



Beyond the Paradox of Trust and Digital Platforms: Populism and the Reshaping of Internet Regulations

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INTRODUCTION: MISINFORMATION, ‘FAKE NEWS’ AND THE LIMITS OF SUPPLY-SIDE SOLUTIONS

The most common approach to thinking about the relationship between digital platforms and the crisis of trust has been to focus upon the dissemination of what is variously referred to as disinformation, misinformation and ‘fake news’. The problems have been understood primarily as information problems, and the focus has been upon what can be referred to as the *supply side*, or the wilful dissemination of misinformation and disinformation through digital platforms. The European Commission High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation has identified the problem in such terms:

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Problems of disinformation are deeply intertwined with the development of digital media. They are driven by actors — state or non-state political actors, for-profit actors, media, citizens, individually or in groups — and by manipulative uses of communication infrastructures that have been harnessed to produce, circulate and amplify disinformation on a larger scale than previously, often in new ways that are still poorly mapped and understood (European Commission, 2018, p. 5).

Lazer et al. (2018), in their highly influential account of ‘fake news’ defined it as:

Fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media’s editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people). (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094)

The initial surge in attention given to disinformation and ‘fake news’ in the late 2010s was driven by the rise of populist political movements, and threshold political events such as the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the ‘Brexit’ referendum in the U.K. in the same year (Benkler et al., 2018; Kellner, 2017; Livingston & Bennett, 2020). The COVID-19 global pandemic has generated a new set of concerns about public health disinformation and conspiracy theories, and their adverse impact upon measures to contain and ultimately eradicate the virus. The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, described this as ‘an infodemic of misinformation’, and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), observed that ‘misinformation ... spreads faster and more easily than this virus’ (United Nations Department of Global Communication, 2020). In defining an infodemic, the WHO observed:

Infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people. (United Nations Department of Global Communication, 2020)

Identification of trust problems as information problems is typically accompanied by measures to promote ‘good’ information and suppress or eliminate ‘bad’ information. The EC High-Level Group, for instance, promoted five measures to address online disinformation:

1. Enhancing the transparency of online news, in terms of data and information about its sources, as well as fact-checking initiatives;
2. Promoting media and information literacy to counter disinformation and helping users navigate the digital media environment;
3. Develop tools for empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation and fostering a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies;
4. Safeguarding the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem; and
5. Promoting continued research on the impact of disinformation in Europe to evaluate the measures taken by different actors and constantly adjust the necessary responses (European Commission, 2018, pp. 6–7).

The focus is upon fact-checking, ‘myth-busting’ (United Nations Department of Global Communication, 2020), media and information literacy, further research, and strengthening the credibility of mainstream news media as the most reliable sources of public information. These are recognisable responses to misinformation and disinformation that approach the problem from *a supply-side perspective*, and envisage the intervention of experts, including academics and news media professionals, as the principal antidote to purveyors of such misinformation who prey upon an otherwise vulnerable public.

As the focus on restricting, suppressing and ultimately eliminating bad information (misinformation, disinformation, ‘fake news’) is so strongly embedded as a common-sense response, questioning it sounds churlish, and puts one at risk of being a purveyor of conspiracy theories. It is certainly an approach that finds strong support with the leading digital platform companies themselves, as it is consistent with a new framing of companies such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, not as the digital upstarts that ‘move fast and break things’ (Taplin, 2017), but as responsible stewards of the online public sphere, able to exercise corporate social responsibility in a new age of stakeholder capitalism (Business

Roundtable, 2019). It is consistent with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's call for 'new rules for the Internet', with 'a more active role for governments and regulators' (Zuckerberg, 2019). It also aligns with the post-COVID vision of national governments and global tech companies as co-regulators of public life, articulated by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in terms of 'the challenges we face demand[ing] an unprecedented alliance between business and government' (Nadella, 2020), and the power of digital platform companies being offered on the basis of their problem-solving capabilities for policy-makers.

One point of contention is the implicit framing of online publics as vulnerable. The question of whether audiences are powerful or powerless in the face of media messages has a long history in communication, media and cultural studies, with what Sonia Livingstone describes as 'an intellectual history of academic oscillation ... regarding their supposed power—to construct shared meanings (as debated by semiotic and reception approaches to media culture), to mitigate or moderate media influences (as debated by media effects research), or to complete or resist the circuit of culture (as debated by cultural studies and political economy theories)' (Livingstone, 2015, p. 439). The debates in the 1970s and 1980s about cultivation theories with regards to violence on television (Gerbner, 1998), and the critiques from the perspective of active audience theories (Gauntlett, 1998), acquired new life with debates about social media and 'participatory culture' (Carpentier & Jenkins, 2013). They are resurfacing around online misinformation and its societal impacts, particularly around whether algorithmic sorting has produced 'filter bubbles'. Deuze and McQuail astutely observe that it is not surprising that 'old' concerns associated with twentieth century mass communications media, such as media manipulation, media literacy, and media effects, are now very much on the policy and academic agenda with regards to digital platforms. With the platformisation of the Internet, social media platforms simultaneously 'massify' audiences as data subjects while largely relinquishing the information gatekeeper function associated with mass media institutions, meaning that 'with a more open media culture, in the context of individualisation and globalisation, there are persistent and insoluble problems of trust and reliability' (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p. 580).

