JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Journal of Management Studies 0:0 Month 2025
doi:10.1111/joms.70053

POINT COUNTERPOINT

Social Media Is a Threat for Democracy! A Political Perspective for Analysing and Diminishing Harm

Itziar Castelló[a], Elanor Colleoni[b], Andreas Georg Scherer[c] and Hannah Trittin-Ulbrich[d]

[a]Bayes Business School, City St George's, University of London; [b]IULM Milan; [c]University of Zurich; [d]Leuphana University

ABSTRACT Social media platforms, once hailed as potential champions of dialogue, have evolved into commodified spaces in which their business models incentivize hate speech, misinformation, polarization, and the political fragmentation of society, benefiting corporate and political elites while eroding democracy. The existing market and technological conceptualizations of social media platforms offer only partial analysis of and solutions to these issues. This paper advances a political perspective grounded in deliberative democracy, arguing that social media companies are political actors responsible for maintaining a well-functioning public sphere. We argue that transforming social media platforms into true facilitators of democratic discourse requires enhancing their *deliberative capacity*. Beyond the capacities of the public sphere suggested by the market and technology perspectives (1) transparency and accountability and (2) openness and inclusiveness, we propose that fostering deliberative capacity also requires (3) conduciveness to argumentation and (4) consequentiality. We thus contribute to understanding how management theories can explain and address current threats to democracy.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, deliberation, democracy, digital platforms, governance, organized immaturity, political view of the firm, public sphere, social media, surveillance capitalism

INTRODUCTION

In January 2025, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, announced the termination of the company's third-party fact-checking programme on platforms such as Facebook,

Address for reprints: Itziar Castelló, Bayes Business School, City St George's, University of London, London, UK (itziar.castello-molina@city.ac.uk).

All authors contributed equally. Authors in alphabetical order.

Instagram, and Threads. Justifying the decision as a commitment to 'free expression', Zuckerberg said that instead, he was introducing a community-driven system for content verification, similar to the 'Community notes' introduced by Elon Musk on X (formerly Twitter) some months prior (New York Times, 2025). Zuckerberg's decision comes at a time when misinformation has flourished unchecked, influencing public opinion (Nature, 2025), manipulating elections, eroding trust in institutions, and contributing to the polarization of democratic societies (Pew Research Center, 2022; Reuters Institute, 2024) and the rise of autocratic regimes (Adler et al., 2023). Similarly, after his acquisition of Twitter in October 2022, Elon Musk reinstated several accounts previously banned for spreading false information and conspiracy theories, a decision that has been criticized for amplifying harmful content and creating a permissive environment for divisive narratives (Washington Post, 2022) and populism (Adler et al., 2023).

These examples show how social media platforms, once celebrated as champions of freedom of speech, inclusive dialogue, and even democracy (Turner, 2006; Van Dijk, 2020), are becoming significant threats to the very democratic values they once promised to enhance (Fortuna and Nunes, 2018; Halford, 2022; Kumar and Maurya, 2024; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Far from establishing forums for more inclusive and informed debates on public issues, social media has transformed into commercialized spaces where communications and social relations are commodified for the benefit of big tech corporations and platform capitalists (Scherer et al., 2023; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021; Zuboff, 2019, 2022).

The business model of social media platforms combines free, personalized content with user behaviour data collection, to create detailed personal profiles that can be monetized, transforming social media platforms into markets for influence. Within these markets, influence is maximized through algorithms designed to provoke emotionally heightened engagement that drives more clicks and more profit. As a result, such business models create the ideal conditions for content manipulation and the spread of fake news, misleading information, extremism, and ideologies, which exploit the same engagement mechanisms that drive profitability (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2020). Critically, these structural vulnerabilities create opportunities for opportunistic manipulation by platform owners and other powerful actors, which can strategically exploit these features to serve their interests for political or economic gains. For instance, French prosecutors have 'opened a criminal investigation into X over allegations that the company owned by billionaire Elon Musk manipulated its algorithms for the purposes of 'foreign interference' (Goury-Laffont et al., 2025, p. 1). Thus, the social media business model not only results in democratic harm through its structural logic but also provides ready-made instruments for those in positions of power to manipulate public discourse (Schottenbauer, 2025). Consequently, as more citizens are exposed to this influence, public trust in institutions has eroded, political cultures have fragmented, and democratic stability has been undermined (Pew Research Center, 2022; Reuters Institute, 2024; Susskind, 2022).

These phenomena are important for management scholars for at least three reasons. First, social media are run by business organizations – some of which are the most profitable worldwide – that design business models and socio-technological infrastructures in which citizens interact. Their influence over the public discourse and the processes of democracy (Habermas, 2022), combined with the lack of public oversight and democratic

control (Adler et al., 2023; Chayka, 2025; Klein and Taylor, 2025), raises critical questions about the economic and political power of these businesses (Jacobides and Lianos, 2021). In addition, the concentration of control over these powerful platforms in a few hands, often combined with dual class governance structures to maintain decision-making powers of individuals (e.g., founders) (Shill, 2025), creates opportunities for strategic manipulation, rising concerns about the concentration of ownership as those controlling these systems possess unregulated tools for exerting political and economic power (Creech and Maddox, 2024).

These concerns are particularly relevant for platform governance scholars, who have primarily focussed on platform governance through market mechanisms (Cennamo, 2021; Cusumano et al., 2019) or technological solutions (Chen et al., 2021; Vergne, 2020), but largely overlooked the platforms' role as political actors shaping democratic discourse. Social media platforms have public goods characteristics and provide the means of communication and social exchange in largely unregulated environments. Yet, their internal governance structures, organizational design, and selection mechanisms influence how people connect and communicate with each other and how they decide on private and public matters (e.g., their private choices and how they vote). Social media organizations' provision of public goods and potential for influence have transformed them into powerful actors with a political role and responsibility (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011).

Second, social media platforms have become critical intermediaries in the institutional environment where information about business firms is produced and disseminated, fundamentally shaping how markets function through stakeholder perceptions and evaluations (Etter et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for scholars of social evaluation and signalling theory (Barnett, 2014; Bergh et al., 2014; Bitektine, 2011; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Mishina and Devers, 2012; Pfarrer et al., 2010; Roberts and Dowling, 2002), who have long assumed that market mechanisms function effectively when information asymmetries are reduced – an assumption that no longer holds when the information infrastructure itself has been compromised by platform architectures that profit from engagement irrespective of its veracity.

