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Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers and Shared Experience: Dewey's Conception of the Public in the Digital Age

Introduction

The¹ rise of digital communication had fueled hopes for increased participation in democracy: it was hoped that online communication would offer a more equal form of interaction and more room for individual participation in political affairs. It was also widely believed that the Internet had the potential to redefine the relationship between the individual and the political community by digitizing the interactions that make up the democratic public. Especially in the early days of the Internet, there was a rather naive hope that the mere availability of such technologies could strengthen participation and thus counter the spread of polit-

¹ The following argument is a revised, translated and more concise version of a German article that has been published in *Zeitschrift für praktische Philosophie* 9(1) (2022) under the DOI 10.22613/zfpp/9.1.4. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their important and helpful comments.

ical apathy. As Grunwald et al.² note, this “cyber-optimism” has quickly been replaced by a much more nuanced view of what digital communication technologies can realistically offer in certain situations.³

Still, more recent empirical studies have shown that the Internet does in fact have the potential to strengthen democracy. Gachau,⁴ for example, highlights the potential of social media to form counter-publics for minorities and, through this, to allow for more participation. Josephi,⁵ Crick⁶ and Hermida et al.⁷ discuss digital forms of publication and communication as a form of democratization in journalism. In their arguments, all of the named authors explicitly refer to John Dewey’s conception of “the public” as developed in *The Public and its Problems*.

On the other hand, social media and online journalism are seen as important factors in the current crisis of democracy. While the more nuanced view also replaced a crude cyber-pessimism regarding digital democracy,⁸ current developments of online publics seem to give more weight to a predominantly skeptical perspective. The spread of mis- and disinformation over digital media is seen as a pressing issue, especially after the 2016 US presidential elections, the so-called Brexit referendum in the same year, and the attack on the US Capitol in 2021.⁹

² Armin Grunwald et al., *Internet und Demokratie. Analyse netzbasierter Kommunikation unter kulturellen Aspekten*. TAB working report (Berlin: Büro für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung beim deutschen Bundestag, 2005), 5–6, 9, 54–63.

³ Cf. Joel Chow Ken Q, “The Internet and the Democratic Imagination: Deweyan Communication in the 21st Century,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 10(2) (2013): 52.

⁴ James Gachau, *The Role of Social Media in Participatory Democracy: A Case Study of Three Facebook Groups* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2018), 247.

⁵ Beate Josephi, “Digital Journalism and Democracy,” in: *The Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism*, ed. Tamara Witschge (London: Sage 2016), 9.

⁶ Nathan Crick, “The Search for a Purveyor of News: The Dewey/Lippmann Debate in an Internet Age,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26(5) (2009): 480–497.

⁷ Alfred Hermida et al., “The Active Recipient: Participatory Journalism Through the Lens of the Dewey-Lippmann Debate,” *Journal of the International Symposium on Online Journalism* 1(2) (2011): 129–152.

⁸ Grunwald et al., *Internet und Demokratie*, 5–6, 62–63.

⁹ Cf. Robert M. Faris et al., *Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, 2017), 18; Jacob Groshek, Karolina Koc-Michalska, “Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, and Support for Populist Presidential Candidates in the 2016 US Election Campaign,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20(9) (2017): 1389–1407; Nathaniel Persily, “Can Democracy Survive the Internet?,” *Journal*

In the discussion around mis- and disinformation, there are two mechanisms of online communication that are prominently discussed: “epistemic bubbles,” which include the effects of automatic personalization of online content that Pariser¹⁰ termed “filter bubbles,” and “echo chambers,” which according to Nguyen¹¹ are a separate phenomenon. Again, in this debate about the disruption of political publics, Dewey’s conception of the public and his concept of shared experience are important reference points.¹²

Pariser’s filter bubbles and Nguyen’s echo chambers describe mechanisms that undermine shared experience as a basis for a well-functioning public. These mechanisms certainly are not the only relevant factors in the current crisis in democracy. Still, it seems promising to inquire in this paper to what extent Dewey’s conception of shared experience and his conception of democratic publics allows for finding potential solutions to the problems raised by these two mechanisms.