MEDIA DISTRUST AND THE CRITIQUE OF EXPERTISE

It has been widely observed that the current era is one of amplified distrust of the media, and of political and social institutions more generally (Botsman, 2017; Edelman, 2020; Flew, 2019, 2021b; McSweeney's, 2019; Zuckerman, 2019). We tend to associate mistrust of the media with political polarisation, based on the well-documented divide between Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. around media trust (Schudson, 2019), as well as the propensity of right-wing populist leaders to denounce the media—while simultaneously maximising their exposure through it—as ‘fake news’, ‘enemies of the people’ etc. (Moffitt, 2016). But as Stephen Reese has pointed out (Reese, 2021), critiques of the media have long been the domain of the political left, whether it be critiques of news framing and objectivity as implicitly favouring the political *status quo*, as argued in by U.K. scholars such as Stuart Hall, the Glasgow Media Group and others (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Hall, 1982, 1986; Sparks, 1986), or Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's forensic analysis of *The New York Times* through a ‘propaganda model’ whereby liberal media ‘manufactures consent’ with the existing socio-political order (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

In the 2000s, much energy was invested in creating alternatives to the mainstream media (‘the MSM’ as it was known) through blogging, citizen journalism, alternative online media, and other online practices. The founding slogan of Indymedia was, ‘Don't hate the media, be the media’, and the promise of the ‘Fifth Estate’ powered through collaborative digital networks was proffered as an alternative vision (Dutton, 2009; Flew & Wilson, 2012; Kidd, 2011). This literature also often looked to what was known at the time as ‘Web 2.0’ and social media to power an alternative media ecosystem. Over the course of the 2010s, a number of factors dissipated this influence. Digital platforms increasingly became the communications sites themselves, with activists making use of the affordances of Facebook, Twitter etc. rather than producing their own media platforms, while media entities of all kinds came to be increasingly dependent upon advertising revenues and the ‘attention economy’ driven by these platforms, in a relationship that became increasingly unequal and fraught as the decade proceeded (Bell, 2018; Tow Center, 2018, 2019). Importantly, the tools and techniques of alternative media were open to be adopted across the political spectrum, and in many respects the political right had an advantage, as it has a more clearly delineated media

ecosystem that links mainstream and alternative media outlets, whereas left-wing alternative media are more likely to view mainstream ‘liberal’ media as competitors or as enemies (Benkler et al., 2018; Entman & Usher, 2018; Livingston & Bennett, 2020).

A paradoxical consequence of calls for greater ‘media literacy’ or ‘digital media literacy’ is that it can fuel greater distrust of the media, promoting an auto-didactic methodology whereby the online public search for absences or gaps in mainstream media representations of major issues, and the mass sharing of such ‘research’, can be the kindling for the spread of conspiracy theories. As a result, measures at scale by digital platforms to suppress ‘fake news’ or conspiracy theories runs the risk of further promoting such theories, as those affected point to information suppression as proof that such conspiracies do indeed have merit. Jack Bratich has provocatively argued that the crisis of misinformation, ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories is in fact indicative of a crisis of the liberal political order, where:

The ultimate goal of the current moral panic war on fake news/misinformation spreaders is to restore a political center as a mode of restoring state legitimacy. “Unity” means separating (a center from extremes, a passive majority from insurgent minority) in order to prevent contagion. Such a restoration of the political spectrum sorts subjects into friends and enemies ... Tech companies have become full partners with professional journalism, intelligence agencies, and pundits in a new nexus to wage a war on dissent via counterinsurgency (Bratich, 2020, pp. 324, 325).

The crisis of trust in media both sits alongside, and is integrally connected with, a wider crisis of trust in expertise. In his book *The Crisis of Expertise*, Gil Eyal proposed that expertise constitutes forms of know-how that develop at the intersection of science and technology on the one hand, and law and democratic politics on the other (Eyal, 2019). It is different to science in that while it draws upon scientific knowledge, expertise has a more specific problem-solving focus, and co-exists with two other key aspects of social life: risk and trust. Eyal observed that expertise typically involves four methods to define and delineate its subjects, the question of who can (and cannot) speak, and legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. These are: (1) exclusion, or a “boundary-work” that confines controversy to technocratic expert judgment; (2) inclusion, or

the extension of controversy to the participation of lay people in order to improve transparency; (3) mechanical objectivity, or the search for objective and standardized procedures that reduce human judgment and error; and (4) outsourcing, or a strategy of expertise spin-off (e.g. governments commissioning academics, consultants or think tanks to advise on policies).

