

# Rethinking the Post-Truth Polarisation Narrative: Social Roles and Hinge Commitments in the Plural Public Sphere

NATALIE ALANA ASHTON AND ROWAN CRUFT

## Abstract

This article critically evaluates what we call the ‘popular narrative’ about the state of the public sphere. We identify three elements of this popular narrative (the post-truth element, the polarisation element and the new technology element), and draw on philosophical work on hinge epistemology and social roles to challenge each one. We propose, instead, that public debate has always depended on non-evidential commitments, that it has always been home to significant, deep division, and that social media, rather than causing these phenomena, has just made them more visible. Finally, we recommend some changes to traditional and social media which we believe would help foster a healthier, more inclusive, public sphere.

**Keywords:** post-truth, polarisation, social media, hinge epistemology, evidence, social roles

## The popular post-truth narrative

THERE HAS BEEN a lot of discussion about changes to contemporary public debate, and the dawning of what’s been called a ‘post-truth era’. Much of this discussion fits with the following popular narrative: that we’re living in a post-truth era, where many members of the public no longer respect facts and evidence, and instead respond to emotional, dogmatic claims that reinforce their existing beliefs. Society is becoming more polarised as these non-evidential influences pull members of the public away from a common, centre ground, towards extreme far right and far left positions. This is caused, or at least worsened, by an unregulated social media which lack the rigorous empirical standards of traditional (broadcast and print) news, and which allow misinformation to run rampant, whilst echo chambers reinforce pre-existing beliefs and filter out conflicting evidence.

We discuss, and challenge, three elements of this popular narrative which we believe are more complicated than this narrative suggests:

- *Post-truth element:* there is a loss of respect for facts and evidence in the public sphere.
- *Polarisation element:* the public sphere is becoming increasingly divided.

- *New technology element:* these changes have been caused (or significantly exacerbated) by social media.

The first two outline purported changes to the arena of contemporary public debate, whilst the third points to a cause of them. We argue that the changes referenced in the first two elements are to some extent overblown and that social media have instead, rather than causing these changes, revealed aspects of the public sphere that were there all along. We think the following three claims paint a more comprehensive picture:

- *Non-evidential commitments:* debates in the public sphere, like all debates, require some biases, values, and other commitments which cannot be supported by evidence.
- *Pre-existing diversity:* the public sphere has always contained significant (albeit unacknowledged and sometimes unexpressed) division.
- *Media responsibility:* one of social media’s most significant effects on the public sphere has been to reveal its pre-existing nature.

In order to do this, we will first need to introduce a view called *hinge epistemology*, that

shows the importance of non-evidential commitments (or ‘hinges’) to our most basic epistemic practices. We then argue that hinges are crucial for other epistemic practices, including public debate. This will undermine the post-truth element of the popular narrative. Next, we argue that public debate has always involved a variety of different social roles and social locations, each with their own hinges. This will undermine the polarisation element of the popular narrative. Finally, we clarify the way that social media have affected the public sphere, throwing some doubt on the new technology element of the popular narrative, and make some recommendations for how the public sphere can be improved in light of this.

## Hinge commitments

We think it is unhelpful to distinguish a particular era of human history as being ‘post-truth’—where this means that public debate is based on, or appeals to, non-evidential considerations—because our belief-formation practices have always rested on non-evidential foundations. A view called hinge epistemology can help make this clear.

Hinge epistemology arose in response to the problems thrown up by *radical sceptical scenarios*. These are scenarios which call all our knowledge into question in one go. A classic example points out that, in spite of your current perceptions to the contrary, you might be a disembodied brain suspended in a vat of green liquid, with all your apparent experiences being prompted by well-placed electrodes. Or, perhaps you are a butterfly dreaming that it is human, or you are a human plugged into a hyper-realistic computer simulation.

