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Absolute Freedom of Speech and Social Media: Deconstructing the Argument of Individual Self-Realization

La libertad de expresión absoluta y las redes sociales: Deconstruyendo el argumento de la autorrealización individual

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Abstract: The paper challenges the absolute conception of freedom of speech as an unconditional means for individual self-realization. Firstly, it discusses the positions of Scanlon and Redish, revealing the inherent vulnerabilities in their arguments. Subsequently, it argues against the view of unlimited freedom of speech as fundamental to self-realization. Finally, even if one were to accept the premise of self-realization as an axiom, social media would not qualify as suitable arenas for its actualization, given their inability to replicate the fundamental characteristics of a public sphere that favors open, plural, and rational debate.
Keywords: Self-Fulfillment, Autonomy, Scanlon, Social Media, Public Sphere, Habermas.

Resumen: El artículo cuestiona la concepción absoluta de la libertad de expresión como medio incondicional para la autorrealización individual. Inicialmente, se discute la posición de Scanlon y Redish, revelando las vulnerabilidades inherentes a sus argumentos. A continuación, se argumenta en contra de la visión de una libertad de expresión ilimitada como esencial para la autorrealización. Finalmente, aun aceptando la premisa de la autorrealización como axioma, las redes sociales no se calificarían como arenas adecuadas para su efectuación, dada su incapacidad para replicar las características fundamentales de una esfera pública que favorezca el debate abierto, plural y racional.
Palabras clave: Autorrealización, Autonomía, Scanlon, Redes Sociales, Esfera Pública, Habermas.

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1. Preliminary Considerations

Freedom of speech is commonly defined as the inalienable right of every individual to express their opinions, ideas, and thoughts, free from fear of retaliation or censorship by government entities, society, or other individuals. This concept has its roots deeply intertwined with the evolution of individual rights and the strengthening of democracy. In contemporary times, it is observed that some groups advocate for freedom of speech in an absolute manner, without, however, basing their claims on robust arguments that give it a convincing legal or philosophical foundation (Bresolin, 2023a: 764).

In this paper, I will explore an argument often mobilized in defense of the concept of absolute and unrestricted freedom of speech, specifically, the principle of individual self-realization. This argument is fundamentally distinct from the Millian conception of the «Marketplace of Ideas» (Bresolin, 2023b: 469), positing that any restrictions on freedom of speech significantly compromise the development of individuals' capabilities and autonomy. I will argue that this perspective faces various significant problems that challenge its consistency and theoretical sustainability.

After deconstructing the argument in favor of absolute freedom of speech, I intend to demonstrate that the environment of social media, often considered a space for the manifestation of free expression, does not constitute a legitimate extension of the public sphere. Due to the control exercised by large technology corporations, social media do not promote an open, free, and plural debate. On the contrary, through algorithms that create «filter bubbles», these platforms facilitate the self-confirmation of pre-existing ideas and exacerbate polarization. This mechanism limits exposure to divergent perspectives and, consequently, restricts the possibility of a genuinely democratic and constructive dialogue in the digital sphere.

In this context, even if we were to adopt the argument of individual self-realization as a justification for the defense of absolute freedom of speech, such freedom would not find practical applicability on social media platforms. These platforms do not favor the autonomy and self-development of the individual; on the contrary, the operational dynamics of social media, driven by algorithms that shape the user experience, tend to restrict the spectrum of ideas and information accessible. This limitation directly interferes with the process of critical formation and the capacity for self-development of the individual, compromising the fundamental basis of the self-realization argument.

2. Individual Self-Fulfillment

While the argument of freedom of speech as a discovery of truth presents itself as consequentialist, as a means to an end, freedom of speech as an aspect of Self-Fulfillment carries an intrinsic value, particularly according to Scanlon's conception (1972). Thus, this view understands freedom of speech as a fundamental aspect of the individual's right to self-development and realization, that is, a right as an «intrinsic and independent good» (Barendt, 2007: 13). Therefore, any form of censorship of freedom of speech becomes an obstacle to the growth and personality of the individual. Redish advocates that any external judgment claiming that a certain expression promotes Self-Fulfillment more than another is

a violation of the individual's free will, as recognizing this is fundamental to the principle of Self-Fulfillment (Redish, 1982: 592). This author champions the value of Self-Fulfillment, emphasizing freedom of speech as fundamental for individual development and self-governance. He identifies two essential components in Self-Fulfillment: the development of individual skills and capabilities (self-development) and control over one's own destiny through impactful life decisions (self-governance).

In this manner, Redish argues that freedom of speech directly promotes self-development, as free expression is an essential tool for personal growth, enabling people to explore and express their ideas, which in turn contributes to the development of their cognitive and emotional skills. The ability to express oneself freely is seen as fundamental to personal evolution, a central aspect of Self-Fulfillment. Freedom of speech promotes self-governance only indirectly, to the extent that it provides a free flow of information and opinions that guide people in their decisions (Baker, 1982: 668).