In identifying a crisis of expertise, Eyal referred to seven ‘engines’ of crisis, that both destabilise and reinforce systems of expertise, and which feed upon one another. They are:

1. *Jurisdictional struggle*, or who has authority to make recommendations and decisions;
2. The *expansion of regulatory science*, whose objects differ from basic science, as they are more concerned with projections for the future based upon evidence from the present or recent past. Such projections are designed to inform action to regulate different aspects of social life;
3. *Trust*, as something that is earned through practice, but also damaged by evidence of decisions going wrong, or the unstable relationship between ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’ behaviour;
4. The *legitimation crisis of state-regulated capitalism*, experienced in the 2020s as the global crisis of neoliberal economics (c.f. Streeck, 2017);
5. The *challenge of lay experts* to the knowledge and authority of designated experts;
6. *The Internet and social media*, which both ‘accelerate the pace and break the boundary between backstage and frontstage’, and ‘accelerate and extend other processes that have broken the monopoly of the gatekeepers, those with the power to bestow symbolic capital of recognition’ (Eyal, 2021, p. 5).
7. *The mediatization of science*, as scientists increasingly take on the role of public communicators and educators, entering directly into the spheres where other challenges to expertise are taking place, such as the media, social media, and politics.

An understanding emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic that counterposed rational experts to irrational politicians and populist leaders. This dichotomous framing of rational experts and irrational populists echoed

the famous 2017 *New Yorker* cartoon where a man stands upon in the middle of a flight and declares “These smug pilots have lost touch with regular passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?” (Fig. 14.1).

Indeed, one could contrast the cool authority of public health experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci from the U.S. Center for Disease Control with political leaders such as former U.S. President Donald Trump, publicly asking whether injecting bleach or inserting flashlights into your rectum could prevent the spread of Coronavirus. There is little doubt that some countries managed COVID-19 better than others, and the relationship between political leadership and public health expertise was a key variable in that. Given the poor record of populist leaders such as Trump, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Narendra Modi in India in managing the pandemic, some wondered whether COVID-19 had killed off populism (Gruen, 2020)?

However, just as attacking the supply of ‘bad’ information does not redress the crisis of trust in media, there is little likelihood of the critique



“These smug pilots have lost touch with regular passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?”

Fig. 14.1 These smug pilots have lost touch with regular passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane? (Source *The New Yorker*, 2017)

of expertise abating simply by measures taken to promote expert opinion, while also suppressing or excluding other views, through the media or on the Internet. This is partly because expertise, because it is so engaged in real-world problem-solving, rests upon shakier knowledge foundations than science in general. This has long been apparent in the social sciences. If one thinks of economics, it was generally accepted prior to the late 2000s that high levels of public debt were a problem, and that austerity was a necessary policy corrective to such high levels of debt. This was until many of those who had previously advocated austerity policies began to rethink their own positions (Ostry et al., 2016), and governments of all political persuasions accumulated debt so as to manage the economy more effectively in the COVID-19 pandemic. They often did so on the advice of the same people and institutions (e.g. Treasury departments) that would have advised against such policies a few years earlier. The relationship between models, assumptions, parameters and concrete circumstances is hence ever-shifting, and those who may once have been deemed to have had ‘unacceptable’ ideas (e.g. that governments should accumulate debt in order to reduce unemployment) now found their ideas accepted. The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the sometimes seemingly arbitrary parameters that informed public health actions while at the same time recognising the importance of social action, as there were ongoing debates about the pros and cons of outdoor mask wearing, how to serve food (are buffets OK?), when it is appropriate to sing indoors or go to a gym, and the numbers able to safely attend sporting events or live concerts. Referring to COVID-19, Eyal observed:

If anybody thought that the role of experts in democratic politics is a sideshow to the more important distributional or ideological politics, the Coronavirus pandemic should have disabused them of this notion (Eyal, 2021, p. 1).

POLITICS, PIKETTY AND POPULISM

The French economist Thomas Piketty has been one of the most influential social theorists of recent years. In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty, 2014), Piketty provided extensive data on trends in global economic inequalities to argue that, in the absence of countervailing measures by governments to redistribute income and wealth, capitalism has an inherent tendency to increase inequalities, as the rate of return

on capital generally exceeds the rate of economic growth ($r > g$). His underlying argument was that electoral pressures arising from a unionised workforce and social democratic political parties stimulated such redistributive policies from the 1930s to the 1970s, but that from the 1980s onwards, the rise of ideologies which justified economic inequalities, and of political parties and movements that sought to reduce the size and scope of the state over economic activities, saw such inequalities increase to levels not seen since the 1920s.

