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## **PLATFORM GOVERNANCE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE: (HOW) CAN EXCLUSION INCREASE THE PARTICIPATION OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS ON DIGITAL PUBLIC VENUES?**

Malin Holm  
Department of Government, Uppsala University

Digital media platforms have transformed the public sphere and prerequisites for public conversations and opinion building in unprecedented ways. One of the greatest differences in relation to traditional public venues is that digital venues have significantly lowered the thresholds for entering public conversations and to broadcast political opinions to a wide audience. Through their low thresholds for access, online platforms on the one hand present intersectionally marginalized groups with increased opportunities to come together and mobilize politically without having to deal with traditional gatekeepers or other types of cost and barriers that are inherent to offline public venues. At the same time, this new type of inclusion affords a wide range of possibilities whereby actors can exercise intersectional violence against politicians, feminist activists and individual women alike. Moreover, there are a number of studies that have shown how these inequalities benefit groups on the extreme right and other types of organised racist movements, but also violent parts of men's rights movements, who have been successful in their use of online platforms to mobilize and influence mainstream political agendas (Daniels, 2009; Dignam & Rohlinger 2019; Holm, 2019; Koehler 2014).

The response from the large mainstream social media platforms to remove published content or to 'deplatform' (the removal of one's account on social media for breaking platform rules) a large variety of users, such as individuals and groups on the far right, including high profile politicians such as Donald Trump (Kraus, 2018), has given rise to vivid media- as well as academic debates around the effectiveness of deplatforming as well as its consequences for the foundations of democratic societies. In parallel, new legislation that targets big tech companies has been rapidly adopted, in particular at the European level. The removal of published content and the barring of users, ordinary citizens as well as high-profile politicians', from social media platforms is increasingly defended as a way to protect democratic rights (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Kraus, 2018; Rogers 2020). It has also been demonstrated that exclusion through deplatforming is an effective strategy, since those targeted lose parts of their visibility and outreach possibilities (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Nouri et al. 2019). However, such practices can also place undue restrictions on freedom of speech and create uneven access to key platforms for public discussion (LoNigro 2021). It has also been shown how far right

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groups and men's rights groups, as well as extremist Internet celebrities, make use of a variety of strategies to sustain their activities and support/fan base when being deplatformed from major social media platforms (DeCook 2019; Rogers 2020.)

In order to hinder attacks on democratic norms and processes in digital public venues, designing exclusion strategies is a pressing concern. Nevertheless, we lack systematic studies of how digital public venues should be governed to protect – rather than undermine – democratic values through exclusion. Hitherto, the democratic quality of public debates has instead been strongly associated with inclusion. This can be understood in the light of that one of the main problems with traditional public venues in relation to political equality has been their high thresholds for participation, which has resulted in the exclusion of less resourceful groups. In democratic theory, inclusion has even been so strongly intertwined with democracy, so that exclusion has been understood as per definition anti-democratic (see e.g. Plotke 2006; Young 2000). As Iris Young (2000, p. 13) writes in her seminal work *Inclusion and Democracy*: “[i]f inclusion in decision-making is a core of the democratic ideal, then, to the extent that such [i.e., political] exclusions exist, democratic societies do not live up to their promise”. Previous research on how to increase the participation of marginalized groups in public deliberation primarily has also mainly focused on how public venues can be more accommodating to a wider range of discussion norms, as well as the importance of developing alternative, more inclusive, deliberative arenas (see e.g. Fraser, 1990; Hayward, 2004; Young, 2000). Hence, this literature has been written from what Dovi (2009) denotes “a perspective of inclusion”. However, the dramatic consequences of the rapid development of digital public venues for democratic processes and practices show the urgent need for also analysing when and how the access to public venues needs to be limited or even denied. While there are pressing concerns to strategize about how to exclude from public venues hosted by big tech companies to hinder attacks on democratic norms and processes, we hence lack systematic studies of how and why digital platforms can and should exercise democratic exclusion.

Therefore, this contribution argues that we as feminist scholars now need to turn our theoretical and empirical focus also towards democratic exclusion to increase equal participation of intersectionally marginalized groups in public deliberation, and how such exclusion could be conceptualized in the context of online public deliberation. How can we then conceptualize of democratic exclusion in the context of digital public venues from a feminist power perspective? To explore this question, I will draw on the feminist works within democratic theory which have contributed greatly to the normative theorization of democratic exclusion, but have done so in relation to other types of political settings; in particular the works within feminist political theory on exclusion of dominant groups within parliaments (e.g. Dovi 2009; Murray 2014). To analyse if and how these previous contributions can be applied to the specific context of digital public venues, we also need to consider the specific gender power structures that characterizes digital public venues. First, I will analyze if and how these previous contributions can be applied to the specific context of digital public venues, where special conditions of access and visibility apply. I will then assess to what extent the platforms' existing governing strategies and policies concerning the exclusion of problematic content or accounts are compatible with the relevant exclusion principles formulated in these works. For example, are principles that justify exclusion such as Dovi's (2009) “oppression principle” applicable in an online

context? Are limitations on the right to free speech justifiable when harm is induced, and if so what type of harm and to whom? Building on this analysis, in its final parts the study will move on to carve out more specific suggestions for how exclusion on digital venues should be governed, and what principles should guide this governance. The results of this study will thus have direct policy implications for how digital public venues should be governed democratically.

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