Redish considers Self-Fulfillment central to democracy, arguing that it entails the protection of freedom of speech, given that democracy promotes values of self-governance and self-development. Democracy is nothing more than a means for the development and Self-Fulfillment of individuals. According to Redish, proponents of the freedom of speech argument for the sake of democracy, like Meiklejohn (1948), have confused a means of obtaining the final value with the value itself. This implies that, if an individual has the opportunity to control their destiny, it is essential that they have access to all pertinent information in order to collaborate in efficient decision-making, thus directly impacting their life. The principle of self-rule is termed an «intrinsic» value, as it is achieved through the very existence of a democratic system (Redish, 1982: 601-621).

In this sense, given that people make choices daily that reverberate in their lives, from those that seem relevant to those considered trivial, it is possible to infer that any opinion or information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, may affect such decisions at some point.

The secondary value of a democratic system is designated as instrumental, since it consists of a purpose for which the democratic system is designed to lead, in contrast to a goal that is achieved by definition — intrinsic — through the adoption of the democratic system itself, that is, the promotion of the development of human faculties. In this way, Redish concludes:

> My thesis is that: (1) although the democratic process is a means of achieving both the intrinsic and instrumental values, it is only one means of doing so; (2) both values (which, as noted previously, may be grouped under the broader heading of self-realization) may be achieved by and for individuals in countless nonpolitical, and often wholly private, activities; and (3) the concept of free speech facilitates the development of these values by directly fostering the instrumental value and indirectly fostering the intrinsic value. Free speech fosters the former goal *directly* in that the very exercise of one's freedom to speak, write, create, appreciate, or learn represents a use, and therefore a development, of an individual's uniquely human faculties. It fosters the latter value *indirectly* because the very exercise of one's right of free speech does not in itself constitute an exercise of one's ability to make life-affecting decisions as much as it facilitates the making of such decisions (Redish, 1982: 603-604).

Democracy, as a form of government, affords individuals the opportunity to achieve Self-Fulfillment, through the refinement of skills and abilities, as well as the autonomy inherent in the right to govern one's own existence. From this perspective, freedom of speech is a fundamental pillar for the valorization of the process of human Self-Fulfillment. Thus, the protection of freedom of speech concerns not just political judgments, but rather to promote the broader values that the democratic system was designed to foster.

However, unless grounded in arguments that demonstrate the particular relevance of expression, the argumentation in favor of the principle of freedom of speech, as a means to Self-Fulfillment, becomes difficult to distinguish from the more comprehensive claims of libertarianism, which defend the right to do anything considered an integral part of the individual's personality.

From the same perspective, it is plausible to question why freedom of speech holds a prominent position in the pursuit of individual Self-Fulfillment. It cannot be unequivocally stated that unlimited freedom of speech inevitably triggers personal challenges or that it is rooted in more fundamental human needs and desires than other necessities, such as education and adequate housing.

To deepen the analysis of the previous statement, one could use Brazil as an example, where 31.6% of the population finds themselves in a condition of poverty (Gomes, 2024). In this context, the concept of a minimum existential, which ensures basic social rights — such as health, food, and education — is undoubtedly crucial. These rights are fundamental to guarantee the minimum vital conditions necessary for human subsistence and freedom of action (Espinoza, 2017: 110).

Given the complexity of establishing criteria that prioritize freedom of speech, there is a shift towards a libertarian orientation, in which freedom is considered the most precious and fundamental good. This approach postulates that, beyond any other valuation, individual freedom should be placed on a pedestal, suggesting that restrictions on freedom of speech should be exceptional and justifiable only in cases where there is a direct and concrete harm to others. Embedded in this perspective is a naive premise about the capacity and intrinsic commitment of individuals to exercise their freedom in a conscious and respectful manner, especially on social media, in a way to harmonize their own expressions with the freedoms of choices of others.

In the same vein, freedom of speech is intertwined with other fundamental freedoms that denote an aspect inherent to the human condition, such as religious freedom, freedom of thought, and freedom of conscience. However, unlike the latter, freedom of speech can harm others when it is exercised, for example, by damaging a person's reputation or infringing upon privacy and intellectual property rights (Barendt, 2007: 13-14).

Similarly, Baker, in analyzing Redish's claims, brings to light profound questions about the essence of Self-Fulfillment and the role of freedom of speech in democratic society. Redish argues that freedom of speech directly promotes self-development, but only indirectly self-rule, suggesting that «speech directly fosters self-development but only indirectly fosters self-rule» (Baker, 1982: 658). This distinction is crucial for understanding Redish's approach, in which he views freedom of speech as a tool for the dissemination of information that, in turn, would enable self-governance indirectly. Baker, however, questions this separa-

tion, arguing that such a view underestimates the direct importance of freedom of speech as a means of exercising autonomy and actively participating in democratic governance.