In *Capital and Ideology* (Piketty, 2020), Piketty elaborated upon these arguments, while also developing new propositions. Addressing the critique of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* that it presented an economically determinist argument that capitalism has certain ‘iron laws’, and where other factors such as politics are ‘both everywhere and nowhere’ (Jacobs, 2018, p. 512), *Capital and Ideology* stresses the point that ‘ideas and ideologies count in history’ (Piketty, 2020, p. 1035). But there is a particular aspect of ideas, ideologies and politics that captures Piketty’s attention, which is the failure of political parties of the left to make electoral headway in many parts of the world since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Instead, the major beneficiaries of disaffection with the political *status quo* have been populist movements, parties and leaders, suggesting that anti-capitalist thinking has morphed into a diffuse anti-elitism, which has been able to be tapped into by nationalists and populists, and has primarily benefited political parties of the right.

For Piketty, the core structuring feature of advanced liberal democracies over the last 60 years has been the manner in which political parties of the centre-left have increasingly become parties of the highly educated. In the 1950s and 1960s, the voting base of parties such as the U.S. Democrats, the British Labour Party, the French Socialists and others was strongly rooted in lower-income voters and communities, allowing for a class politics where they stood as primarily working-class parties pitted against political opponents whose voter base was for the most part the middle- and upper classes. From the 1960s, however, there is a consistent pattern whereby the percentage of those with the highest levels of education (tertiary qualifications) voting for the parties of the centre-left continues to increase. Even after controlling for other variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and family status, this is a consistent trend internationally, which accelerates from the 1990s onwards.

This does not necessarily mean that political parties of the right or centre-right become parties of the less well-educated, in spite of the confident claims of Trump and other to ‘love the poorly educated’. Piketty notes that even in the United States the votes of high-income earners split more-or-less evenly between the Republicans and Democrats, and the strong preference of ethnic and racial minorities for left and centre-left parties means that the average income of voters for right-wing parties remains higher than that of left-wing parties. Surveying voting patterns across 21 Western democracies from 1948 to 2020, Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty found that parties of the right still attracted the majority of higher-income earners – but with the U.S. at 50:50 by 2010— but that left of centre parties overwhelmingly attracted voters with higher levels of education, thus reversing a historical pattern (Gethin et al., 2021) (Fig. 14.2).

As a result of these trends, Piketty refers to the trend as the rise of a ‘Brahmin elite’ on the political left. In the case of the United States, the party system in the period 1990–2020 has become ‘a system of multiple elites, with a highly educated elite closer to the Democrats (the “Brahmin left”) and a wealthier and better paid elite closer to the Republicans (“merchant right”)’ (Piketty, 2020, p. 815). This development has at the same time exposed the fragility of the coalition that links the traditional working-class support base of such parties and the more highly-educated supporters dominant in these parties under the new alignment. It leaves

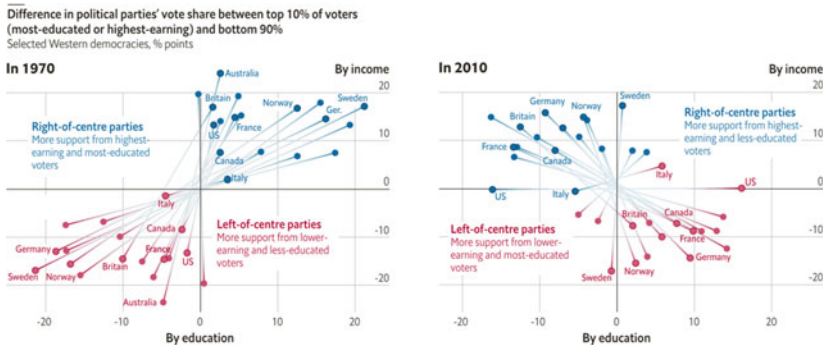


Fig. 14.2 Voting patterns by education and income in 21 liberal democracies, 1970–2010 (Source *The Economist*, 2021)

parties of the left and centre-left open to the critique that they represent the ‘winners of globalization’ (Piketty, 2020, p. 816), and losing those who are ‘left behind’ by globalization and technological change to anti-elitist populism. This may take the form of new populist parties of the Right, such as Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly National Front) in France or Nigel Farage’s UKIP/Brexit Party in Britain, or it may be capitalised upon by populists arising from within the traditional parties of the Right, as with Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 U.S. election (‘I love the poorly educated’, Trump famously said after winning the Nevada Primary), or Boris Johnson’s Conservatives successfully breaking Labour’s ‘Red Wall’ of Northern working class seats in the 2019 U.K. General Election.

Another feature of politics where education, rather than class or income, becomes a primary divide is the growing significance attached to cultural factors as markers of political identity. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Norris & Inglehart, 2016 2019) have observed that the economic platforms of populist parties tend to run across a spectrum from being strongly pro-market to being strong supporters of state intervention, and that the economic circumstances of their voters vary considerably between parties and across countries. At the same time, a common feature of the populist parties they have studied has been a tendency towards ‘traditionalist’ conceptions of culture and suspicion of what they view as ‘cosmopolitan’ cultural values. Comparing populist political parties across 163 countries, Norris found that such parties were evenly split on economic values, with 49% having left-wing economic values and 51% having right-wing economic values, the polarisation of social values was far more marked, with 84% having conservative social values and only 16% having liberal social values (Norris, 2020, p. 707).