Third, social media serve as critical arenas of discussion for business organizations, non-profits, non-governmental organizations, and social movement activists. These organizations use social media for a variety of purposes – from advocacy and fundraising to marketing and community engagement – yet they are vulnerable to the same forces that threaten democratic governance, such as misinformation, polarization, and the manipulation of public opinion (Heavey et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for scholars of stakeholder engagement and social movements (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019; Colleoni et al., 2024; Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017; Wenzel et al., 2025), who examine how organizations interact with activists, build coalitions, and respond to societal pressures.

Management scholars have studied social media platforms through two dominant theoretical lenses, each offering distinct but incomplete perspectives on the challenges to democracy. On the one hand, *market perspectives* conceptualize platforms primarily as market infrastructures that facilitate social and economic exchange via incentive and control mechanisms (e.g., Cennamo, 2021; Cusumano et al., 2019). Market perspectives align with a *representative tradition of democratic theory*, where the role of the public sphere is

to reinforce 'a system of formal representation through political parties that secures the real basis of democracy' (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 290). In this perspective, social media platforms are generally understood to serve as markets for news and public information (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005) and as a 'marketplace of ideas' (Entman, 1989) for public debate. Such marketplaces function best when voters receive accurate information for rational decision-making (Baker, 1998; Parker and Van Alstyne, 2005) as this ensures fair competition. Fair competition is promoted through transparency and accountability, which are the critical priorities that enable a 'market for truth' (Van Alstyne, 2020) where fake news, conspiracy theories, and misleading claims are corrected through media oversight and verification mechanisms.

On the other hand, *technological perspectives* argue that social media (along with other designated tools for e-democracy, such as blog chains) is digital infrastructure that facilitates and empowers popular engagement (Chen et al., 2021; Hsieh and Vergne, 2023). Technological perspectives align with *a participatory tradition of democratic theory* (Ferree et al., 2002) as they advocate for decentralized technological solutions for digital democracy, promoting openness and inclusiveness (e.g., Grossi et al., 2024; Helbing et al., 2023; Tessler et al., 2024). In this perspective, technology not only informs decisions by providing access to information, it also provides technological solutions that enable citizens to participate in decision-making, regardless of their backgrounds and capacities. Both the market and technology perspectives have merit.

However, we suggest that neither is sufficient for addressing the dangers and perils that social media platforms pose for democratic societies with detrimental effects on individuals, organizations, and social relationships.

The market perspective prioritizes transparency and accountability through fact-checking, yet it overlooks how algorithmic architectures amplify sensational content and emotional engagement, undermining discourse quality regardless of whether content is factually true or false, for example, it does this through echo chambers that fragment public discourse and generate societal polarization. The technology perspective does not attend to the quality of the debate and deliberation that is necessary for an effective democratic process, emphasizing the capacities of openness and inclusiveness while neglecting *argumentation* (Habermas, 2022).

We propose that the current threats presented by social media to democracy can be better studied via a *political perspective*. This perspective builds on deliberative democracy, which allows for a systematic exploration of social media's erosive effects on democracy, from which remedies may be derived (Cohen and Fung, 2021; Habermas, 1996, 1998, 2022; Trenz, 2023). In this perspective, politics constitutes the sphere of democratic society in which collective binding decisions on public matters are developed. Citizens form their opinions on public issues based on news, evidence, and arguments provided and exchanged in the public sphere. These opinions are channelled (via elections and representation) into the institutionalized forms of collective will formation (Habermas, 1996). Business firms are considered political actors because they are part of the collective decision-making via corporate activism, self-regulation, lobbying, or the (co-)creation of rules and infrastructure (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011). Such public influence implies responsibilities, as suggested by extant literature on the political view of the firm (ibid.). We argue that platform

organizations are political actors since they provide and regulate social media platforms, producing a public sphere and setting the conditions for democratic decision-making. As such, social media platforms are responsible for effects on the integrity of public and private communication, on trust in democratic institutions, and on the credibility of the institutions' representatives.

In this article, we first extend the market and technology perspectives with insights from democracy theory, offering an integrative approach. We then propose a political perspective that can explain the deliberative capacities of a well-functioning public sphere. Finally, we unfold four critical deliberative capacities for social media in a democratic society: (1) transparency and accountability, (2) openness and inclusiveness, (3) conduciveness to argumentation, and (4) consequentiality. We thus explain, critically analyse, and integrate the market and technical functions of platforms through their increasingly central political role in democratic processes, and provide concrete mechanisms for enhancing platforms' democratic capacity that may inform critical reform processes of the status quo.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA'S DEMOCRATIC ROLE

Social Media and the Democratic Promise

Social media platforms are technology-based forms of organizing social exchange. They are digital infrastructures, designed and managed by public (e.g., cooperatives, open-source communities, state-owned) or private (i.e., commercial) organizations, which enable users to create, search and share content, and communicate and connect with one another. Social media allows users to communicate in private or in public, to distribute or receive notes, messages, feedback, news, or other information as text, symbols, sounds, or videos, and address select individuals, restricted target audiences, or open publics.

We suggest that these features of social media can be contrasted with the ideals of the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere, as developed by Habermas (1989, 2022), refers to a discursive space where citizens come together to engage in rational debates about matters of public concern. A well-functioning public sphere is essential to the health of democracy and stabilization of society because it fosters inclusive and reasoned deliberation, the creation of shared and mutual understanding, and the preparation of binding collective decisions grounded in the rationality of the deliberative process (Baker, 1998). A functioning public sphere requires several key elements: universal access to participation, transparency and freedom from coercion in discussion, rationality in argumentation, and the ability to reach collective understanding through deliberation (Habermas, 1989).

As digital technologies emerged, social media platforms appeared to create a new inclusive and enlightened public sphere (Castells, 2009). Social media platforms' architecture and affordances resembled key aspects of Habermasian public discourse (Dahlgreen, 2005; Papacharissi, 2010; Shirky, 2008). Their open and participatory structure created unprecedented accessibility for individuals to contribute to public dialogue

regardless of their institutional position or social status (Castells, 2009), while simultaneously enabling direct and unmediated communication (Jenkins, 2006).