A significant point of controversy between the two theorists emerges in the interpretation of democracy's role in Self-Fulfillment. Baker criticizes Redish's assumption that democratic acceptance necessarily implies valuing self-development, stating that «Redish fails to show that our acceptance of democracy logically implies acceptance of the self-development value or that this value underlies the First Amendment» (Baker, 1982: 660). This critique points to a broader and less restrictive conception of freedom of speech, which is not limited to promoting self-development, but encompasses a wider range of expressive activities essential to democracy.

Baker also challenges the notion that democracy is a requirement for self-development, arguing that the relationship proposed by Redish between these two concepts is not as direct as suggested. According to Baker, «although democracy may further the ‹development of the individual's human faculties›, a concern with self-development does not, in any obvious way, require a democratic political order» (Baker, 1982: 660). Baker suggests that other political systems could equally promote self-development, questioning the exclusive link made by Redish between democracy and Self-Fulfillment.

Finally, Baker argues that any justification for the constitutional protection of freedom of speech based on the instrumental contribution of speech to self-rule is insufficient. He raises concerns about the possibility that additional speech may, in fact, harm self-rule, contributing to information overload, presenting a distorted or ideologically unbalanced perspective, or promoting simplistic thinking. Baker suggests that the protection of freedom of speech should be grounded in considerations beyond its indirect or instrumental contribution to self-rule, focusing on freedom of speech as a constitutive aspect of self-rule itself (Baker, 1982: 663-664).

3. Scanlon's Argument

In turn, Scanlon defends freedom of speech on the premise that «the powers of a state are limited to those that citizens could recognize while still regarding themselves as equal, autonomous, rational agents» (Scanlon, 1972: 215). Although Scanlon referred to his position as a «natural extension» (Scanlon, 1972: 213) of Chapter II of Mill's *On Liberty* (2015), his argument significantly diverges from Mill's consequence-based argument and, instead, finds its argumentative roots in Kant and Rawls. Scanlon's argument is not grounded in claims about the consequences of different policies, but rather aims to offer an alternative to the conventional view based on the premise of rational and autonomous agents.

Although Scanlon makes it clear that his proposal aligns with the Millian principle, his theory does not present itself as a consequentialist theory, but one founded on rights. As such, it does not argue that truth will necessarily be attained. Through the discussion of examples that could restrict freedom of speech, Scanlon presents his Millian principle:

> There are certain harms which, al-though they would not occur but for certain acts of expression, nonetheless cannot be taken as part of a justification for legal restrictions on these acts. These harms are:

> (a) harms to certain individuals which consist in their coming to have false beliefs as a result of those acts of ex-pression;
>
> (b) harmful consequences of acts performed as a result of those acts of expression, where the connection between the acts of expression and the subsequent harmful acts consists merely in the fact that the act of expression led the agents to believe (or increased their tendency to believe) these acts to be worth performing (Scanlon, 1972: 213).

Acording to Scanlon, Mill's principle is an absolute criterion within its sphere, aimed at entirely excluding «certain justifications for legal restrictions on acts of expression», and thus, should be «the basic principle of freedom of speech» (Scanlon, 1972: 214). In both cases, the harmful outcome was not the deliberate intention of the author of the act of expression. In one of his examples of limiting freedom of speech, Scanlon posits that a person, through an expressive act, may contribute to the generation of a harmful act committed by another. In certain situations, the negative effects resulting from the second act may justify classifying the first as a crime (an order, for example) (Scanlon, 1972: 2011).

In this aspect, Brison (1998), on the other hand, critiques this view for not fully recognizing the social and psychological impact of hate speech. She argues that hate speech not only propagates false and harmful beliefs about individuals or groups but also generates real and tangible harms, such as diminished self-esteem and the perpetuation of systems of discrimination. Brison emphasizes that these harms, both in the formation of false beliefs (category a) and in the harmful actions resulting from these beliefs (category b), are sufficiently serious to justify restrictions on hate speech. She contends that protection against these harms is necessary to preserve human dignity and social equality, values that also underpin freedom of speech (Brison, 1998: 323).

