



Selective Permeability,  
Social Media and Epistemic  
Fragmentation

## Selective Permeability, Social Media and Epistemic Fragmentation

This article examines epistemic impacts of social media, merging Gibson's affordance theory with the notion of selective permeability, which holds [people encounter objective differences in a setting because of their](#) distinct capacities, [only here applying the idea to online spaces](#). I start by circumscribing my deployment of "affordances," taking care not to totally divorce [the term](#) from Gibson's intent, as often happens in information technologies [research](#). I next detail ways that selective permeability characterizes online epistemic landscapes, focusing on how factors (like culture) moderate normative standards for sharing information. This leads to a discussion about selective receptivity and blindness to information in the context of social media—a situation that amplifies political divides and renders antagonists mutually incomprehensible. This segues into my final topic: an exposition of how social media can [make the offline world more selectively hostile to some](#). An additional proposition is that practical habits cultivated on networking apps [can modulate](#) what affordances are present [in offline arenas](#), as opposed to just affecting which ones [get noticed](#). Throughout, I suggest that selective permeability answers an increasingly [recognized](#) challenge: the difficulty of generalizing conclusions about one app to others and across cultures, ages, *etc.* Ultimately, my aim is not only to explicate how social media fragments common social knowledge [but](#) to defend selective permeability as an epistemic template for comprehending social media.

**Keywords:** Affordances, Conspiracies, Ecological Psychology, Information Technology, Internet, Political Ideologies, Populism, Public Awareness, Social Epistemology, Social Media

### Introduction

This article examines epistemic impacts of social media, deploying two ideas: 1) Gibson's (1966, 1979) tenet that people perceive space through the lens of action possibilities, termed affordances, and 2) the allied notion of selective permeability. The second concept suggests that distinct capacities lead individuals to encounter objectively different prospects and obstacles. For instance, a stairway is often more usable for teens than the elderly, and information technologies are differentially accessible [depending on](#) skill. The proposed framework illuminates why some individuals selectively fixate on specific online threads, such as COVID-19 denial, vaccine skepticism or misogynistic content. Such fixations can render offline places less safe for the elderly and women, selectively introducing what Gibson calls "negative affordances," defined as action-limiting environmental features.

Drawing on American pragmatism, European phenomenology and Gestalt psychology,<sup>1</sup> Gibson (1966, p. 285) introduces "affordance" as a non-subjective substitute for values. [The idea is](#) that use-potentialities have [objective valence for](#) agents, as when a lake is navigable, dangerously flooded or safely drinkable. Gibson (1979, Ch. 8) hints at technological and social sides of affordances. But it has been left to later generations to develop a more expansive understanding in these areas (e.g., Leonardi & Barley 2008,

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson (1979) open his last book by expressly crediting pragmatists and Gestaltists. [Chemero & Käufer, S. \(2016\) present evidence that Gibson was also influenced by Merleau-Ponty.](#)

Krueger 2011; Strong et al., 2014), with selective permeability standing as an example. Consider a woman for whom an online dating space is threatening because, compared to men, she contends with aggressive provocations. Here, there is a situation—a normative grammar—with aspects are functionally akin, if not identical, to what Gibson regards as hostile and action constraining negative affordances.

It is important to recognize that applying affordance theory to social media moves beyond Gibson's original intent. For Gibson, affordances are concrete environmental features—what might be called “hard” aspects. For example, if a barricaded embassy is between us and the beach we are walking to, then getting to our destination compels us to go around it. Social media platforms usually lock us in in softer ways. We may disconnect and thereby exit at any time, not an option if we are halfway to the beach. Likewise, we can stare at an online image of somebody we secretly love without incurring costs we might in the offline world. And whereas social networking sites depend a lot on subjective allure, Gibson divorces the presence or absence of affordances from our personal interests, so that a mountain spring is safely drinkable or not regardless of whether we are thirsty.

At the same time, parallels between online and offline affordances are strong. For Gibson (1966, p. 146, 1979, p. 137), predator and prey odors, dangers and safeties, are negative and positive affordances. On social media, there are likewise safeties and dangers, predators and prey. For example, girls are both cyberbullying perpetrators and prey for aggressors more often than boys (Rice et al., 2015), and chatting with a stranger on an app often has risks for women that men less often face (Savoia et al., 2021). Online selectively imposed normative grammars can therefore be fairly “hard” and not far from the negative affordances, say, that a non-swimmer may encounter in a narrow path alongside a deep watercourse.

Several factors amplify selective permeability. To start, information is often regulated based on users' choices and corporate interests (Frost-Arnold, 2023, Chs. 2-3). This results in seemingly personalized content that is, in reality, not individualized as much as tailored through Venn-like overlaps identifying similarities across larger groups—a key step in creating targeted ads and alluring content to keep users enticed. Age, political views, culture, education, religion, peer groups and choice of platform

also increase or decrease susceptibility to misinformation and fringe views (Fuchs, 2021; Zhang & Jung, 2022). This engenders something like a selectively permeable barrier around people that filters information, analogously to how a cell's membrane lets in some chemicals but not others (see Crippen, 2022). Additionally, practical skills and habits, along with platform design, moderate digital affordances, shaping how individuals engage with online spaces (see Yeşilada & Lewandowsky, 2022)

In *developing my position*, a first step is to review affordance theory and selective permeability, demonstrating enough of their original significance is retained to warrant the shared nomenclature. I then elaborate on how selective permeability sheds light on how factors—like a user's culture—affect the epistemic terrains of social networking, moderating normative standards for sharing information. Next, I discuss selective receptivity and blindness to information in the context of social media. This situation fragments the epistemic landscape, exaggerating political divides and rendering antagonists mutually incomprehensible. This segues into my final topic, which is an examination of how social media can amplify selective permeability in the offline world. Additionally, I defend two propositions throughout the article. One is that practical habits, including those developed on various apps, not only change the affordances we notice but also play a role in determining which action possibilities (i.e., affordances) are present. The second proposition is that selective permeability helps answer a challenge that is increasingly recognized: the difficulty of generalizing conclusions about one app to others and across different cultures, age groups and so forth. Thus, my account is not just on how social media fragments common social knowledge. Selective permeability is also offered as an epistemological template for understanding social media.