After a brief outline of the current crisis and of the mechanisms of filter bubble and echo chamber, (1) I will look at Dewey’s own contemporary crisis in the 1920s. As we will see, this crisis was also related to a change in media technology, and it was answered by Dewey’s conception of the public in the so-called Dewey-Lippmann Debate; (2) I will then discuss Dewey’s conceptual revision of “the public” in more detail and point out its role in digital media research; (3) after this, I will turn towards his understanding of “shared experience,” first with a focus on discursive-communicative aspects; (4) then I will focus on the situated-embodied aspects; (5) based on this, I will explore Dewey’s understanding of what it means for a public to learn from experience and its pivotal role in lived democracy; (6) finally, in the course of my argument, it will become clear that one can find valid objections to the idea of using Dewey’s conception of the public to address the current crisis in (digital) democracy. However, this is in part due to the fact that the debate has focused too much on discursive-communicative aspects and prematurely dismissed Dewey’s call for locality and face-to-face interaction. Howev-

of Democracy 28(2) (2017): 63–76; Yuriy Gorodnichenko, Tho Pham, Oleksandr Talavera, “Social Media, Sentiment and Public Opinions: Evidence from #Brexit and #USElection,” *European Economic Review* 136 (July 2021): 103772.

¹⁰ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹¹ C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”, *Episteme* 17(2) (2020): 141–161.

¹² Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 9–10, 75.

er, I will also show that his conceptual revisions offer at least some potential with regard to addressing the two problematic mechanisms.

1. Of filter bubbles and echo chambers

The concept “filter bubble” was introduced by Pariser¹³ and spread quickly both in journalistic and in research texts. According to him,¹⁴ the personalization of digital content leads to a kind of epistemic deficit in the broader public because certain perspectives and facts cease to be presented to everyone in the same way. Instead, public information is subject to filter technologies that try to predict – based on past consumption – what a certain person would probably like to see. Pariser argues that this personalization leads to a disruption of the public in the sense of shared experience because it leads to an individualization of how people are informed:¹⁵

The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like – the actual things you’ve done, or the things people like you like – and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you’ll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us – what I’ve come to call a filter bubble – which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information.¹⁶

In current research, however, the idea of “filter bubbles” is mostly met with skepticism: empirical research has shown that personalization of social media content (for now) does not result in news consumption that is segregated according to political opinion.¹⁷ Rather, the most important journalistic media in the US are consumed by a bipartisan readership. While intuitively plausible, the concept “filter bubble” is seen as methodologically problematic, along with the concept “echo chamber” that is often understood synonymously – which is something that

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 9–10.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 9, 75.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 9.

¹⁷ Jacob L. Nelson, James G. Webster, “The Myth of Partisan Selective Exposure: A Portrait of the Online Political News Audience,” *Social Media + Society* 3(3) (2017).

Nguyen¹⁸ criticizes. He argues convincingly that we should differentiate two related but functionally different phenomena in the spread of mis- and disinformation. Due to the explanatory power of his proposed differentiation, I will make use of his terminology.

According to Nguyen,¹⁹ epistemic bubbles (including filter bubbles) are an effect of selective awareness in different social contexts. The fundamental problem, here, is a (potentially inadvertent) lack of exposure to relevant information on a given topic or on others' perspectives. Personalization of a search on the Internet, hence, could filter out information that the search engine declares to be less relevant for users "like me," but that would show a given topic in a different light.

On the contrary, Nguyen²⁰ conceptualizes the term "echo chamber" as a mechanism of deliberate demarcation that systematically undermines trust in contradicting information. Within a social group, proponents of contrary arguments are denounced as deceptive and malicious in order to validate only consenting perspectives. In echo chambers, sensible objections are often anticipated but propagated as telltale signs of dishonesty. In this way, exposure to moderate or "mainstream" positions can actually lead to a strengthening of disinformation.²¹

Echo chambers are therefore not rooted in an epistemic deficit, but in an undermining of trust. While new information can quickly bring epistemic bubbles to burst, the systematic discrediting of differing viewpoints makes it hard to escape from echo chambers. As Nguyen²² argues, such an escape may encompass not only disinformation that was consumed on a given topic, but often entire worldviews that have a certain internal coherence (e.g., for Neo-Nazis). Escaping the echo chamber, hence, can imply a far-reaching break with one's socialization and existing structures of epistemic trust – something that Nguyen²³ deems hard but possible if trusted relationships can be established with other persons outside the echo chamber.