The concept of autonomy is the foundation of Scanlon's theory of freedom of speech. He regards individual autonomy as the locus of human realization, with the defense of freedom of speech being indispensable in this process. He states that his concept of autonomy does not require the prerequisites of the Kantian concept of autonomy, in such a way that he advocates that «to be autonomous in my sense is quite consistent with being subject to coercion in relation to one's own actions» (Scanlon, 1972: 216). A very weak concept of autonomy, in Scanlon's view, is sufficient to establish the framework from which governmental authority is prevented from performing any kind of intrusion. In this sense, he argues that,

> To regard himself as autonomous in the sense I have in mind a person must see himself as sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action. He must apply to these tasks his own canons of rationality, and must recognize the need to defend his beliefs and decisions in accordance with these canons. This does not mean, of course, that he must be perfectly rational, even by his own standard of rationality, or that his standard of rationality must be exactly ours. Obviously, the content of this notion of autonomy will vary according to the range of variation we are willing to allow in canons of rational decision. If just anything counts as such a canon then the requirements, I have mentioned will become mere tautologies: an autonomous man believes what he believes and decides to do what he decides to do (Scanlon, 1972: 215).

Scanlon explicitly states that he will not describe a set of limits on what he considers to be canons of rationality. According to him, the most important consideration is that an autonomous individual cannot simply accept, uncritically, the judgments of others regarding their conduct and beliefs. It is possible for them to accept external evaluation; however, it is necessary that they have the autonomy to analyze the probative value of the judgments presented, as well as to justify autonomous and independent reasons that demonstrate the veracity of these judgments, so that they can weigh them against contrary evidence and establish their own autonomous judgment (Scanlon, 1972: 216).

Arguing in favor of hate speech freedom and contesting restrictions on this practice, Nagel (1995) has referenced a similar conception of autonomy. For him, the condition of being an independent thinking being demands that the expression of thought and feelings should be, primarily, an individual responsibility, limited only by clearly necessary restrictions to prevent serious harm distinct from the expression itself. This quality establishes a moral recognition that each individual holds their own opinions, and that the possibility of impeding their right to expression is a violation of their integrity. As an aspect of status, freedom of speech intertwines with freedom of thought, since to suppress it also means to repress a fundamental aspect of the shared cognitive process through which the mind can develop freely, as we work, while we think, as participants in a collective endeavor (Nagel, 1995: 96).

In this conception, the worst consequence lies in the censorship of dissenting opinions due to the risk of persuasion they may exert on people, thus failing to support established orthodoxy. Such an attitude is described by Nagel as epistemological stupidity since it constitutes the ultimate insult not only to the dissenters but also to us, as the potential public, insolently suggesting our incapacity to make independent decisions. One could not be jailed or fined for denying, for example, that the Holocaust occurred, or for selling books that deny it, or for running a mail-order business selling Nazi medals.

4. Critical Considerations on the Self-Fulfillment Thesis

That said, Barendt notes that the subject has the right to listen to different viewpoints and consider acting upon them, even if such a procedure might be detrimental to society, acknowledging, however, that certain restrictions may be applied. In contrast, unlike other approaches to the Self-Fulfillment argument, Scanlon focuses on the rights and interests of those who are recipients of the communication (Barendt, 2007: 16). However, Scanlon's Millian principle rests on the limitation of governmental authority and not on a right of individuals or, according to Nagel, as a general moral right—a universal human right,—which, as Brison rightly observed, Nagel does not provide an explanation for why the right to freedom of speech should be considered as such (Brison, 1998: 327).

It's important to highlight how Scanlon transitions from the idea of rational agents to his Millian principle. Two arguments are offered. The first is based on an appeal to our intuitions about agency and responsibility, namely, Scanlon believes that a rational adult assumes full responsibility for their actions and decisions to act. By following their beliefs and judgments, deemed sufficient to justify their action, they cannot blame the people who

provided the reasons for acting for the harm caused. Transferring this responsibility would deny the agent's own autonomy and rationality.

The second argument advocates that, from a perspective where a group of rational and autonomous citizens finds themselves in an original position similar to Rawls's, it is feasible to assert that such individuals would not grant the State the authority to determine the type of arguments that could be heard once the veil of ignorance is lifted. Granting such authority to the government (or any other entity) would be an affront to the autonomy and rationality of these agents, undermining their position as free and conscious decision-makers (Amdur, 1980: 290-293).

The conception of freedom of speech as Self-Fulfillment in the variant presented by Scanlon has faced numerous critiques. Amdur concludes, upon examining various real and hypothetical cases, that individuals who provide persuasive reasons for harmful actions are also morally responsible for the resulting damages. Intuitions about moral responsibility do not support the Millian principle; on the contrary, they raise serious doubts about whether the Millian principle could be correct. Amdur discusses whether our intuitions about legal responsibility support the Millian principle, even if our intuitions about moral responsibility do not. The author suggests that we do not have clear intuitions about legal responsibility, but if we do, they likely reflect moral responsibility. However, there may be reasons to deviate from these intuitions, such as the difficulty in identifying morally responsible individuals. Ultimately, the author concludes that our intuitions about legal responsibility do not support Mill's principle (Amdur, 1980: 297).