Norris cautions that, while the majority of populist parties are ‘in favour of order, tradition and stability, believing that government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues’ (Norris, 2020, p. 707), their defining feature may be less social conservatism—which they share with older parties on the political right—as much as a hostility to pluralism. Those aspects of liberal democracies that mitigate against direct rule by ‘the people’, understood as a numerical majority, that include minority rights, an independent judiciary, binding global agreements, multiculturalism, media that is critical of government, and the celebration of social and cultural diversity, tend to attract the most hostility from populist parties. This intersects with nationalism insofar as

the ‘will of the people’ is by necessity a national will: global institutions are seen as distant and inherently undemocratic in their nature. Norris thus defines populism in the following terms:

Populism is conceived at minimum as a form of rhetoric, a persuasive language, making symbolic claims about the source of legitimate authority and where power should rightfully lie. The discourse rests on twin claims, namely that (i) the only legitimate authority flows directly from the “will of the people” (“the citizens of our country”), and by contrast (ii) the enemy of the people are the “establishment.” The latter are depicted as the powerful who are corrupt, out of touch, self-serving, falsely betraying the public trust, and seeking to thwart the popular will (Norris, 2020, p. 699).

Drawing together the accounts of changes in voter behaviour from Piketty and his collaborators, and those dealing with populism from Norris, Inglehart and others, we can see a four-fold divide in contemporary liberal democracies, based on education on one axis, and economic values on the other (Fig. 14.3).

Thinking about each category, we can make the following observations. First, *liberals* broadly equate to what Bratich terms ‘centrists’, and run the spectrum from what is commonly termed the centre-left to the centre-right. While there are considerable policy differences among those in this group (e.g. around the role and size of the public sector), they are broadly pro-market and pro-globalisation, with the most significant differences typically coming less from economic policy issues than from social and cultural ones. Issues such as marriage equality or measures to mitigate climate change may generate important divides between those at the social democratic and conservative ends of this spectrum, although both issues can find advocates across these traditions (e.g. carbon pricing to address climate change). It is the space that an increasing number of leaders in the corporate sector occupy, and informs much of the mainstream media, even if different media position themselves across this spectrum: in the UK, *The Times* as centre-right as compared to *The Guardian* as centre-left. While the ‘Third Way’ turn of the 1980s and 1990s saw parties of the centre-left reconcile themselves to the global market economy through leaders such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, in more recent years the corporate sector has been moving to the left on social, cultural and environmental questions, as seen with initiatives

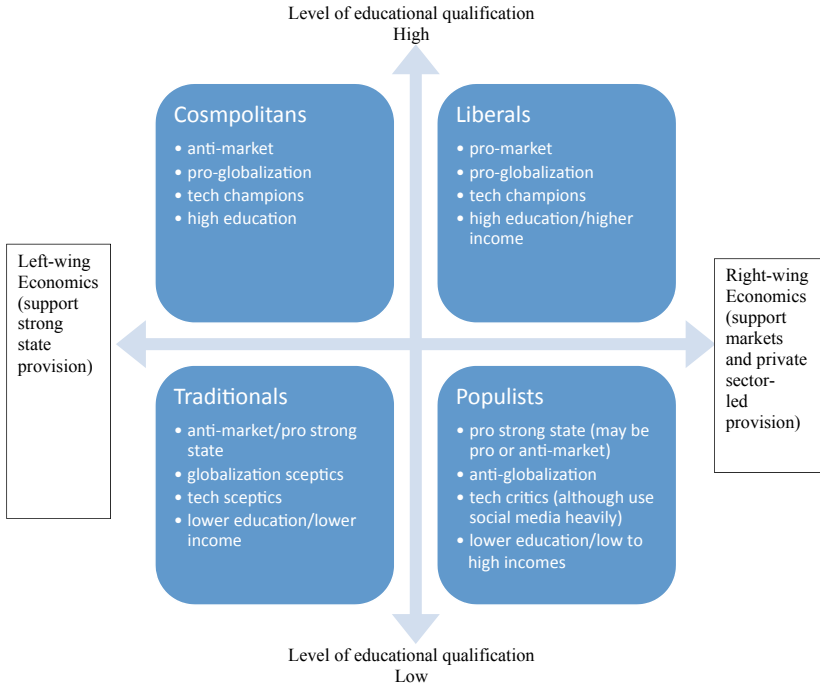


Fig. 14.3 Relationship between education, economic perspectives and other variables (based on Piketty [2020]) (Source Author)

around stakeholder capitalism and the civic responsibilities of business (Business Roundtable, 2019; *The Economist*, 2021). Liberals strongly support the idea of the open Internet, both as a philosophical ideal and as a vehicle for new forms of market competition and societal innovation (Potts, 2019).

