

More specifically, this means that states must (a) guarantee competitive elections, (b) protect a range of civil liberties and basic rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly, (c) protect opportunities for participation in democratic procedures, and (d) protect opportunities for deliberation about social issues.[36]

We can understand this demanding ideal better by spelling out its implications for the epistemic environment that shapes individuals' participation and deliberation. Here, I identify two particularly important epistemic requirements that liberal democracies must meet. While it might be possible to identify further requirements, I focus on these two because I believe that they are the most demanding in terms of their consequences for the quality of public discourse.

First, liberal democracies must allow citizens to freely form and exchange views about important issues. Individuals must be able to contemplate and communicate their views independently, without fear of repression or censorship, and they must not be prevented from acquiring information that interests them. We can refer to this as the *free deliberation requirement* because it restricts the extent to which governments can interfere with

individuals' deliberative efforts. The most important implication of the *free deliberation requirement* is that states must refrain from indoctrination and censorship and that a free press must be allowed to exist. Moreover, this ideal places limits on how much control individuals can exercise over the flow of information in public discourse. For example, large concentrations in private ownership of media outlets can violate this requirement because they can have a censoring effect.[37]

Second, liberal democracies must offer individuals substantive opportunities to contemplate, deliberate, and discuss their views with others. This requirement insists that it is not enough that individuals are legally permitted to deliberate and participate in democratic processes. Individuals must also have genuine chances to make use of this opportunity.[38] To be able to deliberate, individuals need certain faculties for reasoning and access to basic information about social and political issues. Moreover, individuals require sufficient free time to participate and to engage in deliberation. We can refer to this as the *substantive opportunities requirement*.

One important implication of this requirement is that states must provide individuals with decent public education so that individuals can acquire reasoning faculties and knowledge of relevant information.[39] Another important implication is that states must protect individuals from threats to their access to free time. For example, states must make sure that no one's income and wealth are so low as to force them to work extremely long hours to make ends meet. Being forced to work too much deprives individuals of free time and thereby prevents them from being able to participate in democracy.[40] The *substantive opportunities requirement* thus entails that states must take steps to ensure that individuals have sufficient free time for active citizenship.

With this rough sketch of the demands of democracy in mind, we are now in a place to ask whether the value of democracy can justify measures whose goal it is to improve the quality of public discourse above and beyond the standard that is currently available in wealthy liberal democracies. To begin, it is important to observe that states that abide by the *free deliberation requirement* and the *substantive opportunities requirement* are likely to have a public discourse of much higher quality than states that do not abide by these requirements. It is also worth emphasizing that these two requirements are not fully met, even in the most progressive of liberal democracies. To illustrate how existing states fall short of these requirements, consider how ownership of private news media is highly concentrated in many liberal democracies.[41] This can limit the diversity of news reporting and grants media moguls an important agenda-setting and gatekeeper function.[42] Wealthy owners can exercise power over editors to shape news reporting in their interest. This generates a censoring effect that affects individuals' freedom to inform themselves and to contribute to public discourse. Another example of how liberal democracies fall short of the two epistemic requirements is that these countries have been unsuccessful at eliminating poverty and extremely low wages. This means that there is a sizeable group of disadvantaged individuals who must work very long hours and thus cannot participate in public discourse through deliberation and active citizenship.

The two epistemic requirements taken together thus spell out a relatively demanding ideal that is not fully met in any country. Therefore, we can expect that the public discourse of a state that fully met the two epistemic requirements would be significantly higher than the kinds of public discourse that currently exist in liberal democracies.

Yet there are reasons to think that the value of democracy cannot condemn several important flaws that characterize public discourses in liberal democracies and that are

likely to persist even under more ideal conditions where the *free deliberation requirement* and the *substantive opportunities requirement* are met. These flaws include pervasive sensationalism, a severe lack of accuracy in reporting on social issues, misleading and false content, and a worrying abundance of trivial social media content.