Pariser's filter bubbles and Nguyen's echo chambers hence describe two mechanisms in digital media that undermine shared experience in different ways. Before coming back to this, I will first take a closer look at the historical context of the US in the 1920s and the (media-induced)

¹⁸ Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles": 141–143, 152–154.

¹⁹ Ibidem: 145.

²⁰ Ibidem: 146.

²¹ Ibidem: 146–148.

²² Ibidem: 157–158.

²³ Ibidem: 158.

crisis of democracy that Dewey's conception of the public responds to. This will prepare my analysis of this conception in section 3 and the subsequent analysis of "shared experience" in order to explore the potential of these terms to address today's issues of disruptive digital technologies.

2. A crisis in democracy past

In some respects, Dewey's description of American democracy about 100 years ago sounds eerily contemporary. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey²⁴ laments that there is an eclipse of democratic publics by economic interests and offers of mere entertainment, but highlights especially the *de facto* inability of the individual to pursue their interests within the complexities of the modern, party-based mass democracy.²⁵ As he criticizes, liberal democracies actually make the wholly unrealistic assumption that there is a thoroughly informed citizenship, a community of omni-competent individuals.²⁶ According to Dewey,²⁷ it is because of this unhealthy assumption, that during the 1920s US democracy proved so susceptible to propaganda and disinformation.

This analysis is part of the so-called Dewey-Lippmann Debate. In fact, Dewey's diagnosis mostly agrees with that of Walter Lippmann.²⁸ One of the root causes that the two authors see for the demise of the public are the fundamental changes in media technology that happen during this time – one can think of the emergent radio and the cheap tabloid papers of the boulevard press. Using these new possibilities in political communication, propaganda and disinformation can be spread much more efficiently and effectively. The actual "debate" between Dewey and Lippmann consists mostly of the question of how to react to these developments.

Lippmann questions whether we should really want the public to play a strong role in the political process. At first, he proposes reforms to media institutions by introducing independent publicly funded news agencies, but later, he argues for an expert-lead system of "intelligence

²⁴ Dewey, *Later Works* 2, 321.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 307–317, especially 314.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 334.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 341; Dewey, *Middle Works* 13, 329–331.

²⁸ Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 294; Dewey, *Later Works* 2, 308.

agencies" that informs the political process.²⁹ What becomes manifest in his later proposal is a fundamental doubt about whether public participation can play a constructive role in policy making. Lippmann answers this doubt by unburdening the role of the individual and by limiting the role of the public mostly to that of confirmation or rejection through voting.³⁰

While mostly agreeing with Lippmann on the characterization of the crisis as a demise (or eclipse) of the public, Dewey presents a very different argument on what to do about it. He³¹ begins by noting a weird discrepancy: on the one hand, technology offers more ways for the public to communicate than ever, but, on the other, political communication is increasingly disrupted. It is not the means of communication that are lacking, but the intellectual tools, the concepts for a communicative exchange of opinions, desires and hopes.³² Hence, Dewey warns of demonizing technology as the cause of the problems:

There are those who lay the blame for all the evils of our lives on steam, electricity and machinery [...] In reality, the trouble springs rather from the ideas and absence of ideas in connection with which technological factors operate. Mental and moral beliefs change more slowly than outward conditions [...] Conditions have changed, but every aspect of life [...] shows that nothing approaching a transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals. Symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols consonant with its activities. Intellectual instrumentalities for the formation of an organized public are more inadequate than its overt means.³³

It is important to note that Dewey assigns the central role in political communication to symbols and intellectual instrumentalities, i.e., to conceptual rather than technological aspects. The new technological means, as Dewey³⁴ emphasizes, need to be thoroughly appropriated so as to facilitate forms of communication that lead to shared experience. What already becomes clear here, is that Dewey's answer to Lippmann is less about *institutional* (re-)arrangements of the public and the media landscape and much more about (improved) *processes* of communication.