### **Affordances and Selective Permeability**

Gibson (e.g., 1966) does not, as critics sometimes suggest, assert that agents passively receive information since he sometimes describes perception as an “activity” that is “exploratory and stimulus-producing” (p. 138), offering the example of chewing food to release fluids and aromas. Nonetheless, Gibson (e.g., 1979, Chs. 4, 14) posits that energy and chemical arrays (light, sound, heat, food sugars, etc.) immediately and fully convey the presence of affordances. This implies, on the one hand, that affordances

are directly detectable without need for further interpretation. On the other hand, the selective fragmentation of cultural domains caused by social media usage can involve registering temporally extended meaningful social gestalts.<sup>2</sup> The latter cannot be reduced to energy and chemical arrays, although both remain relevant. Accordingly, talking about online affordances risks gutting the concept, making it a verbose word for “options” or “ideas.” In this section, I review Gibson’s account of affordances and how the notion of selective permeability in digital spaces extends beyond his views and yet preserves certain core principles.

Affordances, to review, are environmental features that enable or restrict actions, also affecting how we perceive the world and the values or meanings in it. From a human standpoint, writes Gibson (1979), “a stone can be a paperweight, a bookend, a hammer, or a pendulum bob,” or else “be piled on another rock to make a cairn or a stone wall” (p. 134). To a deer, however, a stone is more value neutral. It has none of the just listed affordances, though a high wall may be a barrier or a hiding place, and a hunter’s flint axe a threat. For Gibson, “these benefits and injuries, these safeties and dangers, these positive and negative affordances are properties of things *taken with reference to an observer*” (p. 137). Yet they are “not properties of the *experiences of the observer*. They are not subjective values” because the attributes that, say, make a rock good for hammering remain even when nobody is present. This “implies that the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ of things in the environment” are “external to the perceiver,” so “can be directly perceived” (p. 127). Accordingly, Gibson identifies as a realist—that is, he maintains that affordances and values, though relative to an individual’s capacities, exist in the world independently of agents.

Typically, technology entails a community since people usually collaborate to construct and learn how to deploy it, and Gibson’s (1979, Ch. 8) discussions of stones and cultural sitting habits imply that social practices and tools inflect affordance availability. Thus, subsequent scholars barely stretched when advancing notions of social and technological affordances (e.g., Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Krueger, 2011; Majchrzak & Markus, 2013), which dovetail with the idea of selective permeability. For instance, the same

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<sup>2</sup> Though not defending a selectively permeable notion of culture, Solymosi (2013) nicely conveys the idea that culture introduces affordances that are not immediately expressed in chemical and energy arrays, anticipating Di Paolo et al.’s (2017, Ch., 8) notion of virtual affordances.

hand gesture can have benign vs. offensive meanings in different regions (see Li, 2015), selectively modifying avenues for social engagement depending on culture. Similarly, an energetic young paraglider with the right training and tools might value a cliff because it affords flying, while the precipice means something different to a tired octogenarian without the appropriate equipment and skill (Crippen, 2020).

Selective permeability, as here used, was originally deployed in work on urban geography (e.g., Crippen & Klement, 2020; Crippen, 2022). The concept can align frictionlessly with affordance theory, as when a city space selectively assails women (Felson et al. 2021; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ceccato, 2022), or when white affluent residents prevent subway expansion to limit access to poorer minorities (Schindler, 2015). Variations in embodiment are bases for selective permeability. Energy depleting conditions like sadness, low blood sugar, illness, tiredness, indebtedness or bad weather all make inclines look steeper or farther away (Bhalla & Proffitt, 1999; Schnall et al., 2010; Zadra et al., 2010; Riener et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2018; Ekawati et al., 2022). Here, the appearance reflects the reality: exhaustion makes movement harder; it basically equates to travelling farther, so that a stairway becomes selectively onerous.

But selective permeability sometimes pushes beyond Gibson's (1966, 1979) position. In urban areas, decorative curbs, picket fences, slight elevation changes and alterations in tiling on walkways function as socially meaningful but tacitly registered markers of private or semiprivate space. Often without explicitly noticing, outsiders feel uncomfortable entering these areas (Newman, 1996, Ch. 1). Moreover, as stairs look steeper to the exhausted who find them tougher to crest, the symbolic design features (decorative curbs, etc.) have been documented to selectively repel the weary homeless, or to keep a public area like Tahrir Square free of politically and economically depleted Egyptians more than tourists (Crippen 2022, 2023a).

Just as forest fire smoke can be a negative affordance to a hiker, with Gibson (1966, p. 146) similarly asserting that a prey animal must detect "the affordance ... of predator odor" for its own safety, people register genuine hazards in cities. Egyptians' perception of Tahrir after its 2015 reconstruction (altered

again in 2020)<sup>3</sup> exemplifies this. So, selective permeability here fits Gibson’s non-subjective commitments. Additionally, living in a surveillance state fosters habitual caution, affecting action possibilities (affordances), which is partly why Tahrir’s traits became negative affordances for many Egyptians and fewer tourists. The example, however, also departs from typical understandings of affordances. To start, Tahrir’s features repelled entry without physically preventing it. They did so partly because of enculturated conventions not given in the immediate environment since agents unfamiliar with architectural customs and Egypt’s politics would probably not register Tahrir’s threatening import (Crippen, 2021, 2022).

Constraining social norms or meanings (what I will sometimes call “social grammars”) are pervasive. For instance, a vocally enthusiastic liberal at a Donald Trump rally on election night faces genuine risks (censure, ejection, physical harm), thereby encountering negative affordances. If the person relocates to a conservative part of the country, continued exposure to normative pressures may curb explicit liberal enthusiasm, altering behavioral habits and in some degree the affordances present, adjusting how things (politically) appear. It is key to remember that socially constructed grammars really are there independently of any single agent; they are fairly unforgiving realities with which people must contend and are in this sense genuinely Gibsonian. However, because these constraints—like the ones in Tahrir—involve social gestalts not given in the immediate environment, the situation again departs from Gibson’s view that information in energy and chemical arrays is sufficient for affordance detection.

While social media landscapes differ from offline ones, they still impose social grammars, which are understandable as affordances. This means, first, that ideologies delivered via the internet—whether from the right or the left—prescribe action-constraining normative codes. If relocating and adjusting behaviors to new conventions modifies the affordances available, thus slightly altering perception, social media ought to be capable of the same. Research confirms this. For example, participants’ alignment with

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<sup>3</sup> During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Tahrir Square was little more than a poorly kept roundabout. In 2013 the military executed a coup, and in 2015 the Square was refashioned with defensive features (elevation changes, alterations in tiling as one moves close to the center, low decorative walls, etc.). In 2020, it was resigned again, and now it is simply guarded with entry forbidden (see Crippen, 2023).

a brand increased or decreased when experimenters asked them to “selectively self-present themselves as either a loyal brand advocate or not” on Chatzy, a [chatroom platform](#) (Carr & Hayes, 2019, p. 418).

