

Digital Life and the Rise of Fundamentalism

Thanks to the proliferation of smartphones and social media and the additive comfort of connection to the internet, people, not least the youth generation, are experiencing new forms of life. This dramatic change, however, from inhabiting the real world to virtual one, carries with it profound cultural, social, geopolitical and other changes. When it comes to the role of authorities the traditional ones are often losing their influence and the new (types of) authorities, in turn, are emerging. Importantly, moreover, the way of gaining knowledge is also considerably shifting from an author-oriented search to a content-oriented one. In other words, whereas in the real world we usually seek initially a reputable source to gain a specific kind of information, within the cyberspace we tend to seek a content without much attending to its author. Consequently, with the decline of authenticity of the content, the fake news or misinformation grows, and the landscape of social epistemology is shifting.

Further, thanks to the features embedded in social media platforms, ranging from filtration, customization, personalization, anonymity to multiple accounts, relying also on various AI algorithms, digital users may get stuck in their “bubbles” wherein they would hear merely the voice of like-minded individuals without being bothered to face any credible rival views. Such phenomenon is what is usually called ‘echo chamber’ where individuals, gradually, come to adopt more radical views after a while of being exposed exclusively to the echo of their own views.

Both the aforementioned points, i.e. shifting roles of authorities and digital bubbles, in conjunction, appear to provide a fertile soil to the growth of extremism of various types, such as (religious) fundamentalism. In this talk we will explore the potentials of digital life for the rise of fundamentalism. If the growth of fundamentalism is, in part, indebted to social media platforms, and they are promoting radicalism, then they should be also part of the solution to countering it. In the light of this insight, we will be calling for a revision in the design of the existing social media platforms and re-balancing it in light of human well-being and basic human goods. In our approach we will draw among others on post-phenomenological tradition.