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Can the internet be designed to protect democracy and human rights?

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Subject

This paper summarises ways in which the internet has been used to support democracy and to undermine it, and the maturing over time of expectations about how democracy and the internet can interact. While the internet has facilitated freedom of expression and political organisation it has also enabled concentration of power and enabled spread of disinformation. The paper explains how the internet has become vital for exercising human rights, and associated risks and opportunities with increasing use of AI. The paper proposes that the online practice of democracy could be positively and significantly enhanced by bringing more expertise in democratic discourse into the design of online tools and platforms for democratic engagement and deliberation.

Preface

The internet has given rise to many new opportunities and challenges for the functioning of democracy. This paper suggests that early optimism that the internet would be innately democratic in its effects was replaced over time by the recognition of a wider range of positive and negative effects and potential. It notes that this more mature and pragmatic consensus nevertheless values the internet as a vital support to democracy, and even as a human right. The paper notes that the continual emergence of new technologies, most recently generative artificial intelligence, will generate new opportunities and challenges in the future.

While attention is paid to emerging threats, more support for exploring the emerging benefits of the new technologies to democracy would also deliver positives. The paper's conclusions identify lessons from the use of deliberation tools in the broader context of the continued interactions between the internet and democracy, suggesting that democratic activity online could benefit from integrating expertise in democratic discourse into design, and by incentivising investment in and reward for deliberative use of online platforms.

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1. Introduction

The public internet has provided many functions to support democratic engagement and deliberation. It also supports platforms, channels, and means of influence and control that can be used to subvert or oppose democratic engagement and deliberation.

A 2021 Council of Europe study on democracy and good governance observed that: “Digital transformation, democracy and good governance have a fundamental feature in common: they are dynamic processes. They evolve over time, hardly ever at a constant pace, being influenced by a great number of internal and external factors. These processes are closely intertwined and impact on each other in an unprecedented way at the present time which is often referred to as ‘the digital age’.”¹

Three decades into democracy and the internet interacting dynamically, the range of opportunities, threats and impacts is still growing. There is continuing evolution in the use, abuse and governance of established technologies. New technologies including generative artificial intelligence continue to emerge and be added into online environments, creating new capabilities and making known ones cheaper and easier to use.

This is a large, diverse, growing, and acutely important field of study. This paper offers a high-level and current overview of key trends and challenges that have arisen in interactions between the internet and democracy. It then uses that broad overview as the context for the use of online tools developed and used specifically for democratic engagement and deliberation.

The tools referred to are open and closed platforms and software applications used to improve access to information, to enable political communication, discussion and organisation. These tools have been developed on top of and using learning about design and user experience from mass market internet platforms and applications. In a parallel paper entitled ‘Democracy online: technologies for democratic deliberation’ we provide a description of some online tools available to manage participatory public deliberation, using responses from interviews with users of them.²

Reasons to use these tools include increasing the agency of individuals in democratic processes and helping organisations (including but not only government organisations) gain more and better input from their publics. Better input in this context may be input that is more accurately representative of individual views and of the range of views among people, and that is more actionable in practice. As well as empowering individuals, collecting better input can strengthen democracy by improving its basis in collective engagement and so also its legitimacy. The relationship between citizens and the state (or other government or executive decision-maker) might be enhanced in additional ways not available before the internet, or through alternative channels.

These tools are designed and used in the context of the experience of longer and broader mass use of the internet, including the leading social media platforms. They take advantage of their publics’ familiarity with the norms and practice of online expression and interaction. As with so many online

¹ Council of Europe. (2021). ‘Study on the impact of digital transformation on democracy and good governance’. European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG). Available at:

<https://rm.coe.int/study-on-the-impact-of-digital-transformation-on-democracy-and-good-go/1680a3b9f9>

² Meylan-Stevenson, A., Hawes, B., Ryan, M., Hall, W. (2024). Democracy online: technologies for democratic deliberation. Web Science Trust and Web Sciences Institute.

services, the use of channels and tools for online democratic deliberation was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and that step-change may persist.

However, as we explain in more detail in the parallel paper³, these tools do not benefit from the scale, continual improvement cycle, investment and other resources that mass market platforms benefit from. These dedicated tools do not yet appear to have convinced user organisations that they offer satisfactory facilities to decide major or large-scale political issues. They offer specific opportunities and sometimes solutions, but to date have not become large-scale ways of doing democracy.