However unlikely you think such scenarios are, you cannot rule them out—at least not by appealing to evidence, because any evidence that you might draw upon (about the capabilities of current science, or the architecture of a butterfly’s brain) is called into question by the scenario itself. No one is suggesting these scenarios are actually true; the power of radical sceptical scenarios is that their mere possibility appears to undermine almost all of our knowledge. If we cannot rule out that we’re disembodied brains in vats, then it seems we cannot know anything incompatible with that scenario either: even something as simple as

that we have two hands. Even if the scenario isn’t true and things are just as they appear, we can’t *know* that they are.

In response, hinge epistemologists have argued that the practice of doubting has similar rules to the practice of belief: both need to be supported by stronger evidence than themselves in order to be taken seriously. Imagine a restaurateur is trying to convince you that their establishment is the most popular in the city. You are more likely to be persuaded by reviews on an independent website than by a sign in the restaurant’s window, because the reviews offer further, and more compelling, evidence, and the sign does not. Similarly, if I tried to make you doubt that a close friend is trustworthy, you would expect me to have grounds for doubt that were more certain than the doubt itself. You would expect me to have proof of a concrete betrayal, rather than a general feeling of distrust. The very general, hypothetical worry that ‘you could be a brain in a vat’ is not evidentially grounded—there is nothing I can point to which makes it seem likely, or even plausible—and so, hinge epistemologists say, it should not shake your confidence in your everyday beliefs.

If hinge epistemologists are right, then some claims—such as ‘I am not a brain in a vat’ and ‘my perceptual faculties are broadly reliable’—have an unusual epistemic status. They cannot be supported by evidence, but they cannot be doubted with evidence either. No matter how hard and long you look for evidence for—or against—the claim that you are not a brain in a vat, you will not find any. These claims do not respond to evidence in the usual way: they are too close to the foundations of our beliefs. But, precisely because they are so close to the foundations of our beliefs, they are absolutely necessary to our epistemic practices. We cannot believe or doubt any other claims about the external world unless these non-evidential claims are in place. So, while it is perhaps not quite right to say we *believe* these non-evidential claims, hinge epistemologists say that we legitimately *accept*, or are *committed to*, them. And we can therefore justifiably believe other claims which rest on them—such as the claim that we have hands.

The term ‘hinge epistemology’ was chosen because of this unusual status. It comes from an analogy Wittgenstein used: he said claims like these are the ‘hinges’ which must stay

put if we want the door to turn.<sup>1</sup> Non-evidential commitments like these are essential to our everyday belief-forming practices, because our ability to navigate the world hinges on them.

## Hinge commitments in public debate

The lesson of hinge epistemology is that our most basic epistemic practices are dependent on unquestionable commitments that cannot be supported by evidence. It has been argued that the same general point applies to other, less basic epistemic practices too.<sup>2</sup> Whenever we conduct an inquiry—whether a formal one like a scientific investigation, or a more informal one like a conversation with a friend—some things need to be taken as read in order for that inquiry to proceed.

We always need the basic, anti-sceptical hinge commitments, regardless of what inquiry we are carrying out. But there are other, local hinge commitments, that are necessary for our everyday inquiries. We broadly assume the information we get from others is reliable unless we have a specific reason not to. The reason we do this is not (just) because we are kind-hearted and charitable; it is epistemically necessary. If you were to doubt the information you got from others without a specific reason, you would not be able to conduct even the most mundane epistemic inquiries; you could not ask for directions, follow an instruction manual, or have a basic conversation about the weather.

There are also hinges we need in order to carry out inquiries within ‘the public sphere’. This is the name we give to the spaces in which citizens of a democracy deliberate about which policies and parties they, as a society, want to be governed by. Historically, this meant gathering in a physical space, like a public square. Now it typically means views reported in print and broadcast news and, more recently, on social media.