Social Media and the Democratic Threat

In recent years, the biggest social media platforms (X and Facebook) have undergone a profound transformation that has undermined their contribution to a functioning public sphere and fundamentally challenged their democratic potential (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2022; Miller and Vaccari, 2020). This transformation is rooted in the increasing concentration of platform ownership in a small number of private commercial entities and their owners, whose profit-driven imperatives, surveillance mechanisms (Zuboff, 2019, 2022), and algorithmic opacity (Whelan et al., 2013) have reshaped the architecture of the public sphere (Susskind, 2022; Zuboff, 2022).

The ability to share content without traditional gatekeeping and quality checks by legacy media has enabled the widespread production and dissemination of misinformation (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Carmi et al., 2020; Illia et al., 2023). The market-driven prioritization of emotional engagement (Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017) over reasoned discourse has led to increasingly hostile and polarized exchanges (Castelló et al., 2025; Castelló and Lopez-Berzosa, 2023; Lundgaard and Etter, 2023). New architectures based on recommendation systems encourage ideological homogeneity and opinion polarization (Himelboim et al., 2013) and 'toxic techno-cultures' that marginalize dissenting opinions (Massanari, 2015), leading to a 'spiral of silence' where minority opinion holders withdraw from political debates (see already, e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Together, these threats create a systemic challenge to democracy.

Despite these threats, it still remains unclear what social media platform governance should look like: What incentive and control mechanisms should be applied, what the appropriate level of governance is (state, industry, firm level), what level of controls should be developed (operational and supervisory), what a (smart) mix of state and private (self-) governance might look like, and how citizens and stakeholders can or should be included.

CURRENT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Management scholarship has approached the challenge of social media platform governance through two dominant perspectives – market and technology – that each offer distinct diagnoses and solutions to the challenges to democracy posed by social media. In the following sections, we examine these perspectives in detail. We then offer a political perspective that can, we argue, overcome the limitations of previous perspectives. Table I summarizes the three perspectives: market, technology, and political.

Market Perspective

The market perspective conceptualizes social media platforms primarily as a market infrastructure, where multiple actors engage in information exchange governed by principles

Table I. Market, technology, and political perspectives on social media platforms: Political theoretical foundations and democratic implications

Perspectives	*Market*	*Technology*	*Political*
Definition of social media			
Definition	Market infrastructure	Digital infrastructures that facilitate participation	Spaces of facilitation of the public sphere
Value proposition	Space where preferences are given and aggregated	Space for direct participation where preferences are included and distributed	Space for argumentation exchange and formation of opinions
Conceptualization of democratic features and processes			
Participation (who)	All users, but delegation of authority	Popular inclusion, users, empowered citizens	All citizens, empowered citizens
Construction of discourse (who)	Elite dominance, experts (political parties for them to create the policy documents)	Popular inclusion	All citizens, empowered citizens
Representation of democratic process	Voting as a selection from a 'marketplace of ideas'	Technology facilitates access and inclusion, equality	Deliberation at multiple levels and on multiple issues
Outcomes of relation between discourse and decision-making	Platforms provide citizens with information for elections Elected representatives decide on behalf of the people; once a decision is made there is no need for further debate or popular inclusion (closure)	Platform aim is to avoid imposed closure. Through openness, platforms enable citizen inclusion on a continuous basis	Avoids exclusionary closure and expands political community Ensures collective decision making and debate of ideas, promotes voice, promotes effective and inclusive decision making, promotes reasoning and justification Aims at the creation of a common ground and societal impact
Democratic theory aligned with each perspective	Representative	Participatory	Deliberative
Implications for the public sphere and democracy			
Capacities of the public sphere	Transparency (to ensure information availability and circulation) Accountability (responsibility of users and technology can be traced and demanded)	Openness (access to popular participation, reduces the barriers to entry) Inclusion in democratic participation	Transparency Accountability Openness Inclusion + Conduciveness to argumentation Consequentiality

of market competition (e.g., Cennamo, 2021; Cusumano et al., 2019). In this view, platforms function as 'multi-sided markets', where intermediaries facilitate exchanges of information between different groups of actors aligning market incentives (Caillaud and Jullien, 2003). From this perspective, the value of these social media platforms for democracy lies (as is also the case for legacy media) in their creation of a 'marketplace of ideas' (Entman, 1989), which provides information on news, preferences, and priorities to institutionalized political markets (e.g., elections, representation in parliament) and thus prepares collective decision-making and public policy formation. The exchange of ideas is enhanced through network effects, as each additional user enhances the platform's utility for all participants, bringing new perspectives and extending the reach of discussions, creating richer debates, and exposing users to a wider range of viewpoints (Katz and Shapiro, 1985).

The market perspective aligns theoretically with the *representative theory of democracy* where politics operates as a market (Downs, 1957; Elster, 1986; Ferree et al., 2002). In this theoretical tradition, the ultimate authority in society rests with the citizenry, who delegate authority to elected representatives and public officials. The representatives remain accountable to the citizens who have delegated authority to them. Politicians and technocrats serve as providers of political programs (operating as a basis for public policies) and during elections, citizens rationally select from these programs based on their individual preferences and the available information. Aside from the periodical elections, citizens play a largely passive role in the formation of public policies; politicians and the political parties are the bearers of public discourse and form public policy until the next elections take place. The assumption is that ordinary citizens are normally poorly informed and generally ill-equipped for political participation, which constrains their participation in public discourse on policy issues on a continuing basis (Ferree et al., 2002).

> Representatives are elected in order to decide for the people, and once a decision is reached, there is no further need for debate. Representative liberal theory endorses a norm of *closure*—a time at which all concerned can agree that the matter has been decided and the system moves on. (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 294)

According to the representative theory of democracy, the role of media is to provide (good) enough information about the parties and candidates so that citizens can choose intelligently among them during the elections (Baker, 1998) and assess their performance. Between elections, officials need to respond to public problems that are technically complex, and most people have neither the inclination nor the ability to master the issues involved (Ferree et al., 2002). However, if citizens are dissatisfied with what they are getting, they can vote the politicians out in the next election.