Even stating that the Millian principle does not work, Amdur asserts that, if it did work, there would be the following problem: the Millian principle proves too much because, if we accept the claims about responsibility, it is not clear why the State can legitimately restrict the expression of acts that Scanlon is willing to restrict. The formulation invites the question of why the contribution to the genesis of Jones's action to rob a bank, for example, made by the act of expression is also not «superseded by the agent's own judgment» (Scanlon, 1972: 212) when he chooses to manufacture and use nerve gas after reading Smith's formula. Jones must decide to manufacture and use the nerve gas with the same certainty that he must decide to rob the bank (Amdur, 1980: 297).

Following the influence of Rawls's original position, Amdur points out that Scanlon did not consider all the configurations of the parties' decisions. In this sense, autonomous citizens would consider both their own rights to speak and hear different viewpoints, as well as the potential harms caused by acts of expression. They might reach an agreement prohibiting the State from interfering in expression based on content, but allowing an exception for acts that cause serious harm. The author suggests that citizens would not demand a principle as strict as the Millian principle (Amdur, 1980: 299).

Amdur's last critique is directed at a certain arbitrariness in what the Millian principle might cover. Scanlon encounters difficulties in applying the Millian principle to cases that seem relevant. During the discussion on the various ways in which acts of expression can cause harm, he drafts the following passage: «Another way in which an act of expression can harm a person is by causing others to form an adverse opinion about her or making her an object of public ridicule. Obvious examples of this are defamation and interference with the right to a fair trial» (Scanlon, 1972: 211).

However, Scanlon's belief that the State can restrict certain types of expression and not others is at least questionable. Scanlon argues that, for example, if A's statements lead B to form an adverse opinion about C, the State can intervene, but if A's statements lead to B murdering C, the State cannot intervene. This view is curious, as it is not clear why the State should be allowed to restrict defamation but not incitement (Amdur, 1980: 300). There is no plausible explanation for the differentiation, so that if the Millian principle prohibits restrictions on incitement, it should also prohibit restrictions on defamation.

It is still possible to question again the presupposition of Scanlonian autonomy, as the theory struggles to respond to the accusation that numerous people are often factually incapable of exercising their autonomy. It is assumed, therefore, that many of them are unable to consider all the viewpoints and arguments presented to them. Consequently, absolute freedom of speech may trigger unwise and highly dangerous choices, such as voting for candidates who self-proclaim as heralds of freedom but violate the principles of pluralism and tolerance.

Furthermore, Scanlon's theory of freedom of speech and autonomy encounters particularly challenging terrain in the context of social media. The Scanlonian premise of autonomy presupposes that individuals are capable of exercising their freedom in a rational and informed manner, considering a plurality of viewpoints and arguments. However, the characteristics of social media, such as the echo chamber phenomenon and its distinct nature from a traditional public sphere, exacerbate the inability of many users to actually exercise this proposed autonomy.

As I will argue further, social media do not function as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, where rational critical discourse among informed citizens could prevail. Instead, these platforms tend to segment users into niches or echo chambers, within which they are predominantly exposed to opinions and information that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs. Such a structure not only makes it difficult to be exposed to a diversity of arguments, as suggested by Scanlon as essential for autonomy, but also amplifies the spread of misinformation and polarizing discourse.

Moreover, the issue of being unfit to exercise autonomy becomes more pressing in the social media environment. Information overload, the speed at which news spreads, and the partial anonymity offered by these platforms can encourage unreflective and impulsive decisions. This directly contradicts the idea of a deliberative and well-informed autonomy, crucial to the Scanlonian theory.

Therefore, when considering the impact of social media on individuals' ability to effectively exercise autonomy, it becomes evident that Scanlon's theory of freedom of speech seems insufficient to deal with the contemporary challenges posed by these platforms.

5. Social Media Do Not Promote Individual Self-Fulfillment

Even if the premise of Self-Fulfillment were accepted as an axiom, social media would not be configured as appropriate arenas for its realization, due to their inability to replicate the essential characteristics of a public sphere conducive to fostering an open, diverse, and rational debate.

That said, according to *Demandsage* (Shewale, 2024), the latest data shows that 5.17 billion people use social media in 2024, which equates to 63.82% of the world's population. The research further projects that the number of users is expected to reach 5.85 billion (Shewale, 2024). From the context presented and the data provided, it is evident that social media have established themselves as an inescapable reality in contemporary society. Therefore, these platforms have transcended their initial role as spaces for social interaction to become primary sites of freedom of expression manifestation.

On one hand, this scenario reflects a profound transformation in the way freedom of speech is exercised globally. By providing an open and accessible platform for the dissemination of ideas, opinions, and information, social media democratize expression in an unprecedented manner. Individuals from different parts of the world, with varying levels of access to resources and traditional media platforms, find in social media a means to express their views, participate in public debates, and influence discourses on a global scale.

