American Democracy In The Book #republic By Cass R. Sunstein

In America, many people receive their news from non-traditional sources like social media. With possible Russian influence on elections and polarized arguments discussed constantly, is government regulation on social media the correct answer? In the book #Republic, Cass R. Sunstein, a professor at Harvard Law School, illustrates the needed supervision on media. On the other hand, although his proposals do not harm democracy, they barely contribute to the American government.

By limiting citizens' choices, the government is taking away their freedom. In the book, the author suggests that "sometimes choices reflect and can in fact produce a lack of freedom" (Sunstein 177). By citizens choosing preferences in social media, he claims that they enter an echo chamber: an environment where people hear and expose themselves to a certain set of views. By only listening to their own views, Americans speed up polarization or extremism. Trying to solve the democratic deficit, Sunstein proposes that social media should force its users to listen to diverse viewpoints. However, this idea completely contradicts the principles of freedom. democracy is founded on people choosing who or what they believe in. In American democracy, it is important to have freedom because democracy needs the right to choose. [rebuttle] credit

In addition to it taking away its freedom, the proposal of limiting choices is impractical. Psychologically, people do not like feeling dislocated with their viewpoints so why would they want to be bombarded with opposite views? For instance, if someone who does not support vaccinations was given massive amounts of articles on why their opinion is incorrect, they would just ignore the texts and listen to articles that confirm their own argument. This is similar to the creation of echo chambers where people only listen to their own arguments. Throughout his proposals, Sunstein tries to make American citizens think differently even if it is impossible.

The government should not regulate social media because it will decrease the amount of social media users while not highly affecting those who stay. By limiting choices and exposing diverse ideas as Sunstein suggests, society spawns more unresponsiveness. For instance, when being bombarded with an opposing view, citizens will uninstall or stop using their social media applications. By having a decreasing amount of users, social media will lose money. Why would any business lose money to help slightly slow down polarization? By even strengthening echo chambers and supplying digital citizens with topics they like, social media apps like Facebook profit. The author even addresses the issue with his own idea when he claims, "Facebook might not think that [a social media system with opposing viewpoints] is the best business model, but perhaps someone will give something like this a try". Even with "experimentation [as] the watchword here," such a change would cost too much for a social media company (Sunstein 233). In addition to these businesses, average Americans using social media would never agree to the proposal and even if people had "the right to opt out," almost all social media users would not use the feature. In his book, Sunstein illustrates that people's brains are malleable and can be changed depending on what news sources they observe. However, this is not the case. For example, those who read or watch more Democratic-leaning articles do not instantly become democrat. In reality, through experience, culture, and many other factors, people

decide which news source supports most of their views, entrapping them in an echo chamber. News sources do not choose people, people choose news sources. After being unknowingly suffocated by these chosen news sources, citizens become more polarized. With extremism on the rise and a wide variety of opinions, governments struggle to help the majority rule without making certain parties revolt. Therefore, stagnation in policy development or gridlock occurs. To reduce polarization, Sunstein suggests the fairness doctrine.

While it opposes group polarization, the fairness doctrine would be difficult to implement into television, news, and other forms of media. According to Sunstein, the doctrine required “radio and television broadcasters to devote time to public issues and allow an opportunity for opposing viewers to speak” (84). For instance, if a news channel aired a debate about abortion, it would show those against and for the choice of abortion. By illustrating both opposing viewpoints on television for audience members to listen to, media benefits democracy. Because of the exact reasons echo chambers were spawned, audience members will just exit the channel and either switch to a different one with similar ideologies or simply turn the phone, television, or computer off. Even with its correct democratic intention, the doctrine will have challenges being put into media because of its ineffectiveness on the American citizens. In the same way as the fairness doctrine, rules from the government on communication outlets will create multiple challenges.

Similarly, the types of government regulation on social media suggested by Sunstein would be ineffective and discriminatory. In the book, Sunstein lists three possibilities of government regulation: completely neutral, depending on the content but without discrimination, or viewpoint discrimination (207-8). While neutral regulation seems fair, it could easily become biased because of corruption or concealed lobbying from wealthy Americans. The “neutral” regulations might actually be partial. Also, the non-discriminatory and content-based rules from the government would be useless in certain cases or extremely influential to American democracy. For social media companies whose target audience is children, they usually ban explicit language already without the supervision of the government. In addition, the author suggests that the government would make broadcasters “cover public issues and allow speech by those with opposing views” (Sunstein 207). As stated earlier, citizens could switch the channel to one without the regulations. These rules aren’t necessary and would be a waste of the government’s time. Like the “neutral” regulations, viewpoint discrimination is flawed because it could be corrupted by the wealthy. In the same way as the rules that depend on content, it would be unnecessary because most news and social media companies already ban discriminatory language. The possibilities listed by Sunstein could make society less fair especially on social media while wasting the government’s time that could be spent on more crucial issues. Through government regulation, digital users lose some of their freedom of speech. Instead of government regulation, Sunstein also suggests voluntary self-regulation.