Such deliberations are a kind of epistemic inquiry too. They are where citizens formulate

beliefs on important issues such as how to respond to climate change, and what proportion of social resources to invest in education. And so, there are commitments citizens need to accept for the inquiry to proceed. For example, perhaps the following commitment is necessary for successful participation in the public sphere: other citizens have valuable knowledge to contribute, and I may need to adjust my beliefs accordingly. Such commitments are like general background principles which have to be accepted for democratic deliberation to proceed. Whilst we may sometimes have evidence for (or doubts about) them, when we are participating in the practice of democratic deliberation, they are comparable to the anti-sceptical hinges discussed above: they have to stand fast—even if we have no evidence for them at all—because the process of inquiry hinges on them. They are essential to navigating the world as a citizen.

If this is correct, some non-evidential commitments have always been part of the public sphere; successful democratic debate could not proceed without them. Characterising any particular era of debate as ‘post-truth’ (where this means ‘involving appeals to non-evidential commitments’) is unhelpful. It suggests that limiting ourselves to facts and evidence will improve the quality and the outcomes of public debate, when in fact public debate hinges on certain non-evidential commitments.

Before moving on we want to highlight an important distinction between *non-evidential* commitments, and *anti-evidential* commitments. When we describe hinge commitments as non-evidential, we are saying they have a very particular relationship with evidence—they cannot be supported or doubted whilst inquiry is underway. They may be responsive to evidence outside the given inquiry, but within the inquiry they must be bracketed. Falsehoods and lies are not bracketed from evidence-responsiveness. When Sean Spicer—acting as then President Donald Trump’s press secretary—said that the crowd at the National Mall was ‘the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration’, that wasn’t a principle of inquiry that needed to be held fast for deliberation to continue. It could, within the debate at hand, be doubted or (if it weren’t false) supported by evidence. And in fact, Spicer attempted to support it with evidence at the time, citing—incorrect—figures of how many trips were made on the DC Metro.

<sup>1</sup>L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, London, HarperCollins, [1969] 1972.

<sup>2</sup>M. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1996. A. Coliva, *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Anti-evidential claims, like falsehoods and lies, do not lie beyond the scope of our evidential practices as hinge commitments do; they simply contravene them. Endorsing the acceptance of hinge commitments does not mean endorsing falsehoods, and if an increase in falsehoods was what people meant when they say ‘post-truth’ we would be inclined to agree with them. But we do not think that is all that people mean when they talk about living in a post-truth era, because (a) falsehoods and lies have always been a significant problem in the public sphere, and (b) it would be naïve to suggest that they are caused by a lack of respect for evidence, rather than plain ignorance and wilful self-interest.

## Social roles and polarisation

Re-evaluating the post-truth element of the popular narrative, as we have done above, will have ramifications for the polarisation element, too. The polarisation element says that non-evidential commitments have undermined the single, unified common ground the public once shared, and pushed us towards two extreme poles. If hinge epistemology is correct that our epistemic practices have always hinged on non-evidential commitments, then it seems strange to blame them for any movement (towards poles or elsewhere). Non-evidential commitments may be part of the story, in the same way that a room full of dry paper is relevant to the explanation of why a fire starts. But if we want to understand why the public sphere looks different, we should be searching for something new—the equivalent of an open flame—not factors that have been present all along.

We will not argue for a particular explanation of polarisation here (though we are tempted by explanations in terms of worsening material inequality, the broadening of the gap between rich and poor, and increased awareness of this gap). Instead, our goal in this section is to question whether polarisation has actually taken place to the extent, and in the way, that the popular narrative presumes. The popular narrative describes polarisation as a movement away from a unified common ground, but we question whether such a common ground ever existed.

In the previous section we said that inquiries in the public sphere hinge on non-evidential commitments. If everyone shared the same commitments, then the popular narrative’s

assumption—that we all, at some point, shared a unified common ground—would make sense. But the real world is messier than this. None of us are merely citizens. We all have other social roles—such as parent, child, teacher, doctor—and we all occupy one of a wide variety of social locations—such as able-bodied, working class, white woman—which come with their own epistemic commitments too.<sup>3</sup> For example, we might say the role of a doctor hinges on commitments such as the following: the diagnosis which is statistically most common, given my patient’s symptoms and history, is the correct one.