From this perspective, Shirky (2011), in addressing the dangers of freedom on the internet, argues that two perspectives can be developed, namely, instrumental and environmental. The instrumental perspective emphasizes the promotion of freedom of access as an essential pillar of this approach. This focus highlights the importance of unrestricted access to global information and the ability of citizens to generate public media in countries under authoritarian regimes, in addition to freedom of speech for activists and the use of instant messaging without interference.

In contrast, the environmental perspective offers an alternative view, conceiving new media as facilitators of citizen participation and strengtheners of individual and collective freedoms. This view maintains that, akin to previous innovations such as the printing press and postal service, modern digital technologies have the potential to foster a robust public sphere and a vibrant civil society. It emphasizes the ability of dissident movements to use any available means to articulate their views and coordinate their actions, thus challenging authoritarian governments that fear unrestricted communication among their citizens. The environmental perspective criticizes the instrumental approach for its difficulty in grasping local conditions of dissent and the risk of compromising the integrity of peaceful opposition through external support. Instead, it proposes a long-term view of social media as tools that lay the groundwork for sustainable democratic transformations, arguing that positive changes follow, rather than precede, the development of an engaged and informed public sphere (Shirky, 2011: 2-4).

With a more enthusiastic and not entirely incorrect view, Loader and Mercea argue that social media have a disruptive effect on dominant discourse: «Equipped with social media, citizens no longer have to be passive consumers of political party propaganda, government spin, or mass media news but are instead actually enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives, and publish their own opinions» (Loader; Mercea, 2011: 759). Indeed, social media equip citizens with tools to question narratives controlled by powerful entities, promoting an environment where multiple voices can be heard and considered. Such a phenomenon is evidence of the democratizing potential of social media, which challenges the monopoly of media production and its dissemination by state and commercial institutions.

Firstly, when considering the democratizing potential of social media, one cannot neglect the propensity of these same platforms for the creation and strengthening of echo chambers (Samaržija, 2023). These echo chambers are virtual spaces where ideas and beliefs are amplified through repetition within a closed community, often isolating its members from divergent or contradictory opinions. This phenomenon results in heightened polarization, where dissent and critical debate are replaced by an illusory consensus, often built upon unexamined or even false premises.

Moreover, social media platforms are designed to maximize user retention and engagement, which often translates into the promotion of content that provokes strong emotional reactions, rather than balanced information or diverse perspectives. Such dynamics can inadvertently favor the proliferation of dominant discourses, instead of challenging them, as polarizing or sensationalist narratives tend to receive greater visibility and dissemination.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the role of algorithms that govern what is seen or not by users on social media. These algorithms, often opaque and devoid of accountability, can intensify exposure to homogeneous viewpoints and filter out information that contradicts the user's pre-existing beliefs, thus reinforcing echo chambers and limiting the potential for genuinely diverse and constructive dialogue (Samaržija, 2023: 72-74).

In this regard, while social media undoubtedly possess the potential to challenge the monopoly of media production and promote a broader spectrum of voices, the practical reality of their operation reveals a complexity that can, paradoxically, reinforce dominant discourses and restrict the diversity of perspectives.

Loader and Mercea (2011) highlight the transformative potential of social media in reconfiguring power relations in the sphere of communication. By arguing that «by facilitating social networking and "user-centred innovation", citizens are said to be able to challenge the monopoly control of media production and dissemination by state and commercial institutions» (2011: 759), they point to a paradigm shift in which user-centered innovation and social networks enable individuals to question and challenge the traditionally monopolistic dominance of state and commercial institutions over media production and dissemination. This process not only evidences the decentralization of media power but also promotes broader and more diverse participation in the construction of public discourse, marking a significant step towards a more effective democratization of communication in contemporary society.

On the other hand, a less optimistic view of the role of social media as a public space suggests that, from the perspective of this new arena of expression, a distinctive element emerges, namely: digital communication platforms represent entities not traditionally framed as media. These platforms forgo the productive function of journalistic mediation and programming, attributes inherent to classic media, thus reshaping the communicational paradigm previously prevalent in the public sphere. Such platforms grant all potential users the ability to emerge as autonomous authors, endowed with comparable rights. The innovative nature of these technological infrastructures lies in providing their users unlimited opportunities for digital interconnection, functioning as blank slates (*leere Schrifttafeln*) for the inscription of their own communicative contents. However, they choose not to assume editorial responsibility for the content they distribute, in contrast to what is observed with news services or classic editors, such as the written press, radio,

or television, where the communicative content is produced professionally and subject to editorial filtering (Habermas, 2022: 43).