One reason why the ideal of democracy cannot condemn these flaws is that it can merely require *opportunities* for acquiring information of high quality and for participating in ongoing debates. Individuals have opportunities for consuming information of high quality when there are at least *some* media outlets that produce this information and offer it at affordable prices. Those who enjoy acting as active citizens can choose to selectively engage with this kind of information, while ignoring the abundance of dumbed-down content that exists alongside it. This means that we might not have to worry about phenomena such as pervasive sensationalism, so long as there are at least some alternative sources of information that individuals can choose to access if they wish.

One might object to this that the integrity of democratic institutions depends on citizens' vigilance vis-à-vis a range of threats, such as corruption, manipulation of elections, and undermining of democratic institutions. Citizens' vigilance, in turn, might depend on the extent to which media outlets help citizens understand the workings of democratic government and the various threats that can undermine it. We might think that even those who prefer not to be active citizens should be regularly exposed to high-quality information about social and political issues because this is necessary to help them appreciate threats to democracy. If this line of reasoning were correct, then it would provide us with a reason to improve public discourse that is rooted in the politically liberal value of democracy.

We can assess the merits of this idea by considering a slightly modified version of an analogy proposed by the public opinion scholar John Zaller.[43] Imagine an urban neighbourhood that must decide how to guarantee that its inhabitants are protected from the outbreak of fires. One option to guarantee the neighbourhood's safety is to send its inhabitants on extensive 'neighbourhood watch patrols', in order to spot potential fire hazards. Another option is to install fire alarms that sound only in the case of an outbreak of fire.

Zaller suggests that the integrity of democracies can be safeguarded by a 'fire alarm model' of news media, whereby news outlets run highly sensational campaigns when corruption scandals or other threats to democracy emerge. During times when no acute threats emerge, media outlets can report trivial and superficial information without thereby endangering democracy.[44] In other words, media outlets are not under an obligation to lead citizens on extensive 'fire watch patrols' that explain current political affairs in detail and on a continuous basis. To safeguard democracy, it is enough to alert citizens at times when threats emerge, while leaving them to attend to other matters during most of their time.

What lends additional support to this idea is that we can expect a variety of actors other than media outlets to produce information on threats to democracy and thus act as additional providers of 'fire alarms'. According to Zaller, 'Parties, businesses, unions, religious groups, ethnic groups, and civil rights groups are obvious examples'.[45] These groups often have a self-interested motive to monitor political affairs and to sound the alarm when they perceive their interests to be threatened. Given that modern societies are comprised of a large and diverse number of such groups, we can expect there to be providers of alarms across the political spectrum. The fact that these groups pursue their own

self-interested agendas need not worry us because we can expect each of these organizations to sound the alarm when their own interests are threatened. To some extent, we can rely on information that is produced by groups with a clear agenda. So long as we know their agenda, we can use this information as a proxy for the kinds of demands and proposals they make. Depending on whether we regard the agenda of each organization to reflect a democratic value that we care about, we can choose whether or not to take their alarms seriously. The upshot of this is that:

> The many citizens who, by the evidence, dislike politics should not be led by reporters on wide-ranging patrols of political terrain. Rather, they should be alerted to problems requiring attention and otherwise left to private concerns. Not only will many refuse to come along on general patrols; they may, in tuning out the news altogether, miss things they would find useful if the news presented them in distilled form … The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else.[46]

What is attractive about this conclusion is that it avoids placing excessive demands on citizens regarding how much they are expected to do to uphold democratic institutions. To demand of individuals that they spend significant amounts of time and energy on informing themselves and on participating in political affairs risks not only overburdening them but also unduly restricting their autonomy to pursue their own conceptions of the good.[47]

The 'fire alarm model' of news media in democratic societies receives additional support from recent empirical findings on individuals' capacity to form electoral preferences based on fragmented and seemingly trivial information.[48] According to some researchers, voters who observe superficial election campaigns that are characterized by soundbites and catchy slogans can use a range of heuristics to form electoral preferences that are surprisingly rational.[49]

The upshot of this is that the value of democracy cannot justify eliminating significant flaws of public discourses. To be sure, there is a perfectionist justification available that justifies eliminating these flaws and that invokes the value of democracy. A perfectionist justification posits that sophisticated democratic citizenship is an essential component of human flourishing and that states have a duty to enable individuals to realize this kind of flourishing. To enable all individuals to deliberate carefully and to participate in democracy, so the argument goes, states must provide a public discourse of high quality on which individuals can draw to inform their deliberation. However, arguments of this kind are not satisfactory because they do not offer a way out of the dumbed-down discourse dilemma. By invoking a perfectionist justification for improving discourse quality, states run afoul of the liberal neutrality constraint that forms the second horn of the dilemma.