A second point is that internet movements, like the populist QAnon perspectives promulgated on 4chan, 8kun (8chan), Reddit, Twitter<sup>4</sup> and YouTube—especially favored by MAGA Republicans—target those who see themselves as disadvantaged folks struggling against societal [tides](#) that disproportionately favor the elites (Müller, 2016; Krämer, 2017). If disenfranchisement elevates exhaustion and examining alternative perspectives zaps energy, [then such](#) individuals may be selectively unresponsive to views beyond their comfort zones (akin to following affordances [or paths](#) that offer the least resistance). The outcome is amplified because social media makes it easy for transmitters to circumvent traditional journalistic gatekeeping [of the past](#) that, while slanted in various ways and more hostile to oppositional narratives (e.g. stressing police brutality), [managed](#) to limit certain excesses (Thomeczek, 2023). Pre-internet media ecologies, therefore, may have filtered junk information in epistemically productive ways.

Here, however, there are oversimplifications to avoid. To start, conspiracy theorizing abounds on both the left and the right. Still, support for a figure like Trump corresponds to the acceptance of the conspiratorial comments issued by him on social media platforms (Uscinski et al., 2022). The self-assuredness and moral confidence that often comes with being a Trump supporter correlates negatively with neuroticism, openness to experience and agreeableness, and positively with conscientiousness and extroversion (Fortunato et al., 2018). At the same time, poor ability to regulate emotions associates with conspiracy theorizing (Molenda et al., 2023). Culture is also a factor, with a study finding that high stress (yet not anxiety) predicted conspiracy belief in US but not Australian populations (Fox & Williams, 2023). Further, platforms themselves have different functionalities (often in subtly gradated ways) for spreading conspiracy theories. In other words, the use-potentialities (affordances) of specific platforms affect how information is spread, who receives it, whether problematic ideas are stated openly or instead implied (Kakavand, 2024) The gist is that it is challenging to substantiate general claims about social media’s

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout, I will use the name Twitter and not X.

epistemically productive or distorting capacities, which is a reason I will argue selective permeability is a useful concept for understanding the impacts of digital platforms.

### **Political and Technological Affordances**

The concept of selective permeability captures the fact that gender, culture, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, available technologies and individual idiosyncrasies objectively make it so that two people do not encounter the same affordances, even when interacting within a shared online or offline space. Almost by definition, therefore, selective permeability characterizes affairs that are not amenable to universalization. This section elaborates, [aiming to](#) show that selective permeability elucidates social media platforms and their epistemic dimensions by responding to a problem scholars increasingly identify: that conclusions about one app do not generalize to others or across cultures, age-groups and so on.

An opening point is that artifacts are imbued with values, whether we are discussing information technologies or buildings (Friedman et al., 2008), and these aspects contribute to selective permeability. For instance, the polished marble and wood [aesthetic](#) of some banks signifies the values of reliability and wealth (Shah & Kesan, 2007), and combines to invite the affluent in more than those of modest means, who are usually less welcomed (Crippen & Klement, 2020). TikTok [is](#) comparable. Its videos often have a DIY (do it yourself) aesthetic, partly because the platform offers production tools—such as Stitch and Duet—that are intuitively graspable to non-professionals and cater to widespread Gen Z aspirations to become an internet influencer (Liu, 2023). TikTok clips are short and often relatable, whimsical, inventively silly and made for quick doses of entertainment. As Abidin (2020, p. 84) observes, the app combines the “performativity of YouTube, the scrolling interface of Instagram, and the deeply weird humour usually reserved for platforms like Vine and Tumblr” in ways that are palatable to a young cohort. This does not preclude serious content, but even here the genre tends to fall into what might be designated as playful protest, aimed at achieving virality (Abbas et al., 2022; Cervi & Divon, 2023; Yarchia & Boxman-Shabtai,

2023). Though TikTok works on laptops, it is conceived around smartphones, bolstering its youth appeal. TikTok's content and design, in short, orient around values that are selectively inviting to younger people.<sup>5</sup>

A second point, therefore, is that conclusions about TikTok often do not generalize to YouTube, Twitter, Facebook or Instagram (and vice versa), and researchers have used affordance frameworks to explain this (Majchrzak et al., 2013; Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2023). Obviously, action possibilities are not the same on all platforms. Compared to Instagram, for example, TikTok lends itself to virally catchy audio snippets or memes (Abidin, 2020). Also, it is wrong to assume that a given affordance is discretely present or absent. Just as a mountain trail affords walking in different ways depending on who is treading on it, a single digital opening does not have identical functionality for all people; or analogously to how two paths may lead to a single destination, but with one harder to trek, photo posting has varying functionality on Facebook vs. Instagram. Commentators catalogue large numbers of social media affordances. As stated at the outset, some of [this](#) is divorced from Gibson's understanding. Definitions of specific affordance labels [are](#) not here important, but to give a sense of the volume, some of them include: persistence affordances, scalability affordances, replicability affordances, connectivity affordances, searchability affordances, identifiability affordances, social affordances, cognitive affordances, emotional affordances, functional affordances, metavoicing affordances, triggered attending affordances, network-informed associating affordances and generative role-taking affordances (Majchrzak et al., 2013; Moreno & D'Angelo, 2019; Kakavand, 2024). Whether or not we count most or even any of the aforementioned as affordances, the sheer number of varying parameters between different [apps](#) ensure [platforms](#) will be selectively permeable.

A third point is that it can be difficult to even make lasting conclusions about a single social media app. Once regarded as a "kid app," the altered cultural landscapes in the [Global North](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have brought TikTok into prominence with adults in their 20s and 30s (Schellewald, 2023). Users also evolved [TikTok](#) beyond a brain candy [platform](#) (even if this function remains dominant) to a venue for playful activism, drawing attention to serious issues, such as the Gaza war or police violence

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<sup>5</sup> For statistics on TikTok use and age, see <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299771/tiktok-global-user-age-distribution/>.

against minorities in the wake of the George Floyd slaying (Abbas et al., 2022; Cervi & Divon, 2023; Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2023). While mindless entertainment can be politically propagandistic (e.g., through supplying sedating distractions or the kind of pro-US militaristic jingoism witnessed in *Top Gun*), the risk of spreading disinformation grows when people use various platforms to discuss serious issues. We see this in COVID-19 conspiracy theories or falsehoods propagated about the Palestine-Israel conflict, even through official channels [on Twitter, YouTube and elsewhere](#) (see Baghdadi et al., 2023; Akerman, 2024).