According to Habermas, it is possible to identify two significant impacts resulting from the structural transformation in the public sphere, spurred by the advent of a new pattern of communication. Initially, the universalist aspiration of the bourgeois public for an egalitarian inclusion of all citizens seemed finally achievable through the advent of new media. These promised to emancipate users from the traditional passive role of mere recipients, limited to selecting from a restricted range of programs, granting each individual the opportunity to express themselves within an anarchic exchange of spontaneous opinions. However, this potential, simultaneously anti-authoritarian and egalitarian, ends up morphing into a libertarian character, characteristic of digital corporations that dominate the global scene.

Within this context, the new media provides a stage both for extremist right-wing networks and for the intrepid Belarusian women who stand firm in their protests against Lukashenko. The self-empowerment (*Selbstermächtigung*) afforded to users of digital media constitutes one side of the coin; the reverse is the burden represented by the liberation from the editorial curation characteristic of traditional media, before users acquired the necessary competence to adequately handle the resources of the new media (Habermas, 2022: 45-46). From this perspective, the natural and spontaneous generation of vast communication networks around certain themes or personalities can lead to fragmentation, as such connections tend to group themselves into communicational circuits that isolate each other dogmatically.

The research conducted by Krause, Norris, and Flinchum (2017) offers a penetrating look at the dynamics between social media and the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Through a detailed study, they reveal a reality far from the democratic idealization of social media as a revitalized space for rational public debate.. Three crucial arguments stand out that, together, underpin the perspective that social media do not meet the necessary criteria to be considered part of the public sphere.

Firstly, the prevalence of a *lack of civil discourse* on social media is alarming. The public sphere, as idealized by Habermas, is a domain of social interaction where individuals can discuss and deliberate on matters of common interest in a rational and respectful manner. Habermas emphasizes that what is considered public (*Öffentlich*) is characterized by being «accessible to all» (*allen zugänglich sind*) (Habermas, 2001: 54). According to Habermas, the public sphere constitutes a domain in which subjects have the possibility to group together and participate in a civic debate grounded in reason, aimed at the collective interests of society (*zivilen Aufgaben einer öffentlich räsonierenden Gesellschaft*) (Habermas, 2001, 116).

However, the data collected by Krause, Norris, and Flinchum (2017) indicate that social media are marked by a toxic communication environment, where personal attacks, disrespect, and polarization replace constructive debate. This scenario of virtual hostility inhibits not only meaningful participation but also the possibility of reaching a consensus or mutual understanding on political and social issues. The absence of civil dialogue prevents social media from functioning as an authentic public sphere, where discourse can flow freely and constructively.

The second argument focuses on the *limitations to information access* and *participation imposed by surveillance* and the fear of *online harassment*. Surveillance, whether state, institutional or interpersonal, and the consequent self-censorship, act as restrictive forces that

shape online behavior. The fear of reprisals—professional, personal or social—leads to a retreat in the expression of opinions and participation in debates. These dynamics create barriers to access and the free exchange of information, vital components of the public sphere. Without the possibility of open and unrestricted discourse, social media fail to promote an environment conducive to the formation of an informed and active public opinion.

Lastly, the tendency toward the formation of «echo chambers» and self-censorship reinforces polarization instead of fostering inclusive dialogue. On social media, the selection of contacts and the personalization of content lead to limited exposure to divergent perspectives. This homogenization of discourse encourages the formation of isolated groups, within which opinions are reaffirmed without being challenged. This isolation directly contradicts the Habermasian principle of the public sphere, which presupposes interaction between different worldviews as a means to enrich democratic debate and strengthen the social fabric (Krause, Norris, and Flinchum, 2017: 8-14).

Habermas argues against the simplistic description of digital platforms as «vehicles of interconnected communicative content on any scale» because he considers them misleadingly neutral and impartial. The presumed neutrality is refuted by the operation of these platforms under the control of algorithms, exemplified by giants like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. These social networks, operated by corporations among the most globally valued due to their significant market value, follow capitalist logic. The profit of Big Techs primarily comes from the collection and sale of data for advertising or other commercial purposes. These data, generated as by-products of user interactions with the platforms, comprise personal information accumulated on the internet by users (Habermas, 2022: 53-54). Therefore, the notion of neutrality of these platforms is belied by the reality of their commercial practices focused on data exploitation.