Within this perspective, the two pillars of a well-functioning public sphere are transparency and accountability. *Transparency* means providing information about who claims what on which occasion. It is a precondition for safeguarding the quality, verifiability, and trustworthiness of content. Transparency enables citizens to evaluate office holders and understand the parties that aggregate and represent their interests. News media (and today increasingly social media platforms) play an important role in facilitating

the exchange of information and providing visibility into both operational processes and information quality, thus enabling market participants to make rational choices (Baker, 1998).

In this regard, scholars in the market perspective increasingly denounce the so-called dark side (Verbeke and Hutzschenreuter, 2021) and the manipulation of choice as an increasing problem related to social media platforms (Hunt et al., 2025), emphasizing how information asymmetries and quality uncertainties can create significant market failures in the digital public sphere (Cusumano et al., 2021). This is because when users cannot readily distinguish reliable information from fake news or verify content authenticity, their ability to make rational choices – whether about products, services, or political decisions – becomes compromised (Hunt et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2024). Transparency also encompasses the systematic disclosure of algorithmic governance mechanisms: How content is curated, how user data are collected and deployed, and how content moderation decisions are made. This operational transparency becomes particularly critical given platforms' sophisticated use of AI and learning systems, which are shaping user behaviour in increasingly complex and opaque ways (Zuboff, 2019). Users find themselves trapped in black box systems where behaviour modification occurs backstage through hidden algorithmic mechanisms (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017; Verbeke and Hutzschenreuter, 2021).

Accountability is the ability to hold individuals responsible for their actions. Accountability is critical to ensure that voters can 'vote out' representatives who fail to speak truth or to stick to their promises. In social media platforms, the market perspective advocates for accountability systems (e.g., content verification systems) that can trace and attribute content to its sources, enabling platforms to hold users accountable for spreading false or harmful information (Rahman et al., 2024) to ensure responsible information sharing and preventing the spread of misinformation.

Besides ensuring accountability on social media, the market perspective identifies potential accountability issues related to market dynamics. Scholars claim that network effects can lead to concentrated markets (Caillaud and Jullien, 2003), which can encourage platforms to act as gatekeepers, imposing discriminatory practices and restricting competition (Crémer et al., 2019). This market concentration erodes accountability by eliminating competitive pressures that might otherwise discipline platform behaviour (Jacobides and Lianos, 2021). To address these accountability challenges, the market perspective proposes strengthened antitrust measures, enhanced competition laws, and regulatory frameworks that prevent anticompetitive practices while maintaining market discipline (Rahman et al., 2024).

We argue that although transparency and accountability in markets are essential pillars of a well-functioning public sphere, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure efficacy within the realm of social media. Despite attempts to address market failures, such as by providing transparency into decision-making processes and holding actors accountable for their actions, these pillars may not inherently guarantee deliberation. Indeed, market mechanisms fail to ensure genuine breadth of information access and exchange. Even with policies enforcing information transparency and user accountability, platforms' content distribution systems create echo chambers that fragment public discourse, undermining the diversity and plurality of viewpoints

necessary for meaningful democratic exchange. These structural conditions reveal how market-based solutions alone cannot address platforms' fundamental impact on democratic discourse.

Technological Perspective

The technological perspective conceptualizes social media platforms as digital infrastructures that facilitate interaction, information exchange, and participatory engagement through their technical architectures (Chen et al., 2021). The technological perspective aligns conceptually with the *direct participatory theory of democracy*, which fundamentally identifies democratic engagement through the lens of unmediated and ongoing citizen participation (Ferree et al., 2002; Scherer and Dal Zotto, 2024), in contrast to the market perspective's imposed closure between discourse and decision-making.

Unlike the representative theory of democracy's reliance on delegated authority, the direct participatory theory of democracy envisions a system where all citizens can access the public sphere (*openness*). This perspective also emphasizes the importance of all citizens being included in collective decision-making processes, with their participation occurring on equal terms without hierarchical distinctions or privileged positions in debate (*inclusiveness*) (Ferree et al., 2002). The technological perspective argues that design principles and architectural choices can systematically engineer these capacities of the public sphere (openness and inclusiveness) into the very structure of social media platforms (Chen et al., 2021; Hsieh and Vergne, 2023; Logue and Grimes, 2019; Reischauer and Mair, 2018). When properly implemented, these technical features can create digital spaces that inherently promote democratic participation (Grossi et al., 2024; Helbing et al., 2023; Shapiro, 2018).

The technological perspective identifies critical shortcomings in current social media implementations that undermine democratic potential. Its proponents criticize the operation of contemporary platforms through centralized control mechanisms, proprietary algorithms, and closed systems that create new forms of digital hierarchy and exclusion (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Vergne, 2020). Second, they criticize the concentration of technical infrastructure among a few dominant platforms, which has led to algorithmic control rather than democratic empowerment (Chen et al., 2024; Fuchs, 2015). Third, they stress the vulnerability of information integrity in current platforms, where centralized control enables the manipulation and distortion of content (Cohen, 2019; Hunt et al., 2025). To address these challenges, the technological perspective suggests an orientation towards technical solutions, advocating for the development of alternative decentralized platforms based on distributed architectures and open-source principles that technically ensure openness and inclusion (Cohen, 2019; O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007; von Hippel and Krogh, 2003). Proponents also advocate for the development of blockchain-based systems that can verify and maintain the integrity of information flow through encryption mechanisms (Chen et al., 2021; Hsieh and Vergne, 2023; Nicoli et al., 2022).