Just as participating in democratic deliberation requires an openness to revise one’s beliefs in light of one’s fellow citizens’ arguments, similarly, carrying out inquiries and navigating the world as a doctor requires reliable, but fallible, heuristics like this. It enables doctors, in the vast majority of cases, to prescribe the right treatment, whilst still being able to distribute finite resources (for example, time and local testing capabilities) between many patients. And doubting it would mean stepping outside the role of a doctor. But, perhaps the patient’s parent is not entitled to that commitment. Perhaps their role determines that they should reserve judgement and keep a close eye on their child for new or worsening symptoms. Although the doctor and the parent accept different commitments here, it does not seem like either of them are wrong. It is just that navigating the world as a doctor and navigating the world as a parent require different commitments.

In addition to various social roles, we each also occupy a particular social location which offers yet more hinges. Think of the male employers in the 1960s and early 1970s who unthinkingly accepted something like the following: making comments about female employees’ bodies is just a bit of fun. This commitment facilitated their navigation of the world as men. It helped them to maintain a feeling of dominance and security at a time

<sup>3</sup>S. Wright, ‘Virtues, social roles, and contextualism’, *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 41, nos. 1–2, 2010, pp. 95–114; <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01629.x> (accessed 28 June 2021). N. A. Ashton, ‘Appropriate belief without evidence’, *Teorema: International Journal of Philosophy*, no. 2, 2015, pp. 7–28.

when women—who had only achieved the vote within living memory—were entering the workforce in greater numbers. Of course, that commitment was harder for women on the receiving end of such comments to accept, as it was an obstacle to forming coherent understandings of their experiences: if these comments were ‘a bit of fun’ then why did they make them deeply uncomfortable? Viewed from outside the male employers’ social location, this commitment seemed dubious and was (fairly successfully) challenged. Multiple women in the US—particularly black women with experience of the civil rights movement—brought legal cases against their (white) male employers, and the concept of sexual harassment has now been enshrined in law in 122 countries. As the commitment to understanding lewd comments as ‘a bit of fun’ accrued legal and social costs, it became increasingly unhelpful for navigating the world as a male employer, until it (largely) lost its status as a hinge.

In this section we have shown that the public sphere is, and always has been, pluralistic.<sup>4</sup> Although democratic deliberation requires us to meet as citizens with a shared commitment to updating our beliefs in response to each other, our other social roles require us to bring additional hinges to the table too, and these often conflict. We’ve also hinted at how non-evidential commitments can be questioned, and even successfully changed, from outside—an advisory board might question and update the commitments of a doctor in light of new evidence, for example, and social and legal progress can make material changes which affect whether a commitment helps navigate the world.

## Social media’s impact on the public sphere

The third element of the popular narrative is that social media are (at least partly) to blame for two big changes that have taken place in the public sphere. In the previous sections we questioned the popular narrative regarding these changes, and in this section we challenge the popular narrative about their cause.

<sup>4</sup>Compare J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, 2005 on the ‘fact of reasonable pluralism’.

For a long time, traditional media were the dominant forums for democratic deliberation. Print and broadcast news outlets collect and share information relevant to their readers’ interests and, in doing so, they highlight social problems, prompt conversations about how to address them, and elicit responses from the relevant governing bodies. Let’s say a library in a small village is only open on weekday mornings. A local journalist might ask members of the community what they think about this, discover—and then write an article reporting—that the opening hours are a barrier to access, and in doing so, prompt a conversation which pressures the local council to assign more funding so the library’s hours can be extended.