4. Ethical Deliberation

Apart from democracy, there is another value that promises to solve the dilemma by identifying a politically neutral justification for improvements of public discourse. A public discourse of high quality might be necessary to enable individuals to develop a conception of the good life. We can refer to the process of developing a conception of the good life as *ethical deliberation*.

To develop a conception of the good, individuals must draw on information from public discourse. This means, for example, that individuals must consider newspaper articles, social media posts, or political speeches to decide whether they endorse a particular goal, value, or belief. The sum of our goals, values, and beliefs determines our conception of the good. Social justice requires that all members of a political community have adequate opportunities for ethical deliberation.[50]

One reason to worry about the role of sensational and superficial media content in the process of ethical deliberation has to do with its above-mentioned potential to crowd out highly informative content. We often lack time to search, filter, and compare various sources of information before forming a view on a given topic. This means that our beliefs are often informed by the types of content that win out in the competition for our awareness.[51] When sensational and superficial information crowds out information of higher quality, we are at risk of forming views that we might not endorse if we had opportunities to reflect on them more carefully and in light of more thorough information. Does this provide us with reasons to create public discourses of higher quality?

Before I begin to answer this question, an important clarification is in order. There is a difference between measures that increase individuals' opportunities for ethical deliberation and measures that increase the extent to which individuals make use of their capacity for ethical deliberation. Here, I am exclusively interested in measures that increase *opportunities* for ethical deliberation. This is because there are many situations where it is in our best interest to refrain from ethical deliberation. Every day, life presents us with an overwhelming number of issues that we can deliberate about, and it is impossible to deliberate about all these issues. We must choose to remain ignorant about those issues that are not important to us, to be able to reflect carefully on those that matter to us. What matters is thus not how much use individuals make of their capacity for ethical deliberation but that they have this capacity, so that they can use it when needed.

To understand the demands of ethical deliberation on the quality of public discourse, it is helpful to distinguish between two interpretations of the ideal of ethical deliberation. One interpretation holds that individuals enjoy adequate opportunities for ethical deliberation when they can deliberate autonomously, in the sense that they are free from several obstacles that can prevent them from assessing competing goals, values, and beliefs. An alternative interpretation holds that individuals enjoy adequate opportunities for ethical deliberation when they can deliberate authentically.[52] Authenticity in ethical deliberation requires more than autonomy. Apart from an absence of obstacles, it also demands that individuals can endorse their conception of the good after careful reflection under suitable circumstances.[53] I will explain each of these interpretations in turn and assess their implications for public discourse, starting with autonomous deliberation.

Autonomy is commonly understood as the ability to live a life of one's own choosing. To be autonomous, an individual must not only have the cognitive competence to form and pursue rational goals, she must also be free from arbitrary external interference that prevents her from pursuing these goals and she must be able to choose from a range of valuable options. The extent to which an individual enjoys personal autonomy thus depends (a) on her cognitive capacities, (b) on her freedom from arbitrary interference, and (c) on her access to valuable options.[54]

To claim that individuals should be able to develop life plans autonomously thus means that individuals must have substantive opportunities to contemplate about the good life, and that the process of contemplation must occur without undue interference and with

sufficient cognitive capacities. Individuals lack autonomy in ethical deliberation when they do not have enough resources to bring a range of valuable options into view and when they cannot think about these options carefully.[55]

Autonomous ethical deliberation is similar to democratic deliberation in that it requires freedom from manipulation and indoctrination, as well as access to education and substantive opportunities for contemplation about one's life plans. However, the range of 'topics' or 'subjects' covered by the demands of ethical deliberation is broader than the range covered by democratic deliberation. Being an active citizen and understanding political debates can form part of individuals' conception of the good, but it does not exhaust the range of subjects covered by ethical deliberation.