²⁹ Crick, "The Search for a Purveyor of News": 489–490; Josephi, "Digital Journalism and Democracy," 13.

³⁰ Robert Brett Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 293–300.

³¹ Dewey, *Later Works 2*, 323–324.

³² *Ibidem*, 323–324.

³³ *Ibidem*, 323.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 370–372.

To further explore this, I will turn to his revised conception of the public in the next section. After this, I will further discuss his conception of “shared experience,” in order to analyze to what extent Dewey’s conception of the public can be used productively to address the problems raised by the two mechanisms of digital technology mentioned above, the filter bubble and the echo chamber.

3. Dewey’s conception of the public

Dewey³⁵ starts his revision from a central differentiation between private acts and public acts: what is understood as a mere transaction between two parties is and remains *private*. However, as soon as others are affected, there emerges a need for *communal* reaction, for control and regulation. Private acts, thus, gain an additional *public* characteristic. In the end, Dewey’s conception of the public can be understood to follow a *procedural* view – not an institutional one – on how to deal with effects that result from private acts but lead to communal problems:

[...] the line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control, whether by inhibition or by promotion [...] It is our thesis that in this distinction we find the key to the nature and office of the state.³⁶

Apart from this procedural revision, Dewey’s conception also puts *affected* publics, i.e., stakeholder publics at the center. This is the space where communal problems are meant to be discussed, solutions developed and initiated – and it is also the space where implementations can be judged as successful or as failed. What Dewey puts at the center with this are *learning processes within stakeholder publics*.³⁷ As Andreas Antić³⁸ describes, these processes contain three distinct steps: (1) communal experience of a problem; (2) discussion of possible solutions; and (3) communal learning from implementation. And this learning process

³⁵ Ibidem, 239–241, 244–246.

³⁶ Ibidem, 245.

³⁷ Cf. Bob Coulter, “Preserving Rich Experience in the Digital Age,” in: *Dewey and Education in the 21st Century*, ed. Ruth Heilbronn et al. (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 23.

³⁸ Andreas Antić, *Digitale Öffentlichkeiten und intelligente Kooperation: Zur Aktualität des demokratischen Experimentalismus von John Dewey* (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2018), 53.

presupposes the sharing of concepts, i.e., the symbols and intellectual instrumentalities mentioned above.

For Dewey, this resembles early American settler communities, where a small group of people that have a stake in the outcome assemble in town hall meetings to search for solutions and to discuss the outcomes of past actions. Already during Dewey's time, however, the context of modern mass democracy proved to be a hindrance to the sharing of concepts.³⁹

This allows us to formulate a qualitative criterion for digital communication in a democracy: Do certain digital technologies support or undermine such a development of shared concepts? Do they support or undermine the three steps mentioned above, i.e., the communal experience of a problem, a discussion of solutions, and learning from implementation? As Dewey writes:

The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication [i.e., one that allows for shared experience, SWV] must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation [i.e., the communication technologies, SWV] and breathe life into it. When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master.⁴⁰

In recent years, a number of contributions have argued that Dewey's procedural revision makes his conception of the public very relevant with regard to the challenges raised by digital media. Alterman⁴¹ rereads the Dewey-Lippmann debate through the lens of a digitized media system. While the text does not adequately reflect today's role of social media (it focuses mostly on the so-called blogosphere), it follows Lippmann in lamenting a crisis in professionalized quality journalism and in criticizing participatory journalism through blog posts, which he interprets as a Deweyan alternative. The text initiated a smaller research debate,⁴² in which the role of social media has played an increasingly important role, and which helped to establish Dewey's conception of the public as one of the formative philosophical conceptions of participatory

³⁹ Dewey, *Later Works* 2, 304–306.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 350.