Cross-cultural variations are another consideration. Compare US and Chinese engagement respectively with TikTok and Douyin, roughly equivalent apps owned by the same parent company. One difference is that Americans are more interested in musical posts, and Chinese in food-related ones (Yang, 2022). This finding makes sense not only because of the food culture in China but because mixing flavors is a dominant metaphor in philosophies from that region (Höllmann, 2013; Sundararajan, 2020; Shusterman, 2021, Ch. 4). However, some results are less predictable: Douyin users score higher in individualism than Americans on TikTok, even though the general Chinese population tends to be more collectivist (Yang, 2022). And cultural variations are not confined to TikTok. For instance, while Facebook is frequently used by right-wing populists across Europe, this is even more [so](#) in Italy (Thomeczek, 2023).

As indicated, social media research often discusses affordances. [Yet work on how regional culture modulates affordances is scant.](#) Also, scholars mainly argue that culture alters which affordances we notice (e.g., Miyamoto et al. 2006; Shell & Flowerday, 2019). [But culture can change which affordances are available.](#) For instance, the “Asian squat” (a way of crouching) and chopsticks skill may open affordances for sitting, eating and socializing that are less accessible to most Westerners. Koreans stride patterns differ from Westerners (Ryu et al., 2006). If this makes walking less tiring for one group, members might see destinations as closer, not because of mental bias, but because these places are genuinely easier to reach.

[For purposes of what is to come, it is important to note that there is no definitive East-West divide since cultural gradations exist across the Anglo-European world and between Asian regions \(Hampden-](#)

Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Yates et al., 2010). In a book looking at digital media ethics through various world traditions, Ess (2014) accordingly notes that any cultural account almost inevitably overgeneralizes. With that said, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism have historically swayed East Asian mindsets (Nisbett, 2003) in ways relevant to social media, as will shortly be shown. Although these traditions ought not to be collapsed together, since each has sub-variations, they all promote the idea that interactive situations are epistemically and ontologically primary. In other words, situations are where anything observable and knowable first shows up and exists. To mention just a few of the corresponding psychological findings, East Asians are adept at registering overall scenes, Americans at focusing on foreground objects (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Boduroglu et al., 2009). East Asians excel at drawing lines in proportion to different sized shapes, Americans at reproducing absolute lengths (Kitayama et al., 2003). When asked about themselves, East Asians prefer conditional answers, e.g., when hiking with friends, I'm lighthearted. By contrast, Americans stress role categories (carpenter, economist), personality traits (diligent, truthful) and activities (I play mandolin) (Nisbett, 2003, p. 53). Westerners display less tolerance for contradictions than East Asians (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009), who are perhaps influenced by their wider (contextual) views that inevitably admit inconsistencies, not to mention yin-yang philosophies that see particulars as unities of contraries. More than Americans, Asians attribute choices to situational factors as opposed to inner agency, and regard failure as indicating additional work is needed and not as an indication of a lack of innate ability (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992, Ch. 3-5; Morris & Peng, 1994; Choi et al., 1999; Masuda & Kitayama, 2004). Easterners also esteem humility more than Westerners (Crippen & Lindemann, 2023).

These cultural tendencies play out on social media in intriguing ways. One study (Wu et al., 2023) compared English and Chinese-speaking users of similarly designed apps, Twitter and Weibo. Whereas tweets often involved explicit self-praise and focused on personal appearance, Weibo users preferred implicit strategies, such as self-encouragement about skill building, fitting the Asian stress on humility and belief in the non-innateness of abilities. The virtues mentioned most on Twitter were friendship and bravery. On Weibo, it was kindness, cherishing kinship and thoughtfulness. In another study, Huang & Park (2013)

looked at Facebook profile photos posted by US, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore students. They report that Americans tended to make themselves the focal point at the expense of the background, with East Asians less inclined to the practice. At the same time, the researchers detected [normative malleability in that](#) Asians relocating to the US and vice versa tended to post photos following local social grammars.

Miyamoto et al. (2006) explored whether differences in East Asian and Western affordance detection corresponds to variations in local [urban settings](#), and the same can be asked about social media architectures. As compared to America, they found built environments in Japan to be more complicated, with less distinction between foreground and background objects. While the design differences arguably arose partly out of the situational vs. focally oriented (analytical) philosophies favored by the respective regions, Miyamoto and colleagues report exposure to complex stimuli can cue Americans to see like East Asians. They also highlight that some US cities are about as visually complex as typical places in Japan, speculating this [nudges affordance receptivity](#) in Asian directions.

These points raise a couple of possibilities. First, if cities (technological arrangements) make people selectively sensitive or insensitive to certain things (e.g., overall contexts vs. focal objects), then social media [plausibly](#) does [similarly](#) on an epistemic level since we are dealing with technologies designed to organize information and to imprint on individuals' minds. Second, the study is a reminder to be cautious about universalizing since the researchers identify differences within US culture. Along these lines, observations about Telegraph often do not generalize that well to other apps (Thomeczek, 2023; Kakavand, 2024). We have seen the same holds for TikTok vs. Douyin and Twitter vs. Weibo, and further that Facebook is used differently across Europe and between America and Asia.

The US Culture Wars and specifically fights over the significance of words can be used to articulate implications of the first point [above](#): that social media makes people selectively receptive to information. One tendency on social media is for the original import of terms to get supplanted by reactionary distortions, which become the primary meaning for much of the public, as in the cases of “critical race theory” or “woke.” Now, word usage and meaning obviously fluctuated before the advent of online technologies,

sometimes in non-reactionary directions. For example, the gay community embraced and thereby redefined the “queer” identity, which was once a pejorative, though some conservatives will still register the term negatively. While the internet allows us to inquire easily into etymologies we are curious about, information technologies drastically accelerate conceptual modification. One reason is that digital information is greased: it is easier to distribute, alter, decontextualize and thus misrepresent than older analog formats were (Moor, 1997). Another factor is that whereas older media formats were slanted in many ways, they also supplied gatekeeping that would, [for instance](#), prevent promulgation of QAnon theorizing and curtail egregiously bigoted language (Spierings & Jacobs, 2018).