The self-regulation would be impossible to actually occur. According to Sunstein, individual citizens must listen to opposing viewpoints by themselves (223-5). If Americans live in an idealistic society where everyone is perfect and follows ethical laws, this proposal would be extremely beneficial to democracy. However, this is not the case. If Americans could listen to everyone’s views, they would. After engaging themselves in echo chambers, people would not listen to a simple suggestion by someone asking for them to listen to others’ opinions. In another sense, if the American government truly wanted to make this work, they would somehow propose or recommend this so it would not be completely self-regulated. Even Sunstein highlights the impossibility of his proposal by noting how “it might be pie in the sky”

(225). While it is better if Americans are not forced to listen to the opposing viewpoints, the government and supporters of the idea like Sunstein would not persuade the majority of American social media users to self-regulate themselves.

Deliberative democracies on social media would be simply impractical. This type of democracy requires a fair political discussion and debate of diverse views for all sides of an issue (Sunstein 202-6). According to Sunstein, deliberative democracy is the type of government America needs. While it is true that people need to debate, polarized groups, ignore widespread issues and will dismiss any sign of deliberation. If more deliberation occurs on social media, then a majority of the US will disregard the discussions and unfortunately, not listen to others' arguments. In addition to its impracticality, a deliberative democracy would decrease the number of voters voting in elections.

American democracy should not be a deliberative democracy because deliberation negatively impacts democracy. Sunstein suggests that social media and the entire American society should participate in democratic deliberation). While those in deliberative democracy are exposed to opposing views, this democracy creates conflict between parties. According to Diana Mutz, political communication researcher and author of the book, Hearing the Other Side:

Hearing the other side is also important for its indirect contributions to political tolerance. The capacity to see that there is more than one side to an issue, that political conflict is, in fact, a legitimate controversy with rationales on both sides, translates to greater willingness to extend civil liberties to even those groups whose political views one dislikes a great deal.

Essentially, hearing the other side or deliberative democracy decreases the number of voters on Election day. Through her extensive and empirical research, her point of view agrees with Sunstein's proposals. However, why does less polarization matter if fewer people are voting? According to Mutz, those who participate in deliberative democracy become less certain about their opinions and simply decide not to vote. In Sunstein's book, he is almost in an echo chamber within his own opinions of deliberative democracy and barely acknowledges Mutz's work. Since those with moderate views would decide not to vote, only polarized citizens would vote in elections. Even with deliberative democracy, there will always be polarization in the US. In reality, deliberative democracy provides Americans with opposing viewpoints but with it, there is a significant number of voters that do not appear on Election Day.

The public forum doctrine should be integrated into social media. According to Sunstein, the doctrine "creates a right of speakers' access, both to places and people" (Sunstein 35). Fundamentally, in public spaces, people are allowed to say whatever they choose to say unless it is hate speech. With the growth of social media, people rather use their phones or mobile devices instead of walking to public parks and streets. On social media, unlike public places, there is no place for digital users to actively express their opinion in arguments with others since everyone is in their own echo chamber. However, echo chambers also exist outside of social media. If someone who supported women's choices to have abortions passed by an anti-abortion protest near the public park during his or her drive to work, they would not stop to hear their opposing views because psychologically, they would rather listen to those who supported them and not be confronted with opposing views in real life. Through phone screens, most people are not scared to say their full opinions because they would not get physically harmed and would be supported by family or friends with similar views. Essentially, while echo chambers exist in and out of social media, digital users feel safer on social media to state their

opinions because of their echo chambers that encase them with protection from disagreement and physical attacks. To integrate public forums with social media, Sunstein proposes many ideas that would address the opinions of a diverse set of voices.