⁴¹ Eric Alterman. "Out of Print," *New Yorker*, 24.03.2008, access 15.06.2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/31/out-of-print>.

⁴² Cf. e.g. Crick, "The Search for a Purveyor of News": 480–497; Hermida et al., "The Active Recipient": 129–152; Cynthia Gayman, "Words, Power, Pluralism: Are You Talking to Me?," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy: A Quarterly Journal of History, Criticism, and Imagination* 22(2) (2008): 82–91.

communication in the digital sphere.⁴³ Furthermore, as Chow Ken Q⁴⁴ and Farrell⁴⁵ before him, Antić⁴⁶ has worked out an explicitly Deweyan conception of what he calls “digital publics.”

Later in this text, I will explore the potential that Dewey’s procedural conception of the public has for meeting the challenge of filter bubbles and echo chambers. In the next section, however, I will first analyze his idea of “shared experience” in more detail.

4. Shared experience and digital publics

In his works, Dewey uses the term “shared experience” (sometimes also “conjoint communicated experience”) mostly in the way of an explanatory metaphor. As such, the term is seldomly focused on in the research literature. However, “shared experience” can be read as a key concept for overcoming Dewey’s contemporary crisis as well as our own. It is central in so far as it functions almost like a hinge in Dewey’s argument: on the one hand, it points towards Dewey’s discussions of a situated conception of experience, but, on the other hand, it also points towards his conception of democracy as a communal, evolutionary learning process. I will start with the latter.

For Dewey, lived democracy is much more than political mechanisms like elections or majority decision-making. As he writes: “The task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”⁴⁷ In light of his procedural revision of “the public,” this ideal of democratic community is about what Antić⁴⁸ calls a “reconstruction of complex interactions and the critical review of the goals, norms and values implied by them. This is seen as the basis for learning processes that improve future experiences [my translation].”

⁴³ Josephi, “Digital Journalism and Democracy,” 14.

⁴⁴ Chow Ken Q, “The Internet and the Democratic Imagination”: 49–78.

⁴⁵ Henry Farrell, “New Problems, New Publics? Dewey and New Media: New Problems, New Publics? Dewey and New Media,” *Policy & Internet* 6(2) (2014): 176–191.

⁴⁶ Antić, *Digitale Öffentlichkeiten und intelligente Kooperation*; Andreas Antić, “Öffentlichkeit im digitalen Wandel. Zur Aktualität von John Deweys Öffentlichkeitstheorie,” in: *Digitale Transformationen der Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Jan-Philipp Kruse et al. (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2020).

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Later Works* 14, 230.

⁴⁸ Antić, *Digitale Öffentlichkeiten und intelligente Kooperation*, 200–202.

The *sharing* of experience can only take place, however, if there is an adequate and established set of symbols and intellectual instrumentalities. In emphasizing these conceptual aspects, Dewey takes up Lippmann's critical analysis, according to which public debate is mostly made up of stereotyping and the use of empty, but emotionally affective symbols.⁴⁹ Despite the new technological possibilities for the collection and distribution of information, communal learning fails in each of the three steps outlined above: (1) there is no communal experience of the problem; (2) there is no cooperative development of potential solutions; and (3) there is no learning from experiencing the outcomes of what has been tried.

What could this mean with respect to the two problematic mechanisms of digital media outlined initially? One could, as an example of a filter bubble, describe the failure of the communal experience of a problem in terms of a situation where a problem affects certain persons or groups, but this is not realized by the larger public. Even though they contribute to this problem and information on the issue is readily available, most people are not exposed to this information. Hence, there is no communal experience of the problem. On the other hand, as an example of an echo chamber, the reason for some groups failing to see a certain issue, e.g., the severity of a pandemic, could also be the result of the defamation of it as an organized deception.