Suppose [someone named Minji](#) first encounters the term “woke” through hostile memes on social media, and sees these representations repeated by politicians and in traditional news outlets. [Even if she](#) is on the progressive left and aware that right-wing narratives have stripped away historical nuances, her chance to embrace “woke” [positively](#) may be overshadowed by prevailing [meme norms](#). [Now, imagine a second individual—let us call her Nour—who participates in social media spaces where consistently and rigidly favorable interpretations of “woke” and related ideologies are circulated. Consequently, even though Minji and Nour align on the progressive left, they find themselves at odds, linguistically speaking. And for those with substantially divergent viewpoints, the gap potentially becomes uncrossable. In other words, the cultural constructs of language and online narratives make it so the same signal \(“woke”\) is selectively decoded in obverse ways that introduce contrary values.](#)

[Here, the fragmented value propagation is not just driven by content but also entwining technologies, for while not impossible, viral memes were less likely before the rise of the internet and social media. Remember that Gibson equates values to affordances. Recall also the analogy between how urban and digital landscapes \(technologies\) cultivate affordance receptivity. The position can be pushed farther. Values circulated on social media at times erect “hard” barriers in communication that restrict possibilities of human interaction, almost as severely as brick walls—a point explored in the last two sections.](#)

## Information Blindness and Affordances

People not affected by a selectively permeable barrier tend to be blind to it. This is illustrated by men's lower sensitivity to a setting's negative impact on women or by older people's inability to hear the noxious effects of an ultrasonic buzz—known as the Mosquito—that businesses use to drive unwanted youths away (Crippen & Klement, 2020). Online media can operate in analogous ways, and this section considers how information is selectively accessible, attending especially to how populists use electronic technologies to transmit emotionally triggering codes, decipherable to targeted cohorts but few others.

Before exploring the ways that influencers and social media companies emotionally vie for public attention, a caveat is in order: that emotion and reason are not opposed. After all, emotions give weight to options; logically identical forms (e.g., “I love you and...” vs. “I love you but...”) have different emotional colors and thus meanings; a substance like oil acquires conceptual significance as a lubricant or a conveyer of flavors depending on a person's emotionally infused goals; perhaps above all, emotions impact what we notice, chiseling experience and memory (James, 1879, 1884, 1890; Luria, 1968; Damasio, 1994; Crippen, 2023b). This last function is vital for perceiving or cognizing coherently, in a world that vastly exceeds our attentional resources. Nonetheless, we can juxtapose reasoned argument with emotionally triggering content that widely circulates on the internet, though this is not a strictly new phenomenon

The prominent psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm (1941) highlighted the issue in the same year that the first television ad aired in the US. While allowing that traditional sales talk “was not entirely objective” and “used persuasion,” he asserted that businesspeople knew their “merchandise” and “the needs of the customer, and on the basis of this knowledge ... tried to sell” through “a rational and sensible kind of talk.” (p. 128). By contrast,

a vast sector of modern advertising ... does not appeal to reason. This type of advertising impresses the customer ... by repetition [...]; by the influence of an authoritative image, like ... a famous boxer, who smokes a certain brand of cigarette; by attracting the customer and ... weakening his critical abilities by the sex appeal of a pretty girl; by terrorizing him with the threat of “b.o.”... All these methods are essentially irrational; they have nothing to do with the qualities of the merchandise, and they smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer... They give him a certain satisfaction by their daydreaming qualities [...], but at the same time they increase his feeling of smallness and powerlessness (p. 128).

Three decades later, as the first personal computers were hitting the market, the Nobel laureate economist and AI pioneer Herbert Simon (1971, p. 40) remarked: “In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information ... consumes is the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” As the internet was becoming ubiquitous in industrialized countries and social media platforms were taking off in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, researchers began to increasingly talk about the attention economy (e.g., Goldhaber, 1997; Davenport & Beck, 2001).

In the informationally overloaded digital age, parties with vested interests **prioritize capturing** attention. For this goal, rational arguments are largely pointless since **they bore** most. If trying to attract customers, investors or voters, quick flashy stuff works better, and controversy heightens attention. Common among uncounted other **tactics** is to link together emotionally charged matters. The destruction of Baltimore’s Francis Scott Key Bridge **was** upsetting, and **certain** social media users **attached** the event to populist grievances by asserting that a COVID-19 vaccine impaired the captain or that the accident was a cyberattack hidden by the Biden administration (Dicker, 2024; O’Sullivan, 2024). Some of this is perpetuated by individuals who enjoy attention and building a following. But those with financial and political interests in riling people up, such as Andrew Tate, Donald Trump, Jr. and Alex Jones, have peddled conspiracies. Jones, for instance, tweeted that the collisions “look deliberate” and “WW3 has already started,”<sup>6</sup> a convenient message for him given that his main income derives from peddling nutraceuticals and preserved food products to customers with survivalist mentalities, **attitudes** he **nurtures**.

Now, a tweet is rarely a well-substantiated argument since **Twitter avails** little space for a reasoned defense. Here, it is worse than that. The claims **lack factual basis**. They **emotionally** heighten vulnerability in people who feel threatened. **And they tap** into a desire to belong to something **bigger, like a just cause**. By the same token, conspiracy theories—even when perpetuated by ruling class members, such as Donald

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://perma.cc/M42J-3GGZ>.

Trump, Jr.—tend to be populist. This is because they [typically create](#) a division between “the people” and an elite power bloc working behind the scenes, [leading followers](#) to believe that only they can recognize the false epistemic authority of the establishment (Fenster, 2008; Uscinski, 2020). A result is tribalism, including [antagonistic](#) social grammars that make people impenetrable to one another.

The just stated relates to what academics sometimes call “kernel phrases,” defined as shorthand for a broader narrative that a particular clique grasps. For certain cohorts on platforms like 4chan, 8kun and Twitter, the name “Bill Gates” designates a conspiracy involving eugenics, electronic tracking and the engineering and spreading of COVID-19 to benefit financially, defeat President Trump and accustom the population to restrictions in preparation for an authoritarian takeover (Bodner et al., 2020; Thomas & Zhang, 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Erokhin et al., 2022). A [tidbit](#) that conspiracy theorists take as evidence is that Gates remarked that vaccine investments yielded a high return. However, whatever flaws Gates has, his “investments” here were donations, and the “returns” were reduced illness and poverty (Fuchs, 2021, Ch. 4). Of course, most do not attribute the aforesaid sinister significance to “Gates.” Accordingly, the “Gates” kernel resembles the earlier mentioned ultrasonic Mosquito that only youths can hear.