According to the common narrative, social media diverted attention away from this traditional forum, and prompted a downward spiral of reduced funding, lower quality reporting, declining interest and trust, and shrinking circulation (which then prompts the next round of the spiral). Whilst this is true, it is important to also recognise the other factors in play. Many papers were, and remain, vulnerable to syndicalisation and centralisation owing to private ownership.<sup>5</sup> Their owners were willing to chase profits and page clicks at the expense of local democracy.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the UK government has reduced the financial support it gives the BBC.<sup>7</sup> The journalist who would have spent a couple

<sup>5</sup>E. J. Limb, ‘The future of local journalism lies in community ownership’, *Tribune*, 12 July 2020; <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/07/the-future-of-local-journalism-lies-in-community-ownership> (accessed 28 June 2021).

<sup>6</sup>T. Bagshaw, ‘What happens when our local news disappears? How UK local newspapers are closing and coverage of court proceedings is not happening’, *Index on Censorship*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2019; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0306422019842090> (accessed 28 June 2021).

<sup>7</sup>‘Television licence fee to be frozen for next six years’, *BBC News*, 20 October 2010; <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-11572171>; J. Martinson and J. Plunkett, ‘George Osborne forces BBC to pay for over-75s’ TV licences’, *The Guardian*, 6 July 2015; <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jul/06/osborne-slashes-bbc-budget-pay-over-75s-tv-licences>; A. Barker, ‘BBC faces era of cuts after reporting “substantial shortfall”’, *Financial Times*, 15 September 2020; <https://www.ft.com/content/d8e1911e-6233-4f2a-bc0b-7dfd97f9ff55> (all accessed 28 June 2021).

of days ‘in the field’ interviewing community members about the local library a few years ago might now have just a few hours to source quotes from—and perhaps build entire stories around—social media posts. But this is not solely the fault of social media—the more fundamental threat to democracy is concentrated private ownership and political austerity.

Something else which can be attributed more squarely to social media—and the internet generally—is increased awareness of the diversity that exists in the public sphere. Traditional media were historically aimed at just a small subset of the public. They catered to, and reflected the views of, property owning white men, who were both the only people who could vote (until 1918) and the people most likely to make purchasing decisions for their household. Whilst mainstream media outlets have made efforts to diversify their offerings over the decades, this has often meant creating separate, dedicated programming (such as the BBC’s *Woman’s Hour*, running since 1946). More recent efforts to make substantial changes to broadcasting and journalistic practices themselves (such as those championed by Media Diversified, founded in 2013) have made progress, but are far from complete. As such, until recently traditional media still gave—and perhaps the overwhelmingly white, middle class people working in it still had—the impression of a broadly unified public sphere. Social media have helped dispel this myth, as now any citizen with a mobile phone can connect with like-minded people, and voice their (collective) interests for themselves. It has become much easier to articulate and broadcast our own opinions and, if they resonate with others, they have the potential to reach thousands or even millions of people. Issues no longer have to capture the attention of editors and journalists in order to become ‘news’.

This has created the impression of a sudden splintering of the public sphere, but the diversity of opinion and interests was always there. They were just not as visible to some people before social media reduced the barriers to contributing to the public sphere. Similarly, social media have made dependence on non-evidential commitments more apparent. One’s own commitments are difficult to spot if they are shared by the majority of people one encounters. And even if we meet someone who does not share them, we may pay more

attention to the commitments they have that we do not share. In such a case, their commitments strike us as particularly novel and unreasonable, and create the impression that the other person or group is uniquely willing to accept non-evidential commitments, in contrast to our, supposedly undiluted, respect for evidence and facts.

If this is correct, then a renewed focus on facts and evidence will not help us improve the public sphere; that idea is based on seeking to return to a unified common ground that never existed. Instead, we need to work towards a pluralistic public sphere which accepts and embraces a diversity of roles, experiences and values. This will likely involve some shared fundamental commitments—such as the citizen hinge we suggested above—in recognition of each other’s ‘common humanity’ as contributors to the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> But it will differ sharply from a return to a narrow public sphere in which differences are hidden or denied.

