

Essay: In a recent interview, writer Emily St John Mandel said that the biggest challenge Western democracies face is “the collapse of consensual reality.” To what extent is her fear valid?

With the advent of social media and AI, our very understanding of reality has been upended. This poses a major threat to democracy.

Democracy is rooted in people's ability to make informed decisions. Yet social media can distort our perception of reality and influence our political choices. For example, immigration has become a major issue in the United Kingdom, where public perceptions of immigration levels do not always reflect official figures. This gap can partly be explained by the echo-chamber effect: social media algorithms tend to reinforce existing beliefs by repeatedly exposing users to similar opinions and information. As a result, misconceptions can spread, deepening social divisions and contributing to growing polarisation.

What's more, established facts are increasingly dismissed as mere opinions. When political leaders question scientific evidence or dismiss climate change as a hoax, they contribute to an environment in which facts are no longer accepted as a common basis for public debate. This can have serious consequences, as political decisions may be driven by ideology or misinformation rather than evidence. In the case of climate change, failing to reduce CO2 emissions will only exacerbate the problem, making its consequences increasingly difficult to mitigate.

In conclusion, Emily St. John Mandel's concerns are justified insofar as the erosion of a shared understanding of facts undermines two essential pillars of a healthy democracy: informed decision-making and constructive public debate. (228 words)

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