Providers and users of these services hope that in time design and practice will make them more serviceable to democracy, and this paper suggests ways to promote that development. Our conclusions identify lessons from the use of deliberation tools in the broader context of the continued interactions between the internet and democracy. We propose ways to improve the balance of outcomes when using internet applications in the service of democracy. In a sense, the unfulfilled potential of dedicated tools parallels the view that the wider internet has not yet fulfilled its potential in terms of delivering benefits for democracy.

2. The internet and democracy

During the early years of the public internet in the 1990s, there was widespread optimism that the internet would be strongly and even innately supportive of democracy. The internet would make expression easier and closer to free, giving voices to individuals and groups across the world and across societies. As a result, disparities between groups in terms of representation would be reduced. At the same time, it would be easier to access news, data and analysis from multiple sources, and more people would make better-informed decisions on how to use their votes. International, free, many-to-many dialogues should nurture more and richer mutual understanding within and between countries, as people learned about other cultures and societies, and made direct contact with billions of other people around the world, unconstrained by intermediaries. The quality, quantity and diversity of deliberation would naturally improve.

The lower costs for disseminating information and new channels for political organisation would help new political groupings to emerge, reducing the advantages enjoyed by established political parties and providing representation to people neglected by those parties. Under-addressed causes could gain attention and traction, without the need to gain the permission of gatekeepers. Interest groups gathering around shared concerns and across geographical, political and social barriers could achieve new political organisation and action. Political campaigns could be run more cheaply online, reducing the advantages of traditional political funding. Technology could make new communities and make possible the transmission of hope across them.

Publication of more government data and information would make governments more accountable and improve voters' ability to make informed choices in elections. Repressive and secretive governments would find it more difficult to control information. From a technical perspective, the

³ Meylan-Stevenson, A., Hawes, B., Ryan, M., Hall, W. (2024). Democracy online: technologies for democratic deliberation. Web Science Trust and Web Sciences Institute.

internet was designed to route around ruptures, providing inbuilt resistance to censorship. Failures and abuses of governments, businesses and powerful individuals could be exposed in detail, faster and to everyone, and exposure could no longer be prevented, restricted or rescinded.

The internet could also be a powerful additional mechanism for voter registration processes, for promoting voter registration, and for promoting voting. Online voting would make voting easier, in particular in countries with widely distributed populations. Election turnout would increase, and representation would improve. Effective political and electoral models around the world would become more widely known and followed.

Economic impacts would also improve democracy, as newly connected communities would access new economic opportunities, increasing autonomy, reducing inequalities, and enabling more people to exercise full participation in economies and societies. Many commentators made connections between the growth of the internet and the global spread of liberal democracy.

Many of the early arguments for the internet as democratizing rested on a concept analogous to Habermas' ideal speech situation: rule-based, open and equitable exchange and opinion-formation, free of coercion. Early modes of internet-facilitated communication – email, listservs, chatrooms – seemed well-suited to carefully crafting rational argument, and attending to diverse voices, without control by gatekeepers.⁴

All of these hopes for democracy and more have been successfully realised, to an extent, somewhere at some time, and many of them often and in many contexts. However, it is now unusual to encounter the view that the internet is wholly and innately supportive of national and global democracy. Experience has painted a much more mixed picture. There are many instances where the internet has not delivered more democratic outcomes, and many where it has been used against democracy.

Firstly, and from the broadest perspective, the internet has not significantly levelled most of the world's legacy hierarchies, economic, political or otherwise. Many social structures and divisions, and the identity and prominence of leading political parties in many countries, have not been changed significantly by it. Political systems proved too resilient to be forced to change by technology alone. International movements (notably the Arab Spring) showed that the internet could enable action for reform in and between states where established media was controlled or restricted, but that did not guarantee success over the longer term. Many incumbent political groups have been able to adapt, extending and enhancing their power bases online. No alternatives that primarily rely on the internet have proved more effective in representing voters over anything more than short terms.

Many of the early aspirations for democracy on the internet related to the reduced importance of country borders in online communication, but the internet has not resolved the major cultural and political fissures between states. In fact, the apparently monolithic internet is maintained by four distinct value systems—the Silicon Valley Open Internet, the Brussels Bourgeois Internet, the DC Commercial Internet, and the Beijing Paternal Internet—competing to determine the future directions of internet affordances for freedom, innovation, security, and human rights.⁵

⁴ Ess, C. (2018). Democracy and the Internet: A Retrospective. *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, Volume 25. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13183222.2017.1418820>

⁵ O'Hara, K. Hall, W., (2021). *Four Internets: Data, Geopolitics, and the Governance of Cyberspace*. Oxford University Press.