We argue that while openness and inclusion are necessary conditions for a functioning public sphere, they are not sufficient to ensure its well-functioning. This is

because technological approaches do not attend to the quality of the debate and deliberation that is necessary for an effective democratic process. They simply emphasize the capacities of openness and inclusiveness while neglecting *argumentation* (Habermas, 2022). This critique applies also to exemplary cases like the 'Habermas machine', a deliberative experiment recently published in Science by Tessler and co-authors (2024). Despite its name, the system fails to enable actual deliberation: users simply choose from AI-generated options as isolated individuals; they do not engage in discourse, listen to others, or exchange reasons (see, e.g., Habermas' concerns reported by Rabe, 2025). The machine merely aggregates individual preferences rather than fosters genuine collective deliberation. Within social media, the unrestricted flow of information and diverse viewpoints does not guarantee that users will engage in deliberative processes in which questions of truth, rightness, and justice can effectively be addressed. Instead, due to the aggregation systems embedded in the algorithms and the encoding, users may lean towards like-minded communities or echo chambers, where dissenting voices are marginalized and debate becomes fragmented or even polarized. A lack of control over the quality of the debate and deliberation also risks swelling hate speech in diverse and vulnerable communities (Acosta Navas, 2025; Habermas, 2022). Additionally, the technological perspective's focus on distributed architectures and blockchain verification addresses information integrity but ignores information quality and democratic will formation. Technical verification cannot ensure information quality or meaningful contribution to democratic discourse, and nor does it help citizens develop well-reasoned positions on public matters. Technological perspectives might therefore lead to the neglect of different epistemologies of thinking and could promote immaturity in citizens (Scherer and Neesham, 2023), leaving them unable to engage in the construction of common ground.

Moreover, the solutions of the technological perspective reveal a fundamental tension between theoretical and practical platform openness and actual participation in democratic collective decision-making (Sander, 2025, p. 337). While decentralized platforms promise equal participation, their technical complexity creates barriers that limit access to a technologically literate elite (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). Even when these barriers are overcome, network effects and switching costs keep most users on the existing commercial platforms rather than migrating to democratically designed alternatives (Shi et al., 2015).

A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

This paper offers a *political perspective* on social media platforms to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these platforms affect democratic capacity in contemporary societies (Cohen and Fung, 2021; Habermas, 2022; Trenz, 2023). While market and technological perspectives offer valuable insights into specific preconditions of platform governance – transparency and accountability, openness, and inclusiveness – a *deliberative democratic perspective* complements these approaches by introducing critical preconditions for the processes of preference formation and collective decision-making based on argumentation. This political perspective sees democracy as a process whereby collective

decisions on issues of common concern emerge and are prepared through reasoned public discourse. Here is where citizens engage with each other in mutual exchange based on giving reasons and jointly considering the justifications of claims aiming at reaching a mutual understanding on public issues, interests and priorities, and policies and strategies as a basis for more informed and thus better collective decisions about public policy and matters of common concern. In this perspective, a well-functioning public sphere is not merely a space for providing (true) news and information for the (next) elections and the aggregation mechanism of individuals' votes based on their mediated perceptions and pre-existing preferences developed in isolation from and without talking to each other (as is implied in market approaches); nor is it a space that merely promotes openness and inclusive participation in decision-making on a continuous basis without considering the necessity of talking to each other and the quality of actual discourse (as is implied in technological approaches). Rather, a well-functioning public sphere aims at facilitating processes of informed preference formation and transformation on individual and collective levels through public reasoning and deliberation. Hence, deliberation is key.

Deliberation as Reasoned Public Debate

In the political perspective, deliberation is defined as the 'debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants' (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). In this sense, deliberation adds crucially to the quality of democratic discourse (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Habermas suggests that participants in an argumentative exchange make (implicit or explicit) validity claims for the comprehensiveness, truth, rightness, and sincerity of their assertions, which can be accepted or rejected by their addressees and, in case of doubt, validated in an open discursive process until a position is reached by those engaged in the discourse (Habermas, 1990, 1996). This process eventually leads to better justified positions and more informed opinions on matters of common concern because they are substantiated by evidence, arguments, and justifications, which can be rationally accepted or corrected and improved.

As pointed out by Fung (2003), deliberation processes offer governance benefits at three levels. At the individual level, they foster individual development and growth by enhancing epistemic and moral knowledge and promoting other-regarding behaviour (Cohen and Rogers, 1992; Habermas, 1990). At the mesolevel of social groups, organizations, and industries or fields, standards for argumentation and rules of debate based on deliberation principles improve the quality of the discourse and its results by incorporating diverse perspectives and additional information in organizational decision-making processes (Fearon, 1998). Finally, at the macrolevel of society, deliberation bolsters the legitimacy and credibility of these standards for the entities involved in their creation and enforcement (Dryzek and Pickering, 2017; Fung, 2003).

A political perspective points to the role social media platforms (and media in general) play as facilitators of deliberations in the public sphere. It argues for the importance of understanding that preferences are not just 'given' and 'aggregated' as is assumed in the market perspective, and that viewpoints are not only 'included' or 'distributed' as is assumed in the technology perspective (Elster, 1986), but that value

positions are formed and maintained or modified through argumentation, reasoning, and exchange.

Enhancing Deliberative Capacities

Through the political perspective, we argue that to transform platforms into true facilitators of democratic discourse, it is critical to enhance their deliberative capacity (Dryzek, 2009). As stressed by Dryzek (2009), *deliberative capacity* is the extent to which such platforms possess deliberation-hosting structures, processes, and norms that (1) provide comprehensive visibility into platform operations and users' opinions while ensuring users can take responsibility for their actions, decisions, and policies, promoting democratic oversight of both algorithmic and human decision-making processes (transparency and accountability); (2) ensure both technical accessibility and substantive opportunities for diverse perspectives to meaningfully form collective positions and shape public opinion (openness and inclusiveness); (3) facilitate sustained reasoned dialogue that enables preference formation and transformation through critical reflection, mutual understanding, and justification in collective decision making (conduciveness to argumentation); and (4) warrant the societal impact of collective decisions and public policies (consequentiality), such that there is not just talking, but actually walking the talk so that the democratic deliberation process delivers results. We now present these capacities, explaining the last two in detail since they are specific to the political perspective.

Transparency and accountability in deliberative contexts encompass both democratic oversight of platform operations and individuals' accountability for the spread of information. This implies making visible how platform structures (such as the algorithms behind recommendation systems and content moderation norms and processes) shape public discourse work (backstage transparency), but also providing information on who says what to whom and on what ground (frontstage transparency). Both platforms and users can thus be held accountable for their actions and words. Being able to determine the quality of information circulating on the platform and identify the sources of information induces both ex ante and ex post quality-enhancing effects.