Scholars have made almost precisely this analogy, writing that “kernel narratives resemble a ‘dog whistle,’ a phrase that is as compelling as a canine whistle to the group it is intended for, but does not resonate as especially meaningful to others” (Bodner et al., 2020, p. 10). In other words, [dog whistles are selectively accessible](#). [Saul \(2018\) catalogues examples](#). [George W. Bush spoke of “wonder-working power.”](#) [The slogan appealed to fundamentalist Christians who use the line, without alienating mainstream voters who were usually unfamiliar with the phrase.](#) [Bush’s speeches also mentioned the Dred Scott decision against Black citizenship.](#) [This 1857 supreme court ruling is deployed by anti-abortionists to insinuate that Roe vs. Wade is dehumanizing.](#) However, most others do not register this meaning.

[Saul \(2024\) goes on to explicate dog whistles that evade social media restrictions against hate speech.](#) [Among these are triple parentheses to indicate a Jewish person, and “Skittles” and “Skype” to connote racial groups, a code that social media platforms struggle to filter because the terms are often innocuous, and the](#)

associated corporations would object to the censorship. Another dog whistle originates in David Lane's neo-Nazi writings. This include his "88 Precepts," with that number selected because "h" is the eighth letter in the alphabet, thus a stand-in for "Heil Hitler." Lane is also known for a 14-word slogan: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." Remarkably, Canada's mainstream federal Conservative Party deployed these codes in a tweet, which reads: "Canada's Recovery Plan will secure the future for you, your children and their children."<sup>7</sup> The message has 14 words and 88 characters (with punctuation and spaces). Moreover, it contains Lane's terminology, i.e., "secure," "future" and "children." Saul says this was pointed out, only to be ridiculed by the members of the press and the Conservative Party, highlighting an additional function of dog whistles: circumventing criticism.

Saul (2024) additionally discusses "figleaves," defined as a rhetorical device that makes dubious statements appear reasonable, as when vaccine skeptics say they are just "asking questions." They frequently describe themselves as "researchers" and "critical thinkers," deploying platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and Telegram for their "investigations" and to share "findings" (Franks et al., 2017; Nagle, 2017; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Saul, 2024). That those favoring alternative health strategies are, by definition, in outlying groups helps explain another outcome: that right-wing conspiracy theorizing, like QAnon, fascinates a proportion of the stereotypically liberal cohort in the wellness community (Bodner et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Rothschild, 2021). In wellness social media circles, some people attribute admirable "nonconformity" to anti-vaccine stances and criticize mainstream medicine, with this ridicule ironically fostering conformity among devotees (Hornsey, 2018; Hughes et al., 2021). Because there is little reason to trust internet influencers lacking an understanding of scientific processes and peer review, vaccine promoters deride skeptics as "irrational" and "unscientific." Yet the self-congratulatory tone is misplaced since the warrant for favoring inoculations does not come from deep scientific understanding since few advocates are experts (see Dennett, 2006, p. 162). If anything, vaccine commitment and trust in scientific

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<sup>7</sup> See [https://x.com/CPC\\_HQ/status/1422165410410008578?lang=en](https://x.com/CPC_HQ/status/1422165410410008578?lang=en).

experts is justified because it is implausible that virologists and politicians from enemy nations would cooperate to promulgate useless or detrimental [treatments](#).

With this fragmented and sliding definitional [terrain](#), it is no wonder that discourse becomes selectively impenetrable. In the context of populist internet movements, the implication is that individuals will have different [experiences](#) with the same media artifact (Twitter post, etc.) depending on their political stances. [Evidently, some platforms, like TikTok, also arrange comments under posts based on the user's profile \(created from search habits, etc.\), increasing the likelihood that the same signal \(e.g., a video\) will not be received in the same way, analogous to encountering disparate affordances in a single landscape.](#)<sup>8</sup>

An outcome typifying the situation are reactions to the National Hockey League's announcement of a job fair open to all adults except non-disabled white males. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis attacked this as "woke" identity politics and "discrimination." The [notice](#) was later retracted, the job fair opened to all adults. But USA Today columnist Mike Freeman (2023) castigated the change as "one of the great acts of cowardice in the recent history of sports" and DeSantis's response as "anti-Black." Both populist reactions deployed self-serving language that preached to the converted via triggering codes ("discrimination," "cowardly," etc.), more or less ensuring the messages were distorted or not received when transmitted across political divides. DeSantis and Freeman, in other words, wielded mechanisms that Fromm attributes to newer forms of advertising that convince less through arguments than emotionally charged labels that are decoded differently depending on the receiver's background. Such shorthand preempts critical thought and leads people to immediately take a side without exploring possibilities that none of the parties involved may be entirely right. On social media, hijacked language often corrals people to opposing extremes, a case being the rhetoric surrounding the Gaza-Israeli conflict. But here and elsewhere, one hesitates to elaborate because doing so without differentially accepting certain tropes can have bad repercussions.

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to one of the reviewers for highlighting this. For video on the issue, see [https://www.reddit.com/r/TikTokCringe/comments/1d14916/apparently\\_different\\_comments\\_show\\_up\\_on\\_videos/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TikTokCringe/comments/1d14916/apparently_different_comments_show_up_on_videos/).

Because trigger words are often used superficially, reflecting on adversarial posts usually does not moderate one's ideas. In fact, an experiment showed that when heavy social media users read tweets from political figures they disliked, their zeal for their own views increased, albeit more for people on the right than the left (Bail et al., 2018). The result makes sense. After all, Twitter is not a forum for careful arguments. Hence, acceptance or rejection of a tweet is usually determined ahead of time, based on the preexisting allegiances of readers. So, rather than moderating views, a tweet representing an opposing position, especially if delivered by one of its kernel symbols—be it “Trump,” “Hilary” or “Gates”—will probably foment aggravation and migration farther from the standpoint of the poster. This may occur more in uncertain times when individuals seek comfort in firm beliefs and welcome intense emotions as a distraction (see McGregor et al., 2019).

