Book Review:
The Discursive-Digital Link: Antagonism and Polarisation in Digital Spaces by Ehsan Dehghan

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Article Info	Abstract
Book Review Main Object: Digital Spaces Received: 13 November 2025 Revised: 18 November 2025 Accepted: 19 November 2025 Published online: 22 November 2025 **Keywords:** digital media, discourse theory, neoliberal capitalism, polarisation, actor-network theory, political communication.	Aurhor: Ehsan Dehghan Title: *The Discursive-Digital Link: Antagonism and Polarisation in Digital Spaces* Year of Published: August 2025 352pp In English ISBN: 9781032487274 Publisher: New York: Routledge

In an academic landscape saturated with deterministic accounts of technology's role in democratic decline, Ehsan Dehghan's *The Discursive-Digital Link* offers a sophisticated theoretical intervention. Drawing on discourse theory and actor-network theory, Dehghan develops what he terms a 'fluid social ontology' that examines how discourses and digital technologies are inseparably entangled in shaping contemporary political antagonisms and polarisation.

The book's central argument posits an inseparable connection between democracy, digital media, political contestation, and neoliberal capitalism. Dehghan's originality lies in proposing the 'discursive-digital link' as a fluid ontology grounded in an 'ontical return'- a pragmatic shift away from abstract ontological debates toward examining actually existing relations between human and non-human actants. Using the metaphor of stalagmites, he conceptualizes how discursive-digital entanglements form fluid, hierarchical structures that are both synchronically and diachronically contingent.

The book's structure moves systematically from theoretical foundations (Chapters 2-3) through methodology (Chapters 4-5) to empirical application (Chapters 6-7). Dehghan establishes discourse theory as his foundational framework while critically engaging with new materialism to incorporate material agency without accepting ontological flatness. His key methodological contribution is 'discursive-digital analysis', comprising recursive, non-linear analytical loops. The empirical chapters examine two articulatory logics- discursive-digital alliances and active passivity- through five case studies across Twitter, Reddit, and Gab.

Dehghan's engagement with materiality represents a significant theoretical contribution. He critiques discourse theory's undertheorization of material agency while rejecting new materialism's ontological turn, which he views as producing politically abstract analysis. His pragmatic approach demonstrates how material and discursive components exert different degrees of force depending on context, using concrete examples like traffic lights and boom gates to illustrate contextually varying ontical hierarchies.

The empirical case studies effectively demonstrate the framework's analytical power. The Twitter studies reveal how discursive-digital alliances form through strategic platform articulation, with the RoboDebt case showing how antagonistic collectives temporarily suspended horizontal antagonisms to form agonistic alliances against a vertical antagonist. The Reddit study demonstrates how platform design embedding polarisation logics constrains collective identities, while the Gab study illustrates paradoxical alliances built on negative rather than positive foundations.

However, the book's theoretical sophistication raises fundamental tensions. Dehghan's post-structuralist foundation, which challenges stable intellectual frameworks, sits uncomfortably with his prescriptive

political manifesto in the conclusion. If discourse and structure are radically contingent, what grounds claims about ontical hierarchies or specific political strategies? This tension between post-structuralist contingency and normative political commitments remains unresolved.

Methodologically, while Dehghan emphasizes context-aware, reflexive analysis, his pragmatic eclecticism notably excludes deeply qualitative approaches. Phenomenology and netnography receive no consideration, despite their potential for accessing the 'agencies of silence and absence' central to his argument about active passivity. Without phenomenological depth, how can absence- by definition elusive- be adequately theorized or empirically accessed? His case studies identify visible patterns of non-reciprocity, but true absence leaves no trace to analyze.

The book's treatment of neoliberal capitalism as the fundamental structural dynamic, while meticulously detailed, risks analytical reduction. Dehghan insists all social phenomena must be examined through three questions: how neoliberal capitalism creates them, how they reproduce it, and how they can dislocate it. While neoliberal capitalism profoundly shapes contemporary life, other power structures, historical forces, and cultural dynamics also operate. The framework's analytical purchase depends on attending to multiple entangled forces rather than presuming capitalism as singular cause.

The political analysis reveals concerning asymmetries. Dehghan demonstrates that right-leaning collectives form discursive-digital alliances more successfully than left-leaning groups, which fragment through identity politics and horizontal antagonisms. He attributes this to neoliberal capitalism's sedimentation privileging individual identity over broader social goals. While this critique resonates, it would benefit from deeper engagement with political science literature on coalition formation and moral foundations beyond structural economic analysis.

Despite these tensions, *The Discursive-Digital Link* makes substantial contributions to communication and media studies. The fluid ontical framework offers scholars conceptual resources for analyzing digitally mediated communication without reducing complexity to either technological determinism or discursive idealism. Dehghan's attention to how collectives strategically articulate platform features- retweet buttons, voting mechanisms, moderation practices- usefully complicates both technological determinism and social constructivism.

For scholars in media and communication studies, the book offers important correctives to prevailing approaches. Rather than accepting the Habermasian public sphere as normative ideal, Dehghan embraces antagonism as ineradicable, arguing that the goal is transforming antagonisms into agonisms. Rather than diagnosing polarisation based on visible symptoms, he distinguishes structural conditions from

manifestations. Rather than proposing technological solutions, he insists on addressing sedimented power structures.

The book's greatest strength lies in its capacity to hold multiple dimensions simultaneously in view. Rather than reducing digital polarisation to algorithms or echo chambers, Dehghan examines entangled components: platform design, collective identities, information flows, moderation practices, affective dynamics, historical contexts, and underlying power structures. This holistic perspective represents significant theoretical progress, even as methodological and political tensions persist.

The Discursive-Digital Link represents an ambitious contribution that will provoke scholarly debate. Its theoretical synthesis combining discourse theory with actor-network theory through fluid ontics offers novel conceptual resources, while empirical case studies demonstrate the framework's analytical power across platforms. However, unresolved tensions between post-structuralist foundations and normative political commitments, alongside methodological limitations excluding qualitative depth, constrain the book's transformative potential. The book sets an important agenda demanding scholars move beyond symptom identification toward structural critique, beyond technological solutionism toward political transformation, and beyond empiricism of presence toward engagement with absence. Whether one accepts Dehghan's specific synthesis or not, the book's provocations will productively challenge scholars to refine their assumptions, methods, and political commitments. This is essential reading for scholars examining the intersections of digital media, political communication, and democratic theory.

Conflict of interest
The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations
The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

Reference

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