As mentioned above, Dewey's ideas on how to address his contemporary crisis aim at improved forms of communication that thoroughly appropriate the technological potential for sharing experience. Dewey does not offer a simple recipe for a solution, however. Rather, he claims that (1) local communities and (2) direct face-to-face communication are necessary prerequisites for well-functioning publics under modern conditions.⁵⁰

As Chow Ken Q⁵¹ notes, both prerequisites seem at first to contradict a digitalization of publics. On closer inspection, however, the main criterion remains whether digital publics facilitate the development of intellectual instrumentalities in the sense outlined above.⁵² Furthermore, Antić⁵³ stresses convincingly that Dewey's insistence on spatial proximity and direct contact may be due to the fact that in his times, only this

⁴⁹ Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 296.

⁵⁰ Dewey, *Later Works 2*, 368–369.

⁵¹ Chow Ken Q, "The Internet and the Democratic Imagination": 62–63.

⁵² *Ibidem*: 64.

⁵³ Antić, *Digitale Öffentlichkeiten und intelligente Kooperation*, 284–285.

would allow for the necessary intensity of communication. In times of digital communication, however, this ceases to be a fundamental problem, since the affected publics can organize and communicate over the internet. So, wherever digital media allow for intensive exchange on public matters and where they support the development of solution-oriented concepts, the relevant prerequisites seem to be given. In other words, it is quite conceivable that digital communication can enable an exchange of views as intensive as in Dewey's ideal of town hall meetings.

If we take a look at the current crisis in democracy, however, and at the role that filter bubbles and echo chambers play here, this potential seems either not present or not realized. In any case, social media and online journalism do not lack *intensive communication*, what they lack is the development of shared conceptions that support communal learning. In the next section, I will take a closer look at the situational aspects of Dewey's concept of experience in order to bring some other aspects of his insistence on locality to the fore.

5. Dewey's embodied concept of experience

For the conception of digital publics, the arguments by Antić and Chow Ken Q outlined above focus on discursive-communicative aspects. At first glance, this seems sound, especially since those aspects are also at the center of Dewey's argument in *The Public and its Problems*. However, when we consider "shared experience" as a key concept, other aspects of Dewey's concept of experience come to the fore, which are discussed in other works in more detail. On the one hand, Dewey frequently emphasizes, as he does in *Human Nature and Conduct*,⁵⁴ that there is a need for rehearsing the consequences of our actions not in the abstract but *within the specific situational context* – and for comparing the experienced results with those anticipated.

On the other hand, his concept of experience is also an embodied one. This becomes clear, for example, in chapter 7 of *Experience and Nature*, where he positions himself in stark opposition to dualist conceptions of experience, especially to the division of mind and body. Instead, Dewey⁵⁵ argues for a continuity between the two poles and he uses the hyphenated term "body-mind" to highlight this idea. For Dewey, discursive-communicative reflection is a powerful and effective part of

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Middle Works 14*, 132.

⁵⁵ Dewey, *Later Works 1*, 217.

solving problems, but it is only part of a continuum that also entails other forms of interacting with the environment:

In the hyphenated phrase body-mind, 'body' designates the continued and conserved, the registered and cumulative operation of factors continuous with the rest of nature, inanimate as well as animate; while 'mind' designates the characters and consequences which are differential, indicative of features which emerge when 'body' is engaged in a wider, more complex and interdependent situation.⁵⁶

As Richard Shusterman⁵⁷ also has written: "In short, mental and bodily reactions are not two different things in search of a philosophical synthesis but are instead analytical abstractions already enveloped in a primal unity of purposive behavior."

I borrow the term "embodiment" from Phenomenology not to suggest that it is identical to Dewey's "body-mind," but to indicate a certain similarity. While I cannot discuss this in more detail here, I would like to highlight additionally Dewey's⁵⁸ characterizations of experience as "transdermally transactional" in *Experience and Nature*. Furthermore, Shusterman⁵⁹ discusses the influence of Frederick Matthias Alexander's work on transforming bodily habits (Alexander technique) on Dewey's thought. For him, nature, body, mind, communication and technology can be understood as a continuum of sensual-embodied and reflective-communicative experience.

Hence, when Dewey describes problem-based learning in his broader work, and when he puts his conception of experience in the center of such processes, he also highlights bodily involvement and he opposes mere conceptual and communicative learning: "Obviously, we think with our minds, but our bodies are an integral part of that work."⁶⁰ As Rölli⁶¹ notes, Dewey sees the isolation of parts of the continuum as separate, isolated, specific conditions in science and technology as one of

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 217.