For instance, deliberative domains are websites that host open discussions for political issues. While the discussions won't hurt democracy or the public, they won't be completely effective because those who need to listen to opposing viewpoints will simply ignore the website. Despite the ineffectiveness, the domains will allow experts to argue and hopefully bring more awareness to the need of the website to others. By educating their peers, friends, and family about it, they can slowly influence others to exit their echo chambers and participate or at least listen to those in the domain. However, when multiple deliberative websites open, people will choose to go to ones that agree with their opinion (Sunstein 217). Similarly, people who have more conservative views tend to prefer new channels like FOX news that has a mostly right-wing audience and cast. If a user finds an area where their opinion is more respected and common, they will gravitate towards it. After years of the domain, multiple websites will appear and decrease the deliberation. To avoid this, people must remain respectful and civil. According to Cass R. Sunstein, digital citizens must listen, agree with some of the arguments, and learn from others before disagreeing in the deliberative domain. While civility might not be completely feasible, respectfulness will provide the website with benefits to democracy and the overall American society.

In addition to deliberative domains, Sunstein suggests must carry policies or "access rights"(226). Like some of his other solutions, these policies try to force viewers to watch certain content because of consumer sovereignty or when the content is decided by what the users desire. As Sunstein proposes, there should be emergency broadcasting services across all channels to save lives. Compared to the other must-carry policies, this is the most logical and acceptable one. However, force-feeding educational or political content would be useless because citizens can turn off their televisions by pressing a button. By telling television channels what to air, the government would not make echo chambers disappear. In addition, these policies change the diverse media landscape because they limit the choices of producers and directors. Like serendipity buttons, although it tries to supports democracy, some of the features would be ineffective.

Similarly, serendipity buttons, digital buttons built into sites like Facebook for users to look at alternative views, would not harm democracy, but it also would not benefit it. Throughout his proposals like the button and domain, Sunstein suggests the need for American digital citizens to listen to others' opposing viewpoints. While the reasoning for the serendipity button is completely logical, the execution is flawed because of the majority of people who live in a psychologically inescapable cocoon of harmonizing arguments. Instead of pressing the button, most people would ignore it and feed themselves their own views over and over again. For the few people who click on the button, they will possibly analyze their views and make a very minor change in a democracy. However, for American democracy to be improved, there needs to be more than a button.

Likewise, disclosure policies for social media and the other producers of communication suggested by Sunstein are difficult to put into place. According to Sunstein, "disclosure policies suggest a promising approach, at least if it is possible to specify what is being disclosed" (219). For readers to sense bias, news sources should notify readers with what companies they are sponsored by at the top of the article of post. For instance, if an article is sponsored by

Facebook and is about the company, then the text will be Facebook-leaning and distorted. Despite the potential laws regarding disclosure enacted by the US, since most private companies would not approve these laws because it would make them lose profit, they would protest. While the solution benefits democracy, companies would most likely disagree with it and ultimately, try to abolish the law. On another hand, these disclosures could also allow users to find recurring partial or misleading information from certain authors or sources to avoid. In Facebook's hearing before the House Financial Services Committee where Facebook announced that those in politics could lie in their ads, the CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, claimed "In most cases, in a democracy, [he] believe[s] that people should be able to see for themselves what politicians that they may or may not vote for are saying and judge their character for themselves." Fundamentally, with disclosures, digital citizens decide who or what websites to trust for reliable information. Although it might be difficult to enact them, for a better democracy, the government should provide news sources with disclosures for their readers.

Furthermore, all the solutions presented by Cass R. Sunstein would slightly benefit democracy but would not create a major impact. However, limiting free speech and choices of digital users would not enrich the democratic conversation, it would cross the boundaries of individuals' freedoms. For the one in a million Americans who click on the link for deliberative domains, he or she will consider listening to others' opposing opinions. The few people will create a minor difference in the American democracy that will not fix the major deficits. With social media or not, Americans will have echo chambers or cascade effects, the impacts of when "many social groups, both large and small, seem to move both rapidly and dramatically in the direction of one or another set of beliefs or actions" (Sunstein). Rather than fixing social media, the culture that came with social media and consists of polarization, echo chambers, and cyber cascades should be fixed. Psychologically, it is extremely difficult for people, especially adults, to change. So, to benefit American democracy, all professors, teachers, parents, guardians, and/or leaders must educate the next generation on the necessity of listening to others' viewpoints and discussions. The author of #Republic and professor from Harvard Law School, Cass R. Sunstein, has logical reasoning for his proposals but some of them lack proper execution that will truly benefit democracy from echo chambers, cyber cascades, and his other issues. According to Clara Shih, the CEO of Hearsay Social, "Social media isn't a one-way broadcast; it's a multiway opportunity for dialogue." But with its undemocratic issues, is it truly a "multiway opportunity for dialogue" or just people being fed their own ideas?