Modern liberal societies offer individuals a choice among a great plurality of lifestyles and beliefs. For example, the right to freedom of occupational choice allows individuals to choose among a plurality of professions. Another example of this is that individuals can choose among different religions and non-religious philosophies. Understanding and evaluating this abundance of options is difficult and requires access to a large amount of information. This provides us with an initial reason to think that the value of ethical deliberation places greater demands on individuals' epistemic circumstances than the value of democratic deliberation. It might thus justify improvements of the quality of public discourse above and beyond what is required by democratic deliberation. Access to information about political developments is not enough to enable individuals to develop a conception of the good. To reflect on the good life, individuals also require access to information about cultural institutions and trends, religious debate, conflicting social norms, and so on.

Before I discuss the implications of autonomous ethical deliberation for the quality of public discourse, it is important to observe that this interpretation of ethical deliberation is consistent with liberal neutrality. Autonomous ethical deliberation does not specify a goal regarding the extent to which individuals should develop their capacity for ethical deliberation. It allows individuals to bring their own preferences to bear on how much they want to refine their deliberative faculties. Some individuals assign greater value to spontaneity, gut instinct, and carefreeness than others, and as a result prefer not to engage in what they might regard as excessive ethical deliberation. These individuals are more tolerant of risk than others, in the sense that they accept that less ethical deliberation implies a greater risk of committing mistakes and consequently regretting some of their choices. Others regard it as important to acquire very advanced skills in ethical deliberation in order to take decisions as prudently as possible. The ideal of autonomous ethical deliberation requires that each of these groups must have rights and resources that facilitate ethical deliberation in line with their preferences. For example, those who prefer living more spontaneously can refrain from purchasing very elaborate training in ethical deliberation in order to spend their time and money on other valuable activities. Those who prefer deep deliberation, by contrast, can use large shares of their resources to purchase things such as education, information, and cultural experiences that help them get better at ethical deliberation. The ideal of autonomous ethical deliberation does not judge the lives of individuals who deliberate frequently and in a sophisticated fashion to be more valuable than the lives of individuals who develop their capacity for ethical deliberation to a lesser extent and who make less use of this capacity.

The flipside of this compatibility with liberal neutrality is a limitation regarding the extent to which autonomous ethical deliberation can justify improvements of public

discourse. To illustrate this limitation, consider the cases of sensationalism and gossip. Contemporary public discourses feature a wealth of reporting on gossip and an abundance of sensationalist messaging. Gossip and sensationalist news are consumed by a large number of individuals, and we might worry about the effect of this on individuals' ethical deliberation. Those who worry about gossip and sensationalism might point out that their prevalence can distract individuals from careful contemplation about the good life. These critics might argue that we should protect individuals from excessive gossip and sensationalism, so that they can contemplate about the good life undistractedly.

Yet we cannot justify policies that aim to replace gossip and sensationalism with information of higher quality with appeal to the value of autonomy. The value of autonomy would condemn such policies because they would interfere with individuals' freely chosen preferences. Recall that autonomy in ethical deliberation requires sufficient cognitive capacities, freedom from arbitrary interference, and valuable options. States can appeal to this value to justify public education systems, substantive rights and liberties, and social welfare provisions. However, the ideal of autonomous ethical deliberation does not provide a vantage point from which to judge preferences for gossip and sensationalism to be problematic. It insists that we accept individuals' preferences as they are given that they have been autonomously developed. If a large number of individuals have preferences for superficial news reporting and if these preferences have been autonomously developed, then it would be disrespectful to judge these preferences as deficient. The upshot of this is that the value of autonomous ethical deliberation does not offer a way out of the dilemma.