During the COVID-19 crisis, social media tribalism arguably helped with the loneliness caused by lockdowns or being ostracized by family and friends due to opposing viewpoints. At the same time, the pandemic likely worsened tribalism, for instance, because remote work limited exposure to broader society, which might have culled extreme beliefs. Along these lines, it turns out that social exclusion predicts vaccine skepticism and conspiracy theorizing (Eshel et al., 2022). Ostracization, isolation, fear of sickness and the like are exhausting to most, and we have seen affordance-inspired studies showing that spaces appear more cut off to the fatigued. For this reason, too, stressed individuals may find it harder to explore unfamiliar intellectual terrains, especially when their thinking is circumscribed by coded kernels and dog whistles. Given that worrying about matters like indebtedness make surroundings look more impenetrable (Liu et al., 2018), populist concerns that elites are stripping autonomy from common folks may have similar effects on an epistemic level.

To what extent do these scenarios mirror the selective imperceptibility of the previously discussed Mosquito or women-hostile environments? All have bad effects, yet there are differences. Ultrasonic sounds and sexual harassment are negative affordances in concrete space; they are realities. Dog whistles and

conspiracy theories, by contrast, distort reality. Simultaneously, they entail action-limiting social grammars that are themselves concrete realities that people must navigate.

To better understand the last assertion, consider Korean culture. A past history of collective punishment shapes it (De Mente & Kingdon, 2018). Crowding also made it hard to escape others' gaze, and Korean mindsets are often shaped by a belief (partly Confucian) that importantly human features emerge in group contexts. Such factors have nurtured a comparably public sense of self, buttressed by continued practices like giving higher shoeboxes to better performing students (Crippen & Lindemann, 2023). Koreans additionally tend to value humility (Śleziak, 2013) and the language encodes social roles, with seven levels of formality deployed according to one's station. Together, this contributes to "shame culture" (e.g., Hong, 2008), for example, making class participation almost as hard as scaling high walls.<sup>9</sup>

As in the Korean case and comparable to affordances, the social grammars underlying dog whistles exist independently of any single agent. And like negative affordances, these social grammars can be almost as restricting as security fences. This makes it difficult to register alternative views and limits action in the world.

### **Digital Fragmentation, Divided Epistemologies and Offline Space**

The advent of social media has democratized content, yielding some benefits. Notably, viral videos exposing state-sponsored violence by police and military forces have challenged narratives that were previously largely unquestioned. Simultaneously, older modes of transmitting information were not without advantages. Among these was that there was a small number of widely followed news outlets, which established a shared foundation (social grammar) for public discourse. Even if these sources slanted or strayed from facts, they were scrutinized by diverse audiences, which helped cull some of the excesses (see Cavanagh, 2019, Ch. 4; Crippen, 2023c). In contrast, today's fragmented media ecologies increase the

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<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is supported by qualitative and quantitative data reported in a manuscript currently under review. The same data suggests that Koreans value individual expression, diversity of opinion, and autonomy as much or more than Westerners, but promote these values through listening without rejecting views and less through expressing personal perspectives.

likelihood of decoding identical signals (messages) in [disparate](#) ways. This last section reflects on offline repercussions by focusing on conspiracy theories, which amplify a situation that Fromm (1947, p. 61) articulated: that the “environment is never the same for two people, for the difference in constitution makes them experience the same environment in a more or less different way.”

The prevalence of conspiracy theories has remained fairly constant since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least according to Uscinski and Parent (2014), who extrapolated from letters to the editors of the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. But their study ended around 2010, just when social media use was becoming ubiquitous (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, Ch. 6). [Additionally, the two newspapers are probably not favored by devotees of populist conspiracy movements like QAnon, which started on 4chan and 8kun, migrating to Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms; and letters to the editor usually involve more effort than microblogging, with editors vetting what gets published. Recent work by Uscinski and colleagues \(2022\), based on questionnaires, reasserts that the prevalence of conspiracy theories is not increasing. However, the study often examines short timelines of less than a year and frequently asks participants to rate strangely worded statements. One asks: “Do you believe that the pharmaceutical industry is in league with the medical industry to ‘invent’ new diseases to make money, or not?” If we consider psychopharmaceuticals, there are cases of this occurring \(see Watters, 2010\), so assenting need not indicate conspiracy theorizing \(in the sense of buying into false beliefs\). Another statement reads: “Some people have argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew about Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor but did nothing about it.” Agreeing here may simply reflect an accurate awareness that some people hold the stated belief. The questionnaire has a range of other milquetoast conspiracy ideas \(e.g., about the wealthy controlling the world, UFOs, etc.\)](#)

For me, the question is not whether conspiracies are on the rise but the extent to which theories like Pizzagate would have taken hold absent social media. Pizzagate alleges that high-ranking Democrats conducted pedophilic trafficking in the basement of a D.C. pizzeria (that has no basement). Sometimes it mixes in a QAnon assertion that these same players slay children to harvest adrenochrome for its youth-

promoting and narcotic effects (the chemical has neither effect). On some surveys, roughly half of Trump supporters subscribe to these views.<sup>10</sup> Such numbers seem unlikely without social media. Also troubling is that politicians in certain jurisdictions can retweet certain QAnon claims and fortify their tenure in office, whereas trafficking such ideas a decade or two ago likely would have jeopardized their careers (Saul, 2024).

Although social media often spread disinformation (Cavanagh, 2019; Rothschild 2021), such occurred before its invention, as in Nazi Germany. Furthermore, decentralized networks—as in the power to start and spread rumors—predate the internet. But on the assumption that (dis)information is decentralized to a greater extent in the internet age, *thereby evading gatekeeping that might have curbed some excesses*, movements like QAnon *have* greater voice. Additionally, in the internet age, people can flip from Fox to Newsmax merely by selecting the latter on YouTube; and if Newsmax is too moderate for their tastes, they can switch to a preferred Telegram channels on the grounds that the deep state (or whatever nefarious agent) is planting fake stories (see Barr, 2020; Egelhofer et al., 2022). Together, this inoculates against outside interpretations, leading to attitude hardening, in other words, authoritarian orientations.

Though published many decades ago, Adorno et al.'s (1950/2019) *The Authoritarian Personality* lends insight into contemporary conspiracy-laden politics. According to this book, those inclined towards authoritarianism seek comfort from feelings of powerlessness by identifying with dominant leaders and rejecting weak ones. Other traits are fixation on rumors, plus a sense that irrational or immoral adversaries are meddling in affairs. This is combined with conformity to the ingroup, which entails rigid thinking as well as sharp delineation between peers and outsiders. Contradictorily, people with these leanings value enlightenment and superstition; they are proud individualists yet fearful of being unlike others, protective of their independence but wont to submit blindly to power. Such tendencies are common to many QAnon followers, including a subset of liberals in the wellness community (see Rothschild, 2021).