Openness and inclusiveness focus on ensuring that proponents of diverse perspectives can meaningfully participate in and shape public discourse. This implies addressing both formal and informal barriers to participation, creating structural and procedural conditions that enable different individuals or social groups to not only access information (and hence be passively engaged by, for example, being informed on matters of public concern) but also to be acknowledged as a legitimate part of the collective and thus effectively influence understanding and the formation of opinions and decisions on individual and collective levels (Fung, 2003).

C*onduciveness to argumentation* is the ability of a platform to productively bring about or facilitate deliberation processes and constructive dialogues so that different voices can make themselves heard, address matters of public concern, put forward arguments pro and con certain opinions, check their validity claims, and eventually form collective decision-making that informs public policy based on reasons (instead of mere power) (Habermas, 1990, 1996, 2022). To be conducive to democratic argumentation, social media platforms must

successfully integrate certain fundamental tensions inherent to democratic governance in complex societies (Dryzek and Pickering, 2017): (a) expertise and participation; (b) diversity and consensus; (c) polycentricity and centralization; and (d) flexibility and stability. These tensions do not represent problems to be eliminated; rather, they constitute essential dialectics of complex governance. We next explain these tensions and how current social media platforms fundamentally unbalance or transform them, leading to democratic threats.

a. The tension between *public participation and expertise* requires integrating specialized technical knowledge with collective wisdom (Arenas, 2025). In social media, this tension manifests in its capacity to democratize voices while simultaneously undermining traditional mechanisms of expertise (Ritwick and Koljonen, 2025). Unlike traditional public spheres, where knowledge is mediated by credentialed experts and journalists, social media platforms enable anyone to claim expertise through followers and engagement. This creates 'influencer expertise', where authority is derived from popularity and algorithmic amplification that privileges viral content over validity, potentially resulting in public discourse dominated by opinion and misinformation rather than evidence-based argumentation.
b. The second tension, *diversity* versus *consensus*, requires maintaining genuine diversity of perspectives while fostering shared understanding and consensus. Social media platforms initially promised both but instead transformed diversity into antagonism, leading to segregation rather than inclusion and the systematic framing of the other as the enemy (Yarchi et al., 2020). This polarization stems from algorithms that amplify emotional over rational content (Del Vicario et al., 2016), anonymity that enables extreme expressions (Munger, 2017), and recommendation systems that reinforce pre-existing beliefs, radicalizing users over time (Rhodes, 2021).
c. The third tension, *polycentricity* versus *centralization*, requires balancing localized autonomy with coordinated debate. Initially, social media promised to enhance polycentricity – content was generated and shared from diverse parts of the world – by increasing the amount and variety of information available (Lazar et al., 2018) and generating increased scrutiny of corporations and their supply chains. However, current social media fragment public discourse within isolated communities that lack meaningful interconnection or mutual learning capabilities. Fragmentation is driven by algorithms designed to maximize content sharing, promoting 'echo chambers' (Colleoni et al., 2014) and fracturing society.
d. The fourth tension involves balancing *flexibility and stability*. It requires ongoing debate to be enabled while maintaining coherent discourse over time. Initial developments of social media promised constant flexibility in debates. The cost of debating was low and allowed multi-party participation. However, the platform architecture transformed flexibility into short-termism, prioritizing the immediacy of emotional and attention-based engagement over sustained dialogue.

Finally, the deliberative capacity of *consequentiality* ensures that deliberation meaningfully impacts collective decisions, public policies, and societal outcomes. Consequentiality is about the consolidation of democracy as it involves developing mechanisms that systematically connect democratic deliberation spaces to actual collective decision-making

processes, public policy (re)formation, institutional change, and societal impact. Consequentiality concerns the impact of deliberations and is based on the conviction that in complex modern society, the democratic formation of collective will leads to better results than reliance on an autocratic leader or single hierarchical superpower (be it human or AI-based). A recurrent lack of consequentiality leads to disappointment and erosion of trust in democratic structures and procedures since citizens perceive that their democratic engagement does not pay off (in the sense of better and more impactful public policies). As Dryzek (2009) notes, consequentiality means making institutions:

a. More legitimate because of the reflective acceptance of collective decisions and the induced public policies and societal impacts that are endorsed by participants. However, current social media create partisan discourse (e.g., by fostering conspiracy theories or fake news) that undermines rather than builds institutional legitimacy (Castelló et al., 2016; Etter et al., 2019; Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017), eroding trust in news media and organizations, democratic institutions, and public policies (Joaquim et al., 2024). Platforms that do not protect democratic discourse from misinformation (e.g., on public policies and their societal impacts) fail to support legitimate institutions (Carmi et al., 2020).
b. More efficient in coping with disagreement and division thanks to ongoing debates. Social media manipulate opinions through personalized data collection, but this serves hidden economic or ideological agendas rather than truth-seeking and collective interests (Zuboff, 2019). Yet, increasing deliberative capacity means enhancing the epistemic quality of governance systems and decision making so that fact-checking and truth-seeking are supported and public policy is based on knowledge rather than ideology or wishful thinking.
c. More effective in solving social problems through joint determination of goals and solutions. While social media amplify misconduct to hold power accountable (Colleoni et al., 2024), they nevertheless fail to establish direct accountability beyond reputational losses (Barnett et al., 2020).
d. More reflexive in correcting deficiencies because this improves the organization's ability to reconfigure based on performance reflection (Dryzek and Pickering, 2017; Lindebaum et al., 2023; Lindebaum and Fleming, 2024). In our context, we refer to reflexivity as 'the ability of a structure, process, or set of ideas to reconfigure itself in response to reflection on its performance' (Dryzek and Pickering, 2017, p. 353) Reflexivity involves a distributed ability of the system to reflect critically on its premises, knowledge bases, and preferences, including preferences about the structure of the political and media systems per se (Dryzek, 2009). Distributed ability might include mechanisms such as Oversight Boards, created to develop policies and procedures in content moderation.