The liberal reformism of the last 40 years—sometimes referred to as ‘neoliberalism’, although not unproblematically (Flew, 2014)—comes up against two forms of critique: that the moral aspirations of liberalism do not go far enough to change society, and that the policy consequences of liberalism have gone too far, and undermined the social order. *Cosmopolitans* critique liberals for failing to recognise the contradictions between their normative agenda of formal equality and the substantive inequalities of opportunities and life chances experienced by different

groups within society. Increasingly, this critique of liberal-democratic capitalism is driven by intersectionality (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 2017), and the proposition that structural inequalities and injustices based upon race, gender, social class, sexuality, disability and other factors interact and intersect, meaning that campaigns for social justice need to recognise and work across these multiple societal fault-lines. As a result, they critique the assumptions of meritocracy that underpin both ‘neoliberal’ and ‘Third Way’ versions of liberalism, arguing that true equality of opportunities and life chances requires more radical social transformation than can be envisaged in the competitive market economy. As the British social theorist Jo Littler has put it ‘the idea of meritocracy has become a key means through which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite –perpetuates, reproduces and extends itself ... the language of meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy and a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture’ (Littler, 2018, p. 2).

Both liberals and cosmopolitans tend to be highly educated and increasing constitute either the ‘right’ and ‘left’ of centre-left parties (as with the Democrats in the US and the Labour Party in the UK), or the latter group have come to be prominent in Greens parties around the world. Cosmopolitans tend to be anti-capitalist yet also pro-global in many respects, ranging from strong support for multiculturalism and high levels of immigration, to favouring identities and institutions that are associated with *non-territorial identities*, or attachments and affiliations based upon age, class, disability, gender, race, sexual orientation or other aspects of ascribed behaviour or a common sense of belonging. Jan Aart Scholte observes that ‘large-scale globalisation since the middle of the twentieth century has spurred unprecedented growth of non-territorial identities and associated networks of solidarity and struggle’ (Scholte, 2005, p. 240). Of particular importance in this regard is the idea of the open Internet, that promotes both extra-territorial engagement and identities and forms of civic action beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

The third group, *traditionals*, are also highly critical of the dominance of liberal ideas, values and policies, but for different reasons. This group, which to some extent overlaps with the working class in the classic sense, have lower average levels of education than liberals and cosmopolitans, are more likely to work in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations or in manual/‘blue-collar’ jobs. They are typically located in the suburbs of

major cities or in regional centres rather than the urban metropolises associated with finance, technology, global mobility, university campuses and the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2017). With the growth in global inequality of income and wealth over the last three decades (Piketty, 2014), this is the group that have most strongly felt the impact of stagnant real wages, rising house prices, and pressures to adapt to more precarious occupational situations (e.g. being ‘gig workers’ or on ‘zero-hour’ contracts) than was the case for previous generations of their families; they may also be recent migrants trapped in secondary labour markets and insecure work.

This group, variously referred to as the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2014), the ‘left behinds’ (Standing, 2018), and those located ‘somewhere’ rather than being geographically mobile (Goodhart, 2017), have also experienced a degree of cultural loss and loss of identity. Guy Standing observed that they have been ‘losing cultural rights, in that those in it feel they cannot and do not belong to any community that gives them secure identity or a sense of solidarity and reciprocity, of mutual support’ (Standing, 2018). Having historically been the backbone of centre-left and social democratic political parties, the experiences of declining trade union membership, hollowed-out post-industrial towns, and a sense of perceived disadvantage arising from inequitable access to post-secondary education and associated cultural capital, have generated a mix of economic and cultural demands that can appear contradictory to the traditional left, but which derive from a demand for security in the face of globalisation, technological change, and policy changes from which they feel disadvantaged and excluded (Freiden, 2018).

The fourth and final group are *populists*. In some respects, populism can be seen as a weaponisation of the concerns of the traditionals, manoeuvred in particular political directions. Among the large literature on populism, noted above, four recurring concerns can be identified, or what Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) term the ‘four D’s’:

1. Distrust of political elites, anger at corruption, and perceived exclusion from the institutions of liberal democracy;
2. Deprivation, in the face of rising economic inequalities, stagnant real wages, job insecurity and declining social provision;
3. Destruction—real or perceived—of national cultures and traditions, value systems and authority structures, and historically embedded ‘ways of life’;

4. Dealignment of citizens as voters from the major political parties, and from the class and other societal cleavages associated with those parties (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Populist movements tend to be national, with globalisation and cosmopolitanism being two of the things they rail against. Reflecting on the diversity of national populisms, Matthew Goodwin observed:

Each national populist party has its own local particularities but there are common themes. In the aggregate, national populists oppose or reject liberal globalisation, mass immigration and the consensus politics of recent times. They promise instead to give voice to those who feel that they have been neglected, if not held in contempt, by increasingly distant elites (Goodwin, 2018).