Globally, benefits may well be arising from overall improved mutual understanding across people, communities and countries, but these may by and large not be benefits to the quality or reach of democracy or realised through democratic functions and systems. Perhaps global internet politics has simply not yet matured. There has been experimentation in that space, for instance, the 2021 Global Citizens' Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis, but so far impacts from these kind of initiative have been limited.⁶

This is not to say that the internet has never helped build consensus internationally. International agreements, for instance on the Sustainable Development Goals and many initiatives of United Nations agencies, have been developed with input from international online consultations. While the internet has been one of the important channels for agreeing on shared values, few of these initiatives involve democratic processes resulting directly in representation or executive action.

The internet itself is a space in which new power structures have emerged, in part but not wholly resembling market power distributions in offline markets. It has nurtured new power bases in international companies supported by the accumulation of data and compute capability, and by new and vast financial fortunes. These internet platforms offered decentralisation to users, with the same services available everywhere, but platform markets and ownership have tended strongly to concentration. Accumulation of internet user data delivers market advantage and advantage over the customer, and both tend to grow over time.

This aspect of the dynamic characteristic of internet businesses seems particularly difficult for governments and regulators to develop an approach to, not least because that accumulation of user data has at the same time been used to make the services perform continually better for users. Data accumulation, evolving services and network effects deter users from leaving and prevent effective competition from arising.

There is an increasingly common view that after a certain point, major internet platform operators can allow the user experience and the service to advertisers to degrade, tilting the balance of outcomes further in favour of profitability, because users and business customers are locked in, and regulators lack or do not use effective tools. As Cory Doctorow has succinctly argued, "First, major internet platforms are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves." This can result from the ease of changing how a platform allocates value, combined with the nature of a "two-sided market," where a platform sits between buyers and sellers, holding each hostage to the other, raking off an ever-larger share of the value that passes between them.⁷

This imbalance of power is often characterised as the Web2 business model, which Web3 innovations have sought to fix. To date, that fix has not been achieved in ways that have replicated the benefits to users of Web2 platforms without the disadvantages, and there have been many failures, particularly in cryptocurrency⁸.

⁶ Mellier, C., Wilson, R., (2023). A Global Citizens' Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Carnegie Europe. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/02/14/global-citizens-assembly-on-climate-and-ecological-crisis-pub-88985>

⁷ Doctorow, C. (2023). The 'Enshittification' of TikTok: Or how, exactly, platforms die. Wired. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/>

⁸ Hawes, B., Hall, D., Thompson, B. and O'Hara, K. (2023). Web3: The Promise & the

This could also be seen as a waning of democracy, as the internet space for communal interaction degrades and users lack the power to change that. The power balance in the market certainly appears far from democratic. The greatest individual beneficiaries from the rise of major internet platforms have been small in number and from a limited section of society, mostly in one country. At the other pole, of individual user experience, most people in the world are affected to some degree by internet business models and practices, and generally experience limited choice or agency in relation to that, challenging democratic accountability. Agency and choice are also unevenly distributed across countries and social groups.

Those examples show that in several respects the internet has not created the new forms of democracy hoped for and has created new imbalances of power. There are also very many examples where the internet has made it possible to attack and undermine democracy in new ways.

The borderless libertarian ethos set out in 1996 in 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' included aspirations for freedom from governments, including freedom from censorship and the rule of law by democratically elected governments.⁹ As the internet eased the dissemination of information, it eased the spread of inaccurate information and deliberate disinformation. Disinformation spreads fast and easily on the internet because expression is freer than in print and broadcast media, and because there are no parallels to the gatekeepers, licensing systems, regulation and redress of legacy media.

The internet has been comparatively more free in this respect than traditional news and publishing. Regulatory mechanisms have specifically been developed to protect platforms from blanket liability for false, offensive or illegal speech published on them, notably, Section 230 of the United States Code established in 1996: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider." This is specifically justified in the Code by the finding of Congress that "The Internet and other interactive computer services offer a forum for a true diversity of political discourse, unique opportunities for cultural development, and myriad avenues for intellectual activity."¹⁰ There is now growing pressure from many organisations to review Section 230, though there is also strong support to retain it because of its protection of free speech.

The internet has made new communities possible, and here too benefits are mirrored by threats. Terrorist groups can form across borders almost as easily as movements for democratic change. Social media platforms help to bring together new communities to coalesce around shared values, but those values may be shared opposition to out-groups rather than an appetite for fostering understanding between groups.

