

An Avalanche of Speech Can Bury Democracy | POLITICO Magazine

By Zeynep Tufekci

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Zeynep Tufekci argues that the current “information avalanche” we experience in the digital era is detrimental to democracy. She says that it disrupts common ground, making it harder to have a common set of facts and shared understandings. Tufekci calls for others to innovate ways to get back to that common ground.

For the longest time, we thought that as speech became more democratized, democracy itself would flourish. As more and more people could broadcast their words and opinions, there would be an ever-fiercer battle of ideas—with truth emerging as the winner, stronger from the fight. But in 2018, it is increasingly clear that more speech can in fact threaten democracy. The glut of information we now face, made possible by digital tools and social media platforms, can bury what is true, greatly elevate and amplify misinformation and distract from what is important.

Deluged by apparent facts, arguments and counterarguments, our brains resort to the most obvious filter, the easiest cognitive shortcut for a social animal: We look to our peers, see what they believe and cheer along. As a result, open and participatory speech has turned into its opposite. Important voices are silenced by mobs of trolls using open platforms to hurl abuse and threats. Bogus news shared from one friend or follower to the next becomes received wisdom. Crucial pieces of information drown in so much irrelevance that they are lost. If books were burned in the street, we would be alarmed. Now, we are simply exhausted.

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