Let us now consider a more demanding interpretation of the ideal of ethical deliberation that invokes the idea of authenticity. One way to understand what it can mean to form authentic life plans is that individuals must recognize their life plans as valuable after having assessed them adequately under suitable circumstances.[56]

Forming authentic life plans involves two steps. First, individuals must be able to discover a broad range of reasonable goals, values, and beliefs. Second, individuals must assess reasons that speak in favour or against each of these goals, values, and beliefs to identify those that are worthy of their adherence. Both steps are necessary. We can imagine individuals who are regularly exposed to a plurality of reasonable lifestyles but lack the ability to identify reasons that help them choose a lifestyle that is suitable for them. Vice versa, we can imagine individuals who have sophisticated mental faculties to assess countervailing reasons but lack exposure to examples of reasonable lifestyles, so that they cannot apply their reasoning capacity.

It is important to observe that authenticity is a local property that can pertain differently to different goals, values, and beliefs. Individuals can have a mix of goals, values, and beliefs, some of which are authentic, and some of which are inauthentic. Consider the example of a person who holds an inauthentic belief in a conspiracy theory. This inauthentic belief can exist alongside authentic life goals, such as a desire to excel at gardening and to care for one's parents. Adhering to an inauthentic belief thus does not compromise the authenticity of someone's entire life. Rather, it makes someone's life somewhat less authentic than it would be if the belief were authentic.

There is some disagreement among philosophers regarding the exact properties that a belief must have to be regarded as authentic. One account holds that a belief is authentic when the person who holds it endorses it reflectively. Roughly, the idea is that individuals adopt a detached perspective and ask themselves whether they can endorse a belief, even

after having assessed it critically. Some refer to this as a 'second-order' endorsement of a 'first-order' belief.[57]

One worry about this account is that it does not explain why exactly a detached perspective improves authenticity. The worry is that it is not clear how a second-order perspective is more authentic than a first-order perspective, if the second-order perspective is not itself supported by another layer of reflection, that we might refer to as a 'third-order perspective'. Within the logic of this account, worries about the authenticity of a third-order perspective would have to be answered by a fourth-order perspective, and so on, thereby creating the problem of an infinite regress.[58]

Various solutions to this problem have been offered and I lack the space to discuss them in any detail.[59] I confine myself to pointing at one plausible solution. To avoid the problem of an infinite regress, we can supplement the idea of reflective endorsement with a requirement regarding the kinds of mental faculties that must be involved in the process of reflective endorsement. To be an effective source of authenticity, reflective endorsement must be supported by a degree of knowledge of relevant facts and by a degree of rationality to facilitate accurate reasoning. I will say more about these two mental faculties in a moment. For now, it is enough to register that plausible accounts of authenticity exist.

At this point it is worth pausing for a moment to ask why exactly authenticity is desirable. Why should we prefer a world inhabited by authentic individuals over a world inhabited by inauthentic individuals? Answers to this question can point to several beneficial effects of authenticity.

One reason why authentic preferences are valuable to those who hold them is that they improve their lives. This is apparent from cases where individuals realize that they must reject a particular life goal after having assessed it carefully. Abandoning life goals can be associated with an experience of regret, which suggests that individuals prefer to live in accordance with life goals that they can endorse. Experiencing regret over important life goals can be a devastating experience and can severely diminish the happiness of affected individuals. However, the value of living authentically goes beyond its effects on individuals' happiness. To illustrate this, consider the following two cases.

> *Conspiracy I:* Bernd believes in a conspiracy theory and dedicates significant time and effort to the aims of the conspiracy. Ten years before he dies, he realizes that his belief in the theory is mistaken. As a result, he experiences deep regret over the many years of his life that were lost in the pursuit of the conspiracy's goals.
>
> *Conspiracy II:* Bernd believes in a conspiracy theory and dedicates significant time and effort to the aims of the conspiracy. He never discovers that his belief is mistaken and dies believing firmly in the conspiracy.

Plausibly, Bernd's life in *Conspiracy II* is less successful than in *Conspiracy I*. The loss of happiness that Bernd experiences in *Conspiracy I* is outweighed by the benefit of several years during which Bernd can live with greater authenticity. We can infer from this that, other things equal, authenticity improves individuals' lives. This is true even in cases where authenticity-gains result in happiness-losses.