Political persuasion and disinformation are live topics, and here the picture is again mixed. Research on the 2015 UK election found both positives and negatives, both deserving further study and attention from governments and civil society organisations. Kevin Munger et al. concluded that "Messages from news media improved recipients' knowledge of relevant political facts; messages from the parties improved knowledge of their relative stances on the campaign's most important

Reality. Web Science Trust and Web Science Institute. Available at: https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/477076/1/Web3_2023_01.pdf

⁹ Barlow, J, P. (1996). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. Available at: <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

¹⁰ Section 230 of the United States Code. (1996). Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2021-title47/pdf/USCODE-2021-title47-chap5-subchapII-partI-sec230.pdf>

issues. But we also uncover results that should temper any unbridled enthusiasm about the impact of social media on political knowledge; namely that exposure to partisan messages about highly salient issues over the course of a campaign can cause knowledge polarization on those issues.”¹¹

This conclusion points to perhaps the most difficult challenge internet platforms pose for democracy. The platforms are designed to influence behaviour without users being clearly aware of the influence. This phenomenon itself is not new to politics, but the scale certainly is.

Facebook’s business model is providing a communication platform that is free to users and paid for by third-party advertisers. Revenue depends entirely on the ability of advertising on the platform to influence the behaviour of users. Arguably, this has innate challenges to democracy. Users use the platform for one set of objectives, as their behaviour is directed for different aims. Users know that they are being advertised to, but there is a lack of clarity around the trades being made. Users will often not be directly aware that efforts to influence them are directed by detailed information about them. Better results for Facebook and its advertisers mean users spending more time on Facebook, which implies that users spend more time being subject to indirect and, to an extent, covert influence. Google and Amazon accumulate and use data about individuals through different models from Facebook, but for similarly commercial objectives.

Shoshana Zuboff’s book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* raised awareness of this model. Her repeated refrain “Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?” is in one sense a question about democracy on the internet, by pointing to the unauthorized exercise of power over millions of people.¹² The stark and growing imbalance of power between individuals and some of the world’s largest companies is a challenge for democracy in itself. Internet platforms can also maintain that imbalance of power by restricting access to the data that could enable governments to develop regulations and compel accountability.

Governments in liberal democracies previously held off from dealing with the accumulation of market power and wealth by the largest digital companies, though many governments are now grappling with these issues. Given the variety of positive and negative impacts of the internet on democracies and societies, it might be more accurate to say that in relation to the internet, governments have favoured some rights (free expression, free markets, economic rights and, latterly and increasingly, privacy) over others (freedom from manipulation and abuse).

That is now changing as research is leading to an increasingly full and nuanced political and public understanding of how opinions and activity online can be influenced. Advertising has always aimed to change behaviour, but the online attention economy presents a significant development with the indirect, covert mechanisms operating by the continual accumulation of personal information at source. These features are made more significant because social media algorithms designed to retain attention also have the effect of driving more attention to material – much of it factually false - that elicits stronger reactions. In social and political terms, this has meant material that tends to persuade readers and viewers towards stronger political positions. The term computational propaganda describes “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks.”¹³ Predictive tools which direct content and advertising to

¹¹ Munger, K. Egan, P. Nagler, J. Ronen, J. Tucker, J, A. (2017). Political Knowledge and Misinformation in the Era of Social Media: Evidence from the 2015 UK Election.

¹² Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*.

¹³ Woolley, SC. Howard, PN. (eds) (2018). *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

users are also always built on previous activity, encoding existing social biases and gaps in representation.

Aside from disinformation, the privileging of extreme content and comment has also encouraged abusive and aggressive language in internet discussions, poisoning civic space and closing out space for reasonable exchanges between people in different groups and holding different views.

Predictive systems that show users material that they are likely to agree with or to be exercised by may also result in filter bubbles: situations where users become less aware of different points of view because they are presented in effect with a community largely in agreement with their own views. The concern is that the lack of contrary views may cause people to drift into more and more extreme positions. They may also wrongly believe that those extreme positions are more widely held than is the case if those are the only views they encounter. An empirical study from British Future and Hope Not Hate demonstrated online debate on immigration is more polarised than face-to-face discussion.¹⁴

However, this remains a very contested area. Research tends to indicate that the impacts of social media on opinions and polarisation between groups are various and complex. While polarising views can spread fast, it is less clear how and when lasting polarisation between communities may result. In some research, little or no evidence for polarisation was found when it might have been expected, given some of the material shared within those groups. Axel Bruns argues that the impact of filter-bubbles is exaggerated, and that putting too much blame on social media platforms' algorithms can distract from causes of polarisation which are rooted in offline social and economic conditions.¹⁵

This debate has implications for democracy too. Believing too readily that social media is bad for democracy might result in the closure of channels for access to a diversity of news and for better understanding between different groups.