Both traditionalists and populists tend to have concerns about the power of digital platforms and the societal impacts of social media. Populism has a more dynamic and contradictory relationship to digital platforms, as it does to the media generally. Benjamin Moffitt has argued that populism is an intensely mediatised political phenomenon, whose leading figures continually rail against the mainstream media ('fake news'), while maximising access to it in order to reach their constituencies 'over the heads' of established political elites. Identifying social media as providing the opportunity to bypass information gatekeepers and media elites, in order to speak more directly to their support base, populist movements and leaders have established a strong presence on social media platforms – Donald Trump and Twitter being the most (in)famous example – while at the same time railing against the power of liberal elites they associate with 'Big Tech'. Philip Napoli has argued that the Trump presidency's technology policies exemplified symbolic policy-making (Napoli, 2021), where rhetorical railing against 'Big Tech' was matched by an almost complete absence of substantive policy initiatives. As such, it appealed to his support base who, Napoli argues, 'cared far less about what Trump actually did and far more about what he represented – essentially, the symbolic dimensions of Trump' (Napoli, 2021).

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE POLITICS OF TECH POLICY

One of the key features of the evolution of the Internet has been the extent to which its development has been bound up with research and educational institutions. The ‘wizards who stayed up late’ (Hafner & Lyon, 1998) were primarily affiliated to universities and research centres, and insofar as they had necessary connections to corporations or to the U.S. military, they maintained a cultural distance from mainstream bureaucracies, instead cultivating a counter-cultural ethos alongside a belief in the inherent virtues of digital technologies (Turner, 2006). While the Internet is now effectively a mass medium, with about 4.7 billion people online in 2021, or 59.5 per cent of the global population (Johnson, 2021), the association of the Internet with liberal politics, cosmopolitanism, and those with high levels of education remains a constant.

To take one example, a 2019 study of Twitter users in the U.S. by the Pew Research Center found that they were younger than the U.S. population as a whole, and far more likely to be college educated and Democrat voting than the population as a whole: this was especially marked among the 10% of Twitter users deemed power users, who generate 6900% more Tweets than the other 90% of users, and generate 80% of content on the site (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). The other key feature of the Internet is its global nature: it has long been championed as enabling the ‘death of distance’ (Cairncross, 1998), forms of politics and identity that transcend nation-states and national cultures and identities (Castells, 2008; Giddens, 2003; Scholte, 2005), and forms of polycentric and multistakeholder governance, buttressed by binding international laws and conventions, that can empower global civil society and no longer be reliant upon nation-state governments (Castells, 2009; Haggart, 2020; Scholte, 2017).

For a long period, the politics of the Internet were shaped in most parts of the world—and particularly the liberal democracies—by what has been termed the ‘Californian Ideology’ of ‘free minds and free markets’ (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Rossetto, 1996). It was in many ways the corollary of what Thomas Friedman would term the ‘Golden Strait-jacket’ whereby economic prosperity was dependent upon accepting the rules of the game of global liberal capitalism, so that ‘your economy grows and your politics shrinks’ (Friedman, 2001, p. 106). While such a

bargaining away of sovereignty was never acceptable to countries such as China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, these countries were seen as outriders in terms of the global Internet. The dominant ‘hands off’ agenda of global Internet politics, which saw massive growth in the major ICT and digital platform companies, has been challenged from a variety of perspectives in the 2010s and 2020s. What was termed the ‘global techlash’ saw a diverse range of concerns unleashed towards the dominant digital platforms, from monopolisation of digital markets to being conduits for ‘fake news’ and online misinformation, and from lack of diversity in their workplaces and internal cultures to the circulation of hate speech and other forms of online harms to women and minorities, and the wider implications of a socio-economic regime based around ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Flew, 2019; Soriano, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). This has in turn promoted a diverse range of regulatory responses around the world, and the rise of a new ‘regulatory field’ around platform governance (Flew, 2021a; Flew et al., 2021; Schlesinger, 2020; Schlesinger & Kretschmer, 2020).

The entry of nation-state governments into the platform regulation space can be seen as marking a shift toward tech policy becoming more integrally connected to electoral politics. For much of the time, policies towards the Internet have been primarily shaped by a cosmopolitan critique of liberalism, in two ways. First, they have focused upon the internal cultures and practices of the largest digital tech companies, such as the manner in which a lack of diversity within the companies—the ‘techbro’ phenomenon—manifests itself in practices that display gender, racial, and other forms of bias (Lusoli & Turner, 2021; Noble, 2018). Second, there has been demands for forms of supranational governance that can empower international NGOs and set limits to the regulatory capacity of nation-states, including digital constitutionalism (Celeste, 2018; Suzor, 2018), social media councils (Docquir, 2019), and the use of human rights laws, such as Article 19 of the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights (Kaye, 2019), to set boundaries to nation-state jurisdiction in the digital domain.