COUNTERMEASURES TO MITIGATE THE DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Based on our political perspective, we derive countermeasures to mitigate the detrimental effects of social media, emphasizing the importance of transformations at the

institutional, organizational, and individual levels for safeguarding the democratic potential of social media (see also, e.g., Kumar and Maurya, 2024;).

Institutional Level

At the institutional level, we argue that several initiatives should be developed. First, we must reconceptualize social media platforms as democratic institutions rather than merely as private businesses (Persily and Tucker, 2020). Such recognition requires the development of a social contract between platform firms and stakeholders to safeguard the deliberative capacities of social media platforms (Trenz, 2023). This must be done through a public debate on the value and societal impacts of social media. More radical solutions, such as eliminating Facebook (Allcott et al., 2020), the 'break-up of Big Tech' (Jacobides and Lianos, 2021, p. 1139), and the establishing of 'public service social media' (Fuchs, 2021), which would reduce the concentration of power and mitigate algorithmic amplification of polarizing content also merit consideration. Establishing a public service social media driven by democratic values rather than profit, emulating for example the BBC (Fuchs, 2021), could promote deliberation, inclusivity, and civic engagement. Second, supranational institutions should increase the regulatory frameworks. While the EU's Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2020) establishes mandatory oversight mechanisms and includes civil society in platform governance (de Streel, 2024), it inadequately addresses algorithmic control. We argue that safeguarding social media as a public sphere requires explicit recognition of the platforms' role in democratic will formation and the establishment of clear public service mandates (Habermas, 2022; Kumar and Maurya, 2024). The BBC model demonstrates how democratic societies can govern media through independent oversight bodies that have statutory powers over both content and algorithmic architectures (Pickard, 2020, 2021).

Organizational Level

At the *organizational level*, we advocate for organizational interventions that ensure social media's deliberative capacity through several key mechanisms:

Effective credential verification systems. Platforms need to develop systems of expertise validation. Although Twitter introduced the blue check system as a verification marker, the system evolved into a marker of status and influence rather than expertise (Mirer and Humayun, 2024), failing to meaningfully validate expertise. We propose a more sophisticated approach involving credential authenticating systems through institutional validation (e.g., medical boards verifying healthcare professionals, or universities confirming academic credentials). Facebook has developed such systems of verification processes for journalists, academics, and other professional groups, representing a step toward domain-specific credentialing. Defining a proper credential system could help maintain public participation in debates on social media while ensuring expert knowledge in public discourse, therefore balancing the fundamental tension between expertise and public participation in democratic discourse.

Privilege affordances for constructive engagement. Social media platforms need to privilege affordances that promote constructive engagement across different viewpoints and users. Experiments with duets show how users can engage in actual dialogue rather than mere sharing or reactive engagement (Herring and Dainas, 2025). Through duet affordances, users are encouraged to respond to and build upon others' content, creating chains of interaction that can develop ideas and perspectives over time (Quick and Maddox, 2024). Duet affordances and consociational systems could be further explored to bridge ideological divides and introduce different ethnic, religious, or ideological lines in deliberations.

Duets and consociational systems should be complemented by filtering systems that identify potentially harmful content (Fortuna and Nunes, 2018) without resorting to outright censorship (Ullmann and Tomalin, 2020). Filtering systems should promote an intermediary ethical space between unrestricted speech and authoritarian control, where content censorship serves to protect users and fundamental democratic discourse is protected. This can be done through the implementation of quarantine systems and other protective mechanisms utilizing content alerts and friction (Ullmann and Tomalin, 2020). More fundamentally, platforms must redesign their algorithmic architectures to avoid amplifying emotionally inflammatory content, which often precedes or accompanies hate speech (Massanari, 2015). These mechanisms would help maintain the tension between promoting diversity of viewpoints and fostering constructive dialogue.

Implement 'diversity-sensitive' recommendation algorithms. While recommendation algorithms have proven effective in commercial contexts such as product recommendations on Amazon (Ansari and Mela, 2003), their application to public discourse needs to be improved to actively promote exposure to different perspectives while maintaining meaningful dialogue (Helberger et al., 2018). These systems need to do more than simply inject random opposing viewpoints into users' feeds; they must identify and promote content that can effectively bridge different discourse communities while maintaining the coherence necessary for productive debate. This means developing recommendation systems that can connect neighbouring discourses around issues to encourage constructive engagement rather than fragmentation. Such systems could help restore the deliberative function of social media by ensuring that users can engage deeply within their primary communities of interest (maintaining beneficial polycentricity) while remaining connected to and aware of the broader landscape of public discourse.

Promote sustained engagement. Platforms must fundamentally redesign their content promotion and engagement systems to prioritize sustained, reasoned discourse around critical societal issues. Current platform architectures, driven by attention metrics and rapid content turnover, create an environment where substantive discussions are constantly disrupted by new trending topics and viral content. Platforms need to develop systems that can first identify topics of critical public relevance and then create spaces and mechanisms that promote extended engagement with these issues over time (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019). This could involve features that track ongoing debates, highlight

thoughtful contributions that build upon previous discussions, and reward users who contribute to sustained, reasoned dialogue rather than quick, emotional reactions. Such mechanisms would help balance the tension between flexibility and stability by maintaining space for emerging issues while ensuring that important debates receive the sustained attention they require for meaningful democratic deliberation.

Individual Level

Citizen literacy and education facilitate deliberative capacity inasmuch as they influence the communicative competence of political actors and ordinary citizens (Dryzek, 2009; Gutmann, 1999; Habermas, 1990). By educating users on the mechanisms of social media platforms and the impact of their online interactions, individuals can be more conscientious of their contributions to digital discussions and the broader public discourse (Kumar and Maurya, 2024). Individual-level solutions to the threads of social media have been developed at two levels: first, at the educational level (on how to develop effective digital literacy) and, second, at the community or societal level (on how to frame and maybe resist the increasing digitalization) (see, e.g., Allen and Edelson, 2024; Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019; Blau et al., 2020; Sander, 2024).

At the educational level, scholars increasingly argue about the importance of a multifaceted approach that combines education, access, and policy initiatives (Jaeger et al., 2012). Governmental organizations such as the European Commission (2020) advocate for lifelong learning programmes related to codification, cybersecurity, and data protection, which ensure individuals continue to develop their digital competencies beyond their formal education years.