Research into the circulation of conspiracy theories about Covid-19 has suggested that design influences outcomes. Twitter exchanges tended in aggregate to subdue conspiracy beliefs, whereas other platforms multiplied spread. The researchers attribute this in part to the design of how users interact on the different platforms, though they acknowledge additional potential factors where the platforms differ, including education levels of users.¹⁶

This is only a short summary of the ways the internet and internet tools and platforms have challenged and subverted democracy. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this area of study is that hope for democracy online seems still to be winning out. The organisations most involved in promoting democracy and countering internet-based threats to democracy continue to work for more and better access to the internet for everyone. The challenges to democracy that have arisen on and from the internet are critically important exactly because the internet is now so important for

¹⁴ Rutter, J. and Carter, R. (2018). National Conversation on Immigration. British Future and Hope Not Hate. Available at: <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Final-report.National-Conversation.17.9.18.pdf>

¹⁵ Bruns, A. (2019). *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* Cambridge. Polity Press.

¹⁶ Theocharis, Y., Cardenal, A., Jin, S., Aalberg, T., Hopmann, D. N., Strömbäck, J., Castro, L., Esser, F., Van Aelst, P., de Vreese, C., Corbu, N., Koc-Michalska, K., Matthes, J., Schemer, C., Sheaffer, T., Splendore, S., Stanyer, J., Stępińska, A., & Štětka, V. (2023). Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries. *New Media & Society*, 25(12), pp. 3412-3437. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045666>

democracy. Many online tools have not been designed primarily for democracy, but they are used to support it, and so impact the practice of it.

3. Human rights and the internet

The proliferating interactions between the internet and democracy, and understanding of those developments, have been reflected in the way the internet has been regarded from the perspective of human rights. Understanding the connection between the internet and human rights explains why the internet is necessary for democracy, despite all the challenges the internet has brought.

Unrestricted and uninterrupted access to the internet has come to be seen as a necessary element of a free and democratic social condition, and increasingly also as a human right, or as a necessary means to exercise other established human rights. The United Nations Human Rights Council has adopted a series of resolutions to ensure that the rights to free expression in Article 19 include the use of the internet. As the internet increasingly became experienced as another dimension of many activities of daily life for billions, pressure increased to transfer norms across to it. A UNHRC Resolution 32/13 in 2016 affirms “that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one’s choice.”¹⁷

There has been some resistance to accepting internet access as a human right. Some have preferred to frame internet human rights as subsidiaries of established rights, objecting to dilution by multiplication of the highest category of agreed rights. Vint Cerf objected on the more functional grounds that the internet works as an enabler of rights, not a right itself.¹⁸

Merten Reglitz objects to Cerf’s argument, suggesting that a human right to internet access is justifiable based on its instrumental value for realising a range of other socio-economic human rights. Internet access has globally become indispensable in practice for adequate opportunities to enjoy other rights. Reglitz explains that even if people have offline opportunities, for example, to access social security schemes or find housing, they are at an objectionable comparative disadvantage to those who have internet access.¹⁹

Additionally, internet access is often the only practically feasible way for people to realise many of their socio-economic human rights. For example, achieving adequate access to social security, education, health, housing, and work requires access to the internet. From Reglitz’s argument, we see that there are strong reasons to accept that internet access should be recognised as a human

¹⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13. (2016). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/documents>

¹⁸ Cerf, V. (2012). Internet access is not a human right. New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/opinion/internet-access-is-not-a-human-right.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

¹⁹ Reglitz, M., (2023). ‘The socio-economic argument for the human right to internet access’. Politics, Philosophy & Economics. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1470594X231167597>

right because it is practically indispensable for the enjoyment of our socio-economic rights in a digital age.²⁰

Reglitz expresses what seems to be a widely experienced development: the internet moving from a communication medium for deliberation about any aspect of life, to being also a dimension of living, rather than a secondary medium. The experience of the internet as a dimension for living has increased our understanding of online human rights. This understanding has now come to include other human rights, notably but not exclusively: socio-economic; economic development; freedom of assembly; privacy; and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Seeing internet access as a human right has democratic implications. In an earlier paper, Reglitz provides three arguments for why free internet access ought to be a human right that have strong democratic implications. First, he claims that internet access is necessary for people to influence the global players who impose rules and structures. Second, an individual's basic freedoms (like free speech, freedom