Habermas also presents the thesis that digital platforms induce the formation of semi-public spheres (*Halböffentlichkeit*) and self-directed, which emerge spontaneously. These spheres distance themselves not only from the traditionally editorial or official public sphere but also from each other, promoting a dynamic of mutual and reflective confirmation of perceptions and pronouncements. This phenomenon favors the creation of fertile ground for the multiplication of narratives and viewpoints limited in their reach and diversity (Habermas, 2022: 58). Anticipating this observation, Sunstein, in his work *Infotopia* (2006), already expressed concern about so-called information cocoons – communicational spaces where echoes of individuals' own choices and preferences predominate, «communication universes in which we hear only what we choose and only what comforts and pleases us» (Sunstein, 2006: 9). This mechanism contributes to the deterioration of deliberative debate and reinforces existing prejudices. Similarly, Eli Pariser, in 2011, brought to light the notion of «filter bubbles», arguing that the effects of algorithmic filtering lead Internet users to receive information that resonates exclusively with their pre-existing interests. This process results in isolation about divergent views and can significantly limit individuals' freedom of choice on how to live. Pariser also warns about «informational determinism», where previous web interactions shape future content exposures, trapping users in a repetitive cycle of information they already know — «a web history you're doomed to repeat» (Pariser, 2011: 13-14).

Furthermore, in this context, Big Techs position themselves as the heralds of impartiality and freedom of expression by not producing, editing, or selecting content.[1] On the other hand, by creating new connections as «irresponsible» (*unverantwortliche*) mediators in the global network and initiating and intensifying discourses of unpredictable content – such as Fake News and Hate Speech — through the surprising acceleration of contacts, they profoundly alter the character of public communication (Habermas, 2022: 44).

The reflections of Habermas, Sunstein, and Pariser converge on a critical point that challenges the conception of social networks as effective spaces of the public sphere. Although social networks boast a remarkable potential to facilitate open dialogue and the democratization of information, the intrinsic dynamics of these digital platforms contradict the fundamental requirements for the constitution of a truly democratic and inclusive public sphere.

Concluding remarks

This discussion aimed to demonstrate the relationship between the argument for absolute freedom of speech through the defense of individual Self-Fulfillment and its connection with social media. The argument for absolute, unrestricted freedom of speech does not hold through the argument of individual Self-Fulfillment. Numerous criticisms of this thesis were listed, highlighting the argument of *libertarianism versus social responsibility* and *the universality of freedom of speech*, which question the premise that freedom of speech, seen as a vehicle for individual Self-Fulfillment, can be considered an absolute priority over other fundamental needs and rights. By placing freedom of speech on a pedestal, disregarding potential conflicts with equally important rights, such as human dignity, social equity, and protection against harmful forms of expression (e.g., hate speech and misinformation), this perspective ignores the social and psychological impact of certain expressions. Additionally, the unilateral emphasis on Self-Fulfillment through expression ignores complex socio-economic realities, where basic rights like health, education, and housing may take precedence in the hierarchy of individual and collective needs, especially in contexts of poverty and inequality.

Regarding the *relationship with democracy* and *Scanlon's principle of autonomy*, there is a fundamental critique of the assumption that freedom of speech, as a pillar of Self-Fulfillment, is essential to democracy and self-rule. This critique challenges the idea that democracy primarily serves as a means for individual Self-Fulfillment, suggesting that this reductionist view may neglect essential aspects of democratic participation and the balance between individual freedom and collective well-being. Moreover, while Scanlon's principle of autonomy seeks to establish freedom of speech on grounds of equality and autonomous rationality, critics argue that his approach does not adequately address the practical challenges posed by harmful discourse, underestimating the impact of expressions that can compromise human dignity, social cohesion, and the right not to be psychologically affected.

1 To corroborate this, it's enough to mention Google's campaign in Brazil against the "Fake News Bill." The platform displayed a message on the search engine's homepage, stating that the bill could "increase confusion about what is true or false" (Pinotti, 2023). It was clearly offering a biased view of the "Fake News Bill" to favor its corporate and economic interests.

Considering this, the defense of the thesis that social media do not constitute a true public sphere due to limitations imposed by echo chambers and algorithms promoting polarization and homogenization of the debate, contrary to the principles of diversity of opinions and rational deliberation characteristic of a public sphere, was advanced. Even if all the severe objections directed at the thesis of absolute freedom of speech through individual Self-Fulfillment are disregarded, social media, due to their operational structure, would not be suitable as the conducive environment for the Self-Fulfillment of individuals.

The operation of these platforms favors content that generates engagement through emotional reactions, to the detriment of information quality, reinforcing predispositions and isolating users from divergent perspectives. This dynamic subverts the notion of an open and democratic public space, limiting the potential of social media to promote inclusive dialogue and genuine citizen participation, instead contributing to social fragmentation and the consolidation of diffuse narratives and fake news.

In conclusion, the intrinsic characteristics of social media present considerable obstacles to the Scanlonian conception of autonomy linked to freedom of expression. The feasibility of users exercising such freedom in an informed and deliberative manner is impaired by phenomena such as echo chambers, the spread of misinformation, and the absence of a public sphere in traditional terms. These elements significantly distort the process by which information is received and processed, compromising individuals' capacity for autonomous and informed decision-making in the digital environment.

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