## Recommendations for a healthy public sphere

Having undermined the popular narrative and its suggestions for improving the health of the public sphere, we now make some brief alternative recommendations for fostering a public sphere that recognises—and works with—the plurality of the public sphere, rather than attempting, vainly, to constrain it. We start with recommendations for traditional media, before offering some constructive thoughts on social media.

### *Traditional media*

In the previous section we outlined several challenges that traditional media currently face. Many of these require practical and regulatory changes which are outside the scope of our expertise, for example, decentralising and decommercialising ownership and/or increasing arms’ length government funding for a diverse range of media outlets.<sup>9</sup> But there is

<sup>8</sup>R. Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>9</sup>N. Fenton, D. Freedman, J. Schlosberg and L. Dencik, *The Media Manifesto*, Cambridge, Polity, 2020.

also important theoretical work to be done on the social role of the journalist, whose widely accepted role within a democratic society is to voice public concerns and hold power to account, but whose hinge commitments often hold them back from doing this.

We argued above that some of journalism's basic practices stem from a historical assumption of a single, broadly unified 'public' comprising male 'heads of households'. Of course, this is a simplified view and there has always been some diversity of media outlets. But we believe the assumption that there is a fundamentally unified 'public' has contributed to the traditional media's current vulnerability. In light of this, those working in traditional media should acknowledge that the task of articulating the concerns of 'the public' is more complicated than it was once thought to be. This means bringing attention and clarity to a plurality of viewpoints which differ at their very foundations. Social media have made these different viewpoints much easier to find, so merely gathering and reporting on them is no longer a unique journalistic skill. But understanding and appreciating viewpoints that clash with our own, and interpreting and facilitating assessment of them, is much more difficult. If the journalist's role is to facilitate democratic deliberation, this is the area they now need to focus on. This could mean a revitalised version of 'local' correspondents who are properly embedded—not just in different regional areas, but in different communities of shared social roles and locations, and who are therefore able to understand and articulate their interests in a way that even those with different fundamental commitments can relate to. Social media provide a (flawed) forum for different groups to communicate and learn from one another, so if journalists are to compete they need to find ways to foster genuine, productive interaction.

Relatedly, we think the journalist's commitment to impartiality needs to be reconsidered, and we recognise that there is current lively debate on this issue.<sup>10</sup> It is widely accepted that journalists should not use their role to advance personal interests, and that navigating the world as a journalist hinges on some level of impartiality. But this commitment is interpreted more strongly in some media outlets

than others. In some cases, it goes as far as withholding from any expression of social or political investment whatsoever. For example, the BBC recently reprimanded its presenter Naga Munchetty (in a decision later overturned owing to public pressure) for expressing the view that a particular expression used by then President Donald Trump had, when said to her in other contexts, been racist.

Such a commitment to impartiality seems to be in tension with holding power to account. Think again about the library example above. The journalist in that case picked a side to advocate for. If she had maintained strict impartiality, her article may not have exerted the same pressure on the council and led to the library's hours being changed. Most real life issues are more complicated than this (as they often involve different and at least superficially competing public interests), so partiality requires careful consideration. But, we endorse current conversations about whether there can be a sophisticated version of partiality that is better suited to holding power to account than impartiality—and, therefore, whether it has a place amongst the journalist's hinge commitments.

### *Social media*

Unlike traditional media, most social media platforms were not built with democratic public deliberation in mind. Facebook originated as a student directory and its usage was initially limited to students of certain universities, before expanding out to other universities and schools. But now, it clearly is a space of public deliberation: it has evolved into a global discussion platform and is the primary source of news and information for a significant proportion of adults.<sup>11</sup> So, we urgently need a clear understanding of the way these platforms shape the deliberation that they host.

