

A ‘democratisation’ that is more a fallacy

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation,” said Oscar Wilde.

From the beginning, social media platforms have trumpeted that they have ‘democratised’ self-expression. In important ways, this is true. Social media platforms have facilitated the circumvention of elite and/or authoritarian gatekeeping and have brought new voices into the public sphere. This has had a decidedly mixed effect on the public sphere. However, the impact of social media on democratic discourse is a separate debate. The purpose here is to dig deeper into the premise that social media platforms have democratised self-expression.

An abridgement of the long form

A review of the trajectory of self-expression on social media shows a trend towards increasing brevity and homogeneity. The early days of online discourse centered around long-form text on blogs and message boards. This required individuals to think through the substance of what they wanted to say and then articulate it in their own words to communicate to their audience. Even if the content itself was nonsensical, it required conscious engagement, certainly from the writer but also the reader, who would need to specifically seek out that particular content and spend time reading and responding to it in her own words. With the advent of social media, long-form text has gone through a series of abridgements, from posts to tweets to retweets, likes, memes, and emojis.

Now, one of the most striking things about online communication is how little people speak. Speak in their own words that is. It is worth asking at what point in this trajectory does engagement stop being a form of self-expression but instead becomes a tool for mass homogenisation. It is unclear how by repeatedly replacing one’s own words with those of another individual (through retweets, likes and memes) or a corporation (via emojis), any individual can find her own voice. This question is relevant also because the time spent on these discrete engagements is too fleeting to allow active involvement. Does a retweet or like indicate 100% endorsement or merely fluid alignment with the “spirit” of the content? And, if we do not take the time to reflect and articulate specifically what we feel, instead of merely reiterating someone else, does it qualify as self-expression?

This question needs to be asked because social media moulds expression to fit its own format instead of vice versa. Retweets and likes are binary instruments which leave no room for personal nuance. Memes and emojis constrain articulation to the selection at hand, shaping instead of facilitating self-expression. Are people really laughing till they are crying as the popular emoji (a smiley) seems to suggest? And if not, does its use denote self-expression or artifice shaped by an external platform? What too of the ambiguity which gets injected into communication due to variable interpretations by different individuals for various emojis and memes?

Social media also forces brevity — due to its format and the larger ecosystem it has spawned — which shows up not just as typographical errors and poor grammar but also constraints on the possibilities of what can be said. This limits, instead of enhancing, the fullness of self-expression.

However, it is not just the structure of social media platforms which inhibits self-expression but also the incentives. An important emerging discussion focuses on how the incentives of social media shape the discourse by privileging antagonism, snark and outrage over dialogue and reason. This in turn prods individuals to become more antagonistic and outrageous with the effect that the medium dictates the message. This influence of the medium on the message is visible also in making virality the primary determinant of value instead of the substance of the message itself.

The ‘creator economy’

The ability of social media platforms to abridge expression is also playing out in the so-called “creator economy”. In order to improve user stickiness and engagement, social media platforms have started compensating users for original audiovisual content. While sites such as YouTube allowed individuals to create their own video channels and shared ad-revenue based on views, platforms have increasingly moved to shorter video formats ranging from 15 to 60 seconds. These videos are served up algorithmically and there are many reports of befuddled creators trying to hack the algorithm and make their content go viral. It is unclear, in this mix of super short videos, preoccupation with algorithms, and directed viewers, whether the creator has or can have a specific point of view and if there is much room for “self-expression”. In fact, a significant portion of “content” is merely rehashed cuts of existing content.

With the emergence of generative AI such as ChatGPT and Dall-E for text and images, respectively, there is a high possibility that “self-expression” will be further diminished by making it easy to generate content without requiring the individual to apply herself in any meaningful manner.

The undeniable fact is that social media platforms are a capitalist enterprise. Even though capitalism seemingly thrives on increasing user choice, standardisation and mass production are natural corollaries of capitalism. Social media platforms thus promote ever greater homogenisation and mass production of ready-made expressions such as memes and emoji because they are interested not in promoting self-expression but engagement.

Even as social media platforms have brought new voices into the public sphere, it is worth looking deeper into the premise — of their democratisation of self-expression

The article you've shared explores a complex and thought-provoking issue about the democratisation of self-expression on social media platforms. Here's a guide on how students might form their opinions on the subject:

Step 1: Understanding the Central Argument

- The author asserts that while social media platforms claim to democratise self-expression, they actually promote brevity and homogeneity, constraining true individuality.
- The platforms, rather than enabling unique self-expression, have facilitated a culture of mimicry, where likes, retweets, and emojis replace thoughtful discourse.
- The article further questions the sincerity of expression on social media and critiques the role of capitalist-driven algorithms that prioritise engagement over meaningful content.

Step 2: Ask Critical Questions

Encourage students to ask questions to help them form a well-rounded opinion:

- **Do you agree that social media has limited rather than expanded self-expression?**
- **What role do retweets, likes, and emojis play in self-expression?**
 - Does the simplicity of these tools truly capture one's thoughts, or are they mere shortcuts that limit creativity?
- **Is the promotion of brevity on social media necessarily negative?**
 - Could it be that brevity allows for clarity and focus, or does it strip away depth from discourse?

Step 3: Support Your Opinion with Evidence

support opinions with examples from own experience or from the text:

- **Pro-brevity argument:** Argument can be- platforms like Twitter or TikTok force individuals to be concise and impactful, pushing for creativity within constraints.
- **Anti- homogenisation argument:** Argument can be memes or emojis have actually added nuance or a playful layer to communication, showing that social media can indeed foster unique self-expression in its own way.

Step 4: Acknowledge Counterarguments

It's essential to engage with the opposing view:

- **Against the article's claim:** Some may argue that social media has enabled self-expression like never before, giving everyone a voice and enabling diverse perspectives globally. They could acknowledge that while there are limitations (homogeneity and brevity), social media still offers a platform for creativity and sharing unique viewpoints.
- **Agreeing with the article:** Others might agree wholeheartedly with the article, citing examples of repetitive trends, like TikTok challenges, which emphasise imitation over innovation, or viral tweets that gain popularity for shock value rather than substance.

Step 5: Conclusion

It can be concluded by reflecting on the role social media plays in lives. Have they ever felt pressured to conform to popular opinions or trends? Do they think self-expression is possible in the age of retweets and likes, or do they believe new forms of creativity are emerging within these constraints?

By following these steps, students can form nuanced opinions about whether social media has democratised self-expression or diminished it, engaging both critically and personally with the topic.