⁵⁷ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 185.

⁵⁸ Dewey, *Later Works 1*, 215; cf. Sebastian Weydner-Volkman, *Moralische Landkarten der Sicherheit: Ein Framework zur hermeneutisch-ethischen Bewertung von Fluggastkontrollen im Anschluss an John Dewey* (Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag, 2018), 54–56.

⁵⁹ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 180–216.

⁶⁰ Coulter, "Preserving Rich Experience," 32.

⁶¹ Marc Rölli, "Kontinuum der Qualitäten," in: *John Dewey, Erfahrung und Natur*, ed. Michael Hampe (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 116.

the main roots for the disruptions due to technological progress, especially the separation of bodily and mental continuities of experience. For him, successful learning implies that the problem to be solved is experienced hands-on and that possible solutions can fail in our own experience when tried.

What we can conclude from this is that Dewey's conception of the public and his idea of shared experience cannot be seen as independent from these situated and embodied aspects. If we want to build on Dewey's political philosophy for a conception of digital publics, we will jump too short if we only focus on discursive-communicative aspects. Therefore, in the next section, I will complement this view with a discussion of Dewey's idea of embodied learning in the light of the idea of digitized publics.

6. Embodied learning and digital publics

What we can see from the above with regard to filter bubbles and echo chambers is that, even in the case of highly intensified communication, online journalism and social media cannot allow for shared experience in the fullest sense: whenever communication is separated from the continuities of everyday experience, when it mostly consists of references to contexts that are distant to us, it precludes an integration with situated and embodied experience. This is also what Dewey highlights in *The Public and its Problems* when he writes about disinformation in his own times:

This is the era of bunk and hokum [...] Until the last generation or so, the mass of men have been interested for the most part only in local matters, in things and people right about them. For the most part their convictions and thinking had to do with affairs of which they had some direct experience. Their range might be limited, but within it they had shrewdness and employed judgment. They were undoubtedly as gullible about remoter things as people are today. But these remoter things did not come within their scope of action [...] At the same time, it has become an object for some men to influence the beliefs the masses hold [...] Cheap printing and cheap distribution afford the opportunity to put the control of opinion into effect.⁶²

What can be concluded from this is that today's dominant forms of political communication on the Internet are problematic in so far as they

⁶² Dewey, *Middle Works 13*, 329–330.

tend toward sharing distant and qualitatively restricted forms of experience. After all, the filter bubble turns a *pluralism* of relevant perspectives into an *individualized* stream based on what I have consumed in the past. Here, locality is just one factor among many, and it has to compete with our emotional responsiveness to politicized controversies and trigger words. One could think, here, of the weeks-long “live” reporting on the vote-counting process during the US presidential elections in 2020. Despite its dominance in European media, the topic had little to do with lived and experienced reality on this side of the Atlantic – let alone with life in local neighborhoods.

If we look at the mechanism of the echo chamber, this becomes even clearer. As we could witness, trust in reported narratives can be undermined systematically; on the other hand, the local contexts of our lives seem much more robust. When New Yorkers could see the dead bodies brought out to refrigerated trucks in back alleys, it became much harder to convince them that COVID-19 was no more dangerous than the flu. As Jacobson⁶³ claims, this was the experience that forced then President Trump to change the country’s health policies. Mere narratives can be reinterpreted very quickly, and they can be questioned or defamed as a lie; communication about *local* contexts, however, either integrates with the range of experiences people make in their everyday lives – or it does not.

If this is true, one may wonder if Dewey’s philosophy can indeed offer ideas on how to deal with the problems raised by digital media. After all, it seems like digitalization has mostly exacerbated the negative tendencies of mass media. However, such a sweeping skepticism would only be a modernized version of the demonizing of technology that Dewey criticized in his own time. Rather, what follows from this, is the challenge to not only technically support *intensive* digital communication, but also an *anchoring in local contexts*, i.e., one that allows to integrate broader, digitally mediated political discourse with situative and embodied forms of experience.