In the electronic information age, competition for attention on social media increasingly brings a plethora of flashy claims, such that news borders on entertainment or fiction. One research team connects

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<sup>10</sup> <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/17286-belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden>

attention-snatching to affordances. They remark that “in online platforms, affordances are almost comically enlarged, and almost nothing else is visible, like a huge mug handle that continually gravitates towards your hand until you grab it” (Moore & Roberts, 2021, p. 22). Perhaps more than affordances, this passage characterizes ideas of Gestalt psychologists, to whom Gibson (1979, pp. xiii, 138-140) acknowledges debts yet from whom he also differentiates himself. As Koffka (1935, p. 7) asserted, things express their nature through emotional invitations, so that people experience a glass of water as urging drinking and a handle as wanting to be grasped. More recent work suggests that emotional pull affects how things **perceptually** show up. Studies have found that cigarettes look longer to deprived smokers, glasses of water taller to the thirsty, coins smaller to the wealthy and tools such as shovels larger if emotionally inclined towards tasks such as gardening (Bruner & Goodman, 1947; Dawson, 1975; Brendl, Markman & Messner, 2003; Veltkamp, Aarts & Custers 2008). Taken with the just-cited passage about online platforms, a key point is that internet ecosystems aggressively pull attention *differentially*, that is, *selectively*.

Though infeasible to list everything influencing the selective reception of information on the internet, the dissemination of false information through social media is notably more common among older individuals, likely due to less familiarity with the digital landscape. Conservatives, who skew older, share this predilection, which remains after controlling for age (Guess et al., 2019). Some consequences in the offline world are obvious. One example is the January 6 Capital Attack. Another is a couple poisoning themselves (one fatally) with chloroquine phosphate, sold for cleaning fish tanks, after hearing Trump extoll the similarly named drug hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment. Despite shaky or disconfirming evidence for its effectiveness, masses purchased enough to make the medication scarce for people who use it for lupus and rheumatoid arthritis (see Sarkis, 2020; Fuchs, 2021; Rothschild, 2021).

Not as obviously, internet-fueled populism intersects with factors like ethnicity, age and health to fuel selective permeability in the offline world. Once more, environments are extra strenuous to those infirmed with energy-depleting conditions and look more severe to them, as per earlier cited studies. This means, for instance, that most settings are already experientially and objectively less open to the elderly

than to their younger counterparts. This is more so as the risk of contracting deadly disease goes up, which occurred when populistically-fueled recklessness contributed to COVID spread (e.g., Naushirvanov et al, 2022). Vaccine- and science-skepticism perpetuated on social media by the wellness community and QAnon were a part of this. The result was that negative affordances increased for the elderly in that many settings became more dangerous to them. The same was so for certain marginalized groups, which are more susceptible to contracting deadly cases of COVID for a variety of reasons, e.g., because of risky jobs, less access to healthcare, poorer nutrition, etc. (Kantamneni, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020).

There are other intersections between populist politics, social media and the emergence of selective permeability. One case is with African Americans, who face more discrimination, often specifically with healthcare services. It is not difficult to imagine why they, therefore, become less trusting and more susceptible to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 promulgated on social media (Nguyen et al., 2022). Similar patterns arise with some MAGA supporters. This is not to say that they necessarily face higher rates of discrimination. However, part of the MAGA populist agenda is to convince conservatives in the US that forces are acting against them, both in the government and in “far-left” movements. Accordingly, it is not surprising that individuals with such commitments are susceptible to conspiracy theorizing about COVID-19 and selectively unreactive to medical advice from the quarters of mainstream science (see Levin & Bradshaw, 2022). On the premise that all of this generates hostility to outgroups, one can see how members of the African American or MAGA communities might become more insular. A proportion of people in other social groups may, in turn, come to see the aforesaid communities as “strange,” partly through a lack of contact. This reduces contact further, with the situation thereby exacerbating.

Societal crisis amplifies the outcome, with uncertainty making people more susceptible to ideological hardening as a compensatory counter to unpleasant ambiguity (McGregor et al., 2019; also see Nietzsche, 1888, pp. 497-498). [Affairs are](#) worsened by populist political and moral rhetoric that targets people’s insecurities, often in times that are already distressing (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Public distress,

in turn, is heightened by the circulation of paranoia-inducing fringe beliefs on the internet, which often degrade mental and physical health, simultaneously inflicting selective harm on bystanders. For example, paranoid refusal to wear masks or to get vaccinated helped spread COVID-19, making public spaces especially threatening to the elderly and other vulnerable groups (Sepúlveda-Loyola et al., 2020). Likewise, lockdowns [associated with](#) increases in domestic violence [against women](#) (Letourneau et al., 2022).

As Fromm (1941, p. 248) foresaw decades ago, our age is one in which “‘information’ alone can be just as much of an obstacle to thinking as the lack of it.” The problem is not just that there is bad information out there, or that there have actually been some conspiracies that have undermined trust. It is also that there is an overabundance of information, so that people today, if they are so inclined, can usually even find peer reviewed articles to fit whatever narrative they prefer. If merely seeking confirmatory voices on social media, it is that much easier, and the unrealities perpetuated in conspiracy theories translate to real limitations on the affordances available to agents.

## **Conclusion**

This article began by reviewing affordance theory, explaining its applications to cultural, political and technological arenas, including social media, also introducing the concept of selective permeability. Though selective permeability has to date been applied mainly to urban geography, a case was made that it also sheds light on online life, with populist internet movements, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, being primary targets of the investigation.

The concept of selective permeability was advocated for several reasons. To start, it illuminates the influence of factors such as a user’s cultural background on the normative benchmarks for information-sharing and -reception on social networking apps. Moreover, selective permeability aids in understanding informational blindness and disparate decoding of messages in the realm of social media. The consequence is fragmented information environments, exacerbated political divides and deep

misunderstandings among opponents. This tied to my final topic, which examined how social media amplifies certain aspects of selective permeability observed offline.

Throughout, the article posited that practical routines, including those cultivated through various apps, not only influence the opportunities we recognize but also shape the spectrum of possible actions or affordances that are actually there for us on social media. A key assertion here was that a single online space avails disparate affordances to different people. Presupposed in this view is a recognition that social media resists generalization. This is because the affordances offered vary depending across apps, cultures, ages, political stances and quite a bit more.

In the end, therefore, what was offered was not just an account of how social media shapes and more specifically fragments everyday social epistemologies. Selective permeability was also put forward as an epistemological framework for understanding social media.

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