Given the need to respect the plurality of the public sphere, we should think particularly about the extent to which different platforms enable interaction between people with different social roles and backgrounds. For example, on Twitter it is possible—and very common—to 'follow' people who you don't know in real life, and

<sup>10</sup>L. Raven Wallace, *The View From Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, Chicago IL, Chicago University Press, 2019.

<sup>11</sup>'Usage of social media as a news source worldwide as of February 2020', *Statista*; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/718019/social-media-news-source/> (accessed 28 June 2021).

who may be very different from anyone you do know in many politically and socially salient ways. Facebook, on the other hand, was designed primarily with existing relationships—friends, family and colleagues—in mind. Twitter exposes people to new points of view—something that is crucial for a healthy, pluralistic public sphere—whilst Facebook allows relatively intimate, private conversations, which can be conducive to processing and evaluating new ideas. A healthy pluralistic public sphere will likely require both these elements, and so we need to think carefully about what the ideal balance between them would be, and how to achieve this in our online spaces.<sup>12</sup>

We should also think carefully about how both existing and new social roles interact with social media environments. We have argued that social roles have their own hinge commitments. We have also suggested that certain traditional roles—journalist, politician, citizen—have been central to the division of labour constitutive of modern democratic deliberation. Consider how platforms handled one such existing social role, the presidency: many major platforms suspended Donald Trump for violating their terms of service—as they would any other user—whilst others took extraordinary steps to remove or obscure content he posted because of the significance of his social role. In both cases, these steps were only taken as he approached the end of his presidency. What steps is it appropriate to take against a world leader who violates a platform's terms of service? Should there be special rules for those who have a lot of power?<sup>13</sup> Are there any contexts in which a world leader can be considered to be acting as merely a private citizen?

Relatedly, we should think carefully about the new social roles that social media have given rise to. Should we think of social media

influencers—users with a large following who sometimes get paid to promote products and services to their audiences—as entertainers, or as freelance advertisers? And what about unpaid individuals who find themselves becoming spokespeople for the marginalised groups they are part of? They are often labelled as 'activists', but many object to this characterisation and maintain that they are merely citizens voicing their interests in the public sphere like anyone else. Is this right, or might we consider them as embedded, invested (albeit unpaid) journalists? If social media rules and regulation are to respect the distinctive function of the social roles that enable democratic debate—as with the President of the United States—it's important to have a clear understanding of the functions that new roles play in the public sphere. Roles such as social media influencer and 'activist' are currently under-specified or misunderstood. These questions go beyond mere labels, since the way someone's role is understood affects its hinge commitments, as well as affecting how the role's occupants are treated in important ways—not least in the eyes of the law.

## Concluding thoughts

We have argued, contrary to the popular narrative, for the following claims: democratic deliberation has always rested, unproblematically, on non-evidential commitments; the public sphere has always been home to significant, deep division; and social media have merely made these facts more apparent. We also recommended some changes to traditional and social media which could improve the health of the public sphere. Although we have framed our suggestions in opposition to the popular narrative, they are not particularly radical. The driving thought behind theories of the public sphere has always been that good epistemic outcomes and autonomous collective democratic choices come from interactions between different perspectives. Our proposals, whilst differing on the details, are still true to this picture.

*Natalie Alana Ashton* is a philosopher working on feminist epistemology and social media at the University of Stirling. *Rowan Cruft* is a philosopher working on ethics, human rights, and the public sphere at the University of Stirling.

<sup>12</sup>N. Ashton, 'Why Twitter is (epistemically) better than Facebook', *Logically*, 26 November 2020; <https://www.logically.ai/articles/why-twitter-is-epistemically-better-than-facebook> (accessed 28 June 2021).

<sup>13</sup>Twitter is right to have special rules for Donald Trump—it's recognising that not all tweets are equal', *The Conversation*, 22 July 2019; <https://theconversation.com/twitter-is-right-to-have-special-rules-for-donald-trump-its-recognising-that-not-all-tweets-are-equal-120547> (accessed 28 June 2021).