Foremost, this implies the strengthening and appreciation of certain forms of local journalism, but also helping to bring together those who live near each other, in order to discuss local matters. What Dewey’s proposals for his contemporary crisis point toward for us today is the idea

⁶³ Lenz Jacobsen, “Corona-Epidemie: Unsere unsichtbaren Toten,” *Die Zeit*, 24.05.2020, access 15.06.2022, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-05/corona-epidemie-opfer-covid-19-infizierte-verstorbene-leid-sichtbarkeit>.

to use digital communication integrated with situative and embodied experience, not decoupled and abstracted from it. Examples that give but a vague idea of this could be the participatory platform “maerker.brandenburg.de” that Antić⁶⁴ mentions, where citizens are put in contact with local authorities. Furthermore, in reference to Dewey, Niesyto⁶⁵ discusses the interesting potential of digital media to create not so much one big European public, but rather a plurality of *trans-local* publics across the continent: in Dewey’s procedural conception of stakeholder publics, one may envision several publics that digitally bring together neighborhoods with similar issues (e.g., post-industrial structural change) so as to try different solutions and learn from each other’s successes and failures.

In this sense, Dewey’s insistence on locality and face-to-face communication should not be mistaken to imply a cyber-pessimistic view, but rather a demand for better digital media that support rather than undermine democracy. Therefore, a Deweyan conception of localized experience is not *opposed* to digital mediation of public communication, but it formulates the very difficult *challenge* to realize this mediation in a way that allows for a continuum between broader political discourse online and the issues individuals experience when they step outside their front door.

Conclusions

In the debate on digital media, Dewey’s political philosophy is often presented as a way to highlight digital media’s potential for strengthening participatory democracy. Here, the discursive-communicative aspects of Dewey’s concept of experience are at the center of the debate. However, as I have shown, the situative-embodied aspects that are also central to his understanding of experience and of learning are not adequately reflected in this discussion. I have discussed two prominent problematic mechanisms of digital media, the filter bubble and the echo chamber, and I have shown that these aspects are highly relevant for the locality of publics that Dewey insists is necessary. I have argued that for well-functioning publics in the digital age, Dewey’s philosophy points toward a technologically mediated anchoring of broader discussions in

⁶⁴ Antić, *Digitale Öffentlichkeiten und intelligente Kooperation*, 287.

⁶⁵ Johanna Niesyto, “Europäische Öffentlichkeit im Internet,” *Navigationen – Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften* 8(2) (2008): 43.

local, situative contexts as a necessary precondition to respond to the challenge of these two mechanisms. The current lack of such an anchoring explains what seems like a return of the “era of bunk and hokum,” of a problematic susceptibility to commercially or politically motivated disinformation.

It is frustrating that Dewey’s philosophy does not present us with a simple recipe for solving this issue, neither for his own time nor for ours. It remains largely unclear how exactly such an anchoring could take form in the digital age. Nevertheless, his philosophy defines and underscores our current challenge to reshape digital media and to gain a better understanding of the connection between problematic mechanisms like filter bubbles and echo chambers on the one side and shared experience on the other. It also suggests that it is misguided to expect being able to end the era of digital “bunk and hokum” by implementing online filters for mis- and disinformation so as to simply hide it from public view. This will not lead to something like “shared experience.” Instead, we should raise a very Deweyan question: *How do we make use of digital technologies to make bunk and hokum fail in the light of local, embodied experiences?*

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Summary

This article explores what John Dewey's political philosophy can offer in regard to the current crisis in digital democracy. It focuses on two digital mechanisms, the "filter bubble" and the "echo chamber." While there is a prominent, Dewey-inspired debate on "digital publics" in the literature, a reconstruction of the Deweyan concepts of the public and of shared experience shows that it does not adequately reflect the aspect of situated and embodied experience. Based on this, it is shown that digital media offerings must also be rooted in local contexts of experience in order to answer the challenge of those two problematic mechanisms.

Keywords: filter bubble, echo chamber, digital democracy, democratic public, John Dewey