At the community and societal level, the debate is polarized around whether individuals should engage with or resist digitalization altogether. On the one hand, proponents of digital literacy advocate for community-based initiatives enhancing digital literacy (Sander, 2024). Public libraries, schools, and non-profits offer workshops and training programmes that target marginalized populations, helping bridge the digital divide. On the other hand, there is an increasing societal call for digitalization resistance, arguing that the addictive nature of technology means it should be avoided and regulated. Digital detoxes are promoted, as are awareness campaigns such as those led by the *Digital Minimalism* movement, inspired by Cal Newport's work on intentional technology use (Newport, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, we have sought to answer a deceptively simple question: Is social media threatening the democratic capacity of our societies? And if so, what should we do about it?

To answer this question, we first set out the limitations of current management approaches (market and technology) for addressing this question. We claimed that social media are not merely market intermediaries or technological platforms; they have become critical infrastructure for public discourse, requiring new theoretical perspectives. We introduced a new political perspective of social media platforms and explained its implications for democracy.

The political perspective we have outlined not only facilitates the development of policy countermeasures; it also has important implications for management and organization research and opens future avenues for research. First, we shed light on the relationship between organizations and democracy. We join the conversation on the importance of addressing authoritarianism and the retreat of democracy (Adler et al., 2023; Chayka, 2025; Klein and Taylor, 2025), explaining the role that social media platforms play in democracy, and their potential harm for democracy. We do so by making explicit the implicit assumptions about democracy behind current management perspectives on social media platforms and show the limitations of the market perspective in focusing only on accountability and transparency (echoing authors such as G. F. Davis in Adler et al., 2023, and also Cennamo and Karonović in this issue). We also argue about the constraints of openness and inclusion and the imperative of governance plurality of the technology perspective (cf. J. P. Vergne in this issue) as effective countermeasures to democratic threats. In doing so, we open a new debate, advocating for the need for a deeper understanding of the foundations of democracy in management theory.

Second, and as a remedy to the limitations of the current approaches, we propose a political perspective that has important implications for multiple streams of management research. For platform governance scholars (Cennamo, 2021; Chen et al., 2022), we show that social media's fundamental role in shaping democratic discourse calls for governance frameworks that account for deliberative capacity. We contribute to the analysis of power inequalities embedded in platform designs (Harracá et al., 2023; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Walker et al., 2021) and broader debates on democratic organizing (Landemore, 2020; Scherer and Voegtlin, 2020). For social evaluations researchers (Barnett et al., 2020; Etter et al., 2019; Joaquim et al., 2024), we argue that platform architectures systematically undermine information quality (foundational to signalling theory and social judgements formation), suggesting the need to reconceptualize how social evaluations function in algorithmically mediated environments. For stakeholder engagement and social movement scholars (Colleoni et al., 2024; King and Pearce, 2010; Wenzel et al., 2025), we show how platforms transform the dynamics of collective action and advocacy, creating new forms of power asymmetries while simultaneously enabling novel forms of resistance and mobilization.

Further to this last point, we emphasize the role of social media platforms in shaping public debate and democracy and call for an improvement of their deliberative quality – an area that warrants further investigation. We introduce two fundamental principles of deliberative capacity: (1) *conduciveness to argumentation*, which we define as a platform's capacity to foster productive deliberation and facilitate constructive dialogue, and (2) *consequentiality*, the capacity of a system to transform what has been decided based on democratic deliberations into public policies and societal impact, thus walking the talk on a collective level. With regard to the former, we expand on contemporary threats to democracy – polarization, societal fragmentation, hate speech, misinformation, short-termism – as consequences of the disruption to the conditions and tensions necessary for conducive argumentation. We call for further empirical and theoretical exploration of these challenges. Future research could investigate these tensions in relation to different

platform governance models (e.g., varying degrees of centralization and accountability) and the underlying power dynamics within platform organizations.

Finally, we advance scholarship on how social media platforms influence the implementation of democratic decision-making and institutional change. We introduce *consequentiality* as fundamental to deliberative capacity, and advocate for the importance of looking at the implementation and consequences of the deliberative outcomes. We argue for the need to develop governance frameworks that enhance bottom-up problem-solving and enable multi-level coordination among governmental and societal actors. We suggest linking consequentiality to issues such as changes in legitimacy derived from social media engagements (Castelló et al., 2016; Colleoni et al., 2024; Etter et al., 2019; Joaquim et al., 2024), governance practices and stakeholder engagement (Wenzel et al., 2025), and the challenges of implementing institutional change and reflexivity (Lindebaum et al., 2023; Lindebaum and Fleming, 2024). In this regard, we call for future research to disentangle the empirical complexities of political debate implementation. These studies should not only examine governance and practical challenges (Castelló et al., 2016), but also address the cognitive and emotional barriers that hinder the translation of social media discourses into political and institutional practice.

With this article, we aim to stimulate scholarly reflection on the need to reassess democracy in the context of social media platforms; we do this not to 'shoot the messenger' (Margetts, 2019, p. 9) but to deepen our knowledge of how these platforms are integral to contemporary democratic systems. Both platform organizations and political institutions must adapt to these changes and explore ways to integrate social media into democratic life in a deliberative manner. Accordingly, we call on technologists, philosophers, political theorists, and management scholars to collaborate in developing the ethical, political, and regulatory frameworks necessary to realize this integration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The team of authors would like to thank Corinne Post, Christopher Wickert, and the Journal of Management Studies editorial team for their continuous and invaluable support and review and the three authors of the two counterpoints that contributed to a rich debate. We want to recognize Donato Cutolo, Cinzia Dal Zotto, Annabelle Gawer, and Cristina Neesham with whom we had early debates about these topics and who guided our paper. We also want to thank Alberto Mingardi and the IULM Debate Club for organizing a workshop on our Point-CounterPoint debate that highlighted the broader public relevance of the issue of social media and Democracy. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the following conferences and workshops: The Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management in 2024 and 2025, ESCP Seminars, CSIC Ingenio Seminars. We thank all the participants for their comments and suggestions. We thank the support of the following funding organizations and projects: UK ESRC ES/Y003667/1 and IULM University 'Special Projects' grant.

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