With these clarifications in mind, we can now turn to the question of how authenticity is affected by different kinds of opportunities for ethical deliberation. In particular, we can ask how public discourses of poor quality and of high quality respectively affect

individuals' authenticity. My claim is that individuals are more likely to develop authentic life goals when public discourses are of high quality than when they are of low quality.

To some extent, this has to do with the effects of public discourse on two faculties – knowledge and rationality – that are essential to authenticity. To understand why this is the case, let me briefly explain both faculties and their connection to authenticity, starting with knowledge.

We can understand knowledge as justified true belief. A person has knowledge of a subject matter when their beliefs on this matter correspond to what is the case. Knowledge enables authenticity in two ways. First, it helps individuals appreciate a variety of goals, values, and beliefs, among which they can choose. The more knowledge a person has, the more options they are able to perceive and assess. In other words, knowledge *broadens* the menu of choice that individuals can perceive and thus makes it more likely that individuals discover those options that they have most reason to endorse. Second, knowledge helps individuals understand a larger number of considerations that count in favour of a particular option. Knowledge thus *deepens* ethical deliberation, in the sense that it helps assess each belief in greater detail. The deeper the process of ethical deliberation, the more likely it is that its outcome can be endorsed by individuals, so that the outcome is authentic.

Rationality is not the same as knowledge. We can define rationality as the ability to follow rules of logic. Understood this way, rationality mainly involves avoiding various fallacies of reasoning. For example, rational persons do not contradict themselves and refrain from using anecdotal evidence to make judgements about a broader set of cases. Rationality increases individuals' chances of developing authentic life goals because it helps them use knowledge in the right way to arrive at valid conclusions regarding the desirability of various options. To illustrate, a rational person would notice contradictions among different beliefs that she endorses and would revise her beliefs to make them consistent.

Appreciating the importance of knowledge and rationality for authenticity helps us understand why public discourses of poor quality reduce individuals' opportunities for authenticity. To gain knowledge and rationality, individuals must be exposed to true information and to rational reasoning. One of the main ways in which individuals get exposed to information and reasoning is through public discourse. For example, newspaper articles, social media posts, and TV programmes often aim to convey information and to argue in favour of certain positions. Dumbed-down discourses expose individuals to a large number of falsehoods and to flawed reasoning, thereby limiting their opportunities to gain knowledge and practice rational thought.

It bears emphasizing that my claims about the prevalence of authentic life goals under public discourses of high quality are probabilistic, not deterministic. My claim is not that high-quality discourses eliminate inauthentic life goals but that on average, individuals will have a larger number of authentic life goals under high-quality discourses than under low-quality discourses. Moreover, it is important to recall that the goal of high-quality discourses is not to maximize authenticity. Rather, the goal is to eliminate very common threats to authenticity, so that individuals can be confident that their lives are not compromised by a large number of inauthentic goals that can be avoided at relatively small cost.

To summarize, improvements of public discourse are essential to boost the authenticity of individuals' life plans. For example, public broadcasting agencies can expose individuals to a steady stream of well-researched information in order to provide them with

additional knowledge and rationality, which in turn enhance authenticity. The value of authentic ethical deliberation is thus appealing because it condemns dumbed-down discourses.

Yet this understanding of ethical deliberation also fails to resolve the dilemma because the value of authenticity cannot be endorsed by all reasonable individuals. Recall that we can expect there to be differences among individuals regarding their preferences for highly sophisticated deliberation. Some individuals place great value on prudent planning and careful assessment of competing life plans, while others prefer to rely mainly on intuition and gut feeling. Those who prefer to rely on intuition and gut feeling can complain about subsidies for high-quality discourses because these one-sidedly advance the interests of those with preferences for prudent planning. Importantly, this inequality is not merely an unforeseen side product of subsidies for high-quality discourses. Rather, it is the intention of these subsidies to facilitate sophisticated deliberation. Measures to improve the quality of public discourse are thus incompatible with the value of liberal neutrality.