What has been a consistent corollary has been that, insofar as nation state governments or entities such as the European Union have proposed regulations for the Internet and digital platforms, these are more often than not opposed by relevant NGOs. Germany’s Network Enforcement Act, or NetzDG (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*) Law, which aimed to combat hate speech on the Internet by requiring digital platforms to remove hate speech quickly under threat of large fines, was opposed

when introduced in 2018 by civil society groups advocating for online freedom of expression such as the Electronic Frontiers Foundation, journalism organisations such as Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Internet industry representatives, and political parties ranging from the far-right Alliance für Deutschland (AfD) and the centre-right Free Democrats, to the Left Party (Echikson & Knodt, 2018). The European Union's Article 13 Directive on online copyright was opposed by Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Creative Commons, and European Digital Rights, as well as by the major technology companies Google and Facebook (Reynolds, 2019). The Australian government's News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, passed in March 2021, was strongly opposed not only by Google and Facebook, but also by NGOs such as Digital Rights Watch, who argued that it failed to address the data-driven business model of surveillance capitalism (Floreani, 2021).

The United States under the Biden administration is proving to be a fascinating case study in such debates. As the pro-Silicon Valley consensus among the Democrats leadership during the Clinton and Obama administrations fractured, with Presidential nominees such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren calling for strong antitrust action to 'break up big tech', the then-nominee Joe Biden gave an interview to *The New York Times* indicating a preparedness to revoke Sect. 230 provisions for digital platform companies unless they were held more accountable to content hosted on their sites:

[The New York Times] can't write something you know to be false and be exempt from being sued. But he [Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook] can. The idea that it's a tech company is that Section 230 should be revoked, immediately should be revoked, number one ... It should be revoked because it is not merely an internet company. It is propagating falsehoods they know to be false, and we should be setting standards not unlike the Europeans are doing relative to privacy. You guys still have editors. I'm sitting with them. Not a joke. There is no editorial impact at all on Facebook. None. None whatsoever. It's irresponsible. It's totally irresponsible (Editorial Board, 2020).

With Biden's inauguration as U.S. President in January 2021, 70 activist, social justice and human rights organisations prepared an open letter to the new administration warning against what they termed 'overbroad' changes to Sect. 230, arguing that:

Section 230 is a foundational law for free expression and human rights when it comes to digital speech. It makes it possible for websites and online forums to host the opinions, photos, videos, memes, and creativity of ordinary people, rather than just content that is backed by corporations (Fight for the Future, 2021)

As has often been the case, this does put these activist and social justice groups, along with long time free speech advocacy groups such as Electronic Frontier Foundation, on the same side of debates about tech policy as industry advocacy groups, such as the Competitive Enterprise Institute (Nabil, 2021).

What is apparent is that, insofar as issues in tech policy have issue salience (Moniz & Wleizen, 2020), there is typically majority public support for measures to rein in the market power of ‘Big Tech’, or to require digital and social media platforms to have both legal and ethical responsibilities with regards to content hosted on their sites. There are also well-documented concerns about trust in information generally, with both media as traditionally understood and social media platforms seen as having responsibilities in this regard, along with business and government (Edelman, 2020; Zuckerman, 2019). This would not be an uncritical support for all forms of state regulation. Clearly nation-states can go too far in regulating the Internet, or develop policies which have unintended consequences. But the baseline assumption that the community is less disposed towards regulation of digital platform companies because that may ‘break the Internet’, as compared to support for regulating large companies in the interests of accountability, transparency and control over market power, is not well back up by recent experience of policy initiatives. Cosmopolitan critics of market liberalism in the tech sector often find themselves in a position of Saint Augustine in the face of temptations, saying “Lord make me chaste, but not yet”. The modern-day parallel is that of “Let there be more regulations of Big Tech, but not those ones”.

If progressive politics is primarily concerned with cosmopolitan critiques of nation-state regulation, in the name of globalisation and supranational governance regimes, it runs the risk of being side-lined by government proposals that tap into the concerns of ‘traditionalists’—many of whom have been historically aligned with left and centre-left political parties—about the apparent dissolution of the social contract, and populists who identify ‘Big Tech’ as an elite that should be subject to greater popular sovereignty. As it appears that nation-state regulation

of digital platforms will increasingly be a feature of the global Internet, in the liberal democracies as well as in authoritarian states, the ethos of global cosmopolitanism that has underpinned much Internet activism will bump up against demands for greater accountability and transparency on the part of digital platforms, and forms of governance that are meaningfully subject to state laws and regulations, and where sanctions for non-compliance can be effectively applied. In light of the demographic, electoral and political trends identified by authors such as Piketty, it would appear that populism will be around for some time, and will be something which all engaged in politics, policy and the management of digital technologies will have to contend with.

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