5. Conclusion

Complaints about dumbed-down discourses have a long tradition, and recent years have seen an increase in the ferocity of these complaints. Some politicians and activists are pushing for policies that aim to improve the quality of public discourses. For example, some have suggested instituting a system of media vouchers that individuals can direct to a selected group of news providers that meet an independently monitored quality threshold.[60] Other measures to improve the quality of public discourse include subsidies for public broadcasting agencies, and various regulations to improve the quality of content on social media.

This article has evaluated complaints that have been levelled against dumbed-down discourses and arrives at a sobering conclusion. States that aim to abide by a liberal constraint must tolerate many of the pernicious effects of pervasive sensationalism, gossip, consumerism, misleading content, and superficial content. This is because two promising avenues for justifying improvements of public discourse are unsuccessful.

The first of these avenues appeals to the value of democracy. A healthy democracy, so the argument goes, requires competent citizens who can actively participate in deliberation about social issues. I have argued that this argument is less forceful than it is often assumed to be. Drawing on the 'fire alarm model' of news reporting, I show that democracy can flourish even when the average quality of public discourse is low.

Subsequently, I explored another promising avenue to justify discourse-improving policies. Individuals have a fundamental interest in being able to develop a conception of the good life and protecting this interest requires adequate epistemic conditions. I distinguished between two interpretations of the interest in forming a conception of the good. One interpretation is that the process of forming a conception of the good must be autonomous. Another interpretation holds that individuals' conceptions of the good must be authentic. The first of these interpretations is appealing because it is compatible with liberal neutrality, but it cannot justify discourse-improving policies. The second interpretation can justify these policies, but it is not compatible with liberal neutrality.

The upshot of this is that we lack a persuasive justification for policies to improve public discourse. This is not to say that no such justification can exist. It is conceivable, for

example, that individuals placed behind a veil of ignorance would decide to insure against the risk of living in a society where the quality of average discourse is low. If this were true, then it might provide a solution to the dumbed-down discourse dilemma. Further research is thus called for to explore this and other avenues to determine whether a solution to the dilemma exists.

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NOTES

1 Aïmeur *et al.*, "Fake News"; Brettschneider, *When the State Speaks*; European Parliament, *Impact*; Howard, "Dangerous Speech."
2 Hannon, "Public Discourse"; Lepoutre, *Democratic Speech*; Mutz and Young, "Communication"; Renwick *et al.*, *Future*.
3 Arbaoui *et al.*, "Sensationalism"; Bennett, *News*; Glasser, *Idea*; Patterson, *How America Lost Its Mind*; Pew Research Center, *Public*.
4 Doctorow, *Enshittification*; Khawar and Boukes, "Analyzing."
5 Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, *News Gap*; Hamilton, *All the News*; Newman *et al.*, *Reuters Institute*; Johansson, "Tabloid Journalism."
6 Brogi and Sjøvaag, *Good Practices*; Chandler, *Free and Equal*, 161; Rolnik *et al.*, *Protecting*, 34–38.
7 Media Reform Coalition, *Media Manifesto 2024*.
8 Pasquale, *Black Box Society*; Sun, *Technology*.
9 Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*; Sunstein, "Framework."
10 Bennett and Norris, "Virtuous Circle"; Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral*.
11 Hanitzsch *et al.*, "Mapping"; Maurer, "Quality"; McQuail, "Media Performance"; Müller, *Comparing*.
12 Prochazka and Schweiger, "How to Measure"; Urban and Schweiger, "News Quality"; Van Der Wurff and Schoenbach, "Civic and Citizen Demands."
13 Bachmann *et al.*, "Defining"; Tannenbaum and Lynch, "Sensationalism."
14 Beattie and Milojevich, "Test"; Esser and Umbricht, "Evolution"; Wessler and Rinke, "Deliberative Performance."
15 Bächtiger *et al.*, "Discourse Quality Index"; Steiner *et al.*, *Deliberative Politics*, chap. 3; Stromer-Galley, "Measuring."
16 Bennett, *News*; Johansson, "Tabloid Journalism"; Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*; Sparks and Tulloch, *Tabloid Tales*; Stephens, *Beyond News*.
17 Brennan, "Right"; Chan and Clayton, "Voting Age"; Rapeli, "Sophistication."
18 Marciel, "On Citizens' Right to Information," 367.
19 Balaj *et al.*, "Effects"; Cutler and Lleras-Muney, *Education and Health*; Liu *et al.*, "Higher Education."
20 Mutz, *Political Persuasion*; Pennycook and Rand, "Lazy, Not Biased"; Smith and Collins, "Dual-Process Models"; Zaller, *Nature*, chap. 4.
21 Patterson, *How America Lost Its Mind*.
22 Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here?*, 128.
23 Hart *et al.*, "Feeling Validated."
24 Evans, *Bias in Human Reasoning*; Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias."

25 Hamermesh, *Spending Time*.
26 I don't claim that the vicious spiral and market failures are the only causes of widespread superficial information. I focus on these because they are particularly important for my normative analysis. For an additional explanation that emphasizes the importance of organizational pressures, see Skovsgaard, "Tabloid Mind?"
27 McManus, "Serving."
28 Habermas, *Europe*, 136.
29 Chandler, *Free and Equal*, 162; Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*; Lunt and Livingstone, *Media Regulation*; Sunstein, "Framework."
30 I lack the space to defend this idea in any detail. For a detailed defence of the liberal constraint, see Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection*.
31 States currently fail to adequately tax large social media companies. But the revenue that these companies create is in principle a valuable source of tax income that can be used by states to discharge duties of justice.
32 One might worry that preferences for low-quality information are often adaptive preferences that don't carry much normative weight because they have been formed and distorted by deeply unjust circumstances. For example, those who grow up in poverty might sometimes have insufficient opportunities to develop intellectual curiosity and preferences for information of high quality. While this might sometimes be the case, it is also important to appreciate that the intellectual tradition and interest in education of members of disadvantaged groups have often been belittled and understated. For more detail on this, see Rose, *Intellectual Life*; James, "Literature."
33 Ferejohn, "Deliberation."
34 Strömbäck, "In Search."
35 Dahl, *Preface*; Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy*, chap. 3; Steenbergen *et al.*, "Measuring."
36 Cohen, "Deliberation."
37 Grossman *et al.*, "How the Ultrarich."
38 Marciel, "On Citizens' Right to Information"; Dahl and Shapiro, *On Democracy*, 37.
39 Schudson, *Why Journalism Still Matters*.
40 Rose, *Free Time*, chap. 4.
41 Noam, *Who Owns the World's Media?*
42 Hendrickx and Van Remoortere, "Exploring."
43 Zaller, "New Standard."
44 Zaller's analogy is helpful to illustrate why some subsidies for high-quality information might not be necessary to protect the value of democracy. My reference to this analogy should not be taken to imply that my argument rests on some of the more controversial assumptions that underpin Zaller's work on this topic, such as those on citizens' capacity and willingness to process complex information.
45 Zaller, "New Standard," 119.
46 Ibid., 121.
47 Graber, "Rocky Road"; Lupia and McCubbins, *Democratic Dilemma*.
48 Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; Lucas *et al.*, "Are Politicians Democratic Realists?"; Lucas *et al.*, "Politicians' Theories."
49 Popkin, *Reasoning Voter*.
50 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 34; Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 102.
51 Davis and McLeod, "Why Humans Value Sensational News"; Zaller, *Nature*, 76–96.
52 Several philosophers have drawn similar distinctions. See, for example, Colburn, *Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*, 315; Haworth, *Autonomy*; Mackenzie, "Three Dimensions"; Prunkl, "Human Autonomy."
53 Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, 212.
54 Dworkin, *Theory and Practice of Autonomy*; Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, chap. 4.
55 Blake, *Justice and Foreign Policy*, 21; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 160; Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 81.
56 Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, 212.
57 Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will."
58 Berofsky, *Liberation from Self*.
59 Ekstrom, "Coherence Theory"; Watson, "Free Action."
60 Chandler, *Free and Equal*, 161; Brogi and Sjøvaag, *Good Practices*, 47; Rolnik *et al.*, *Protecting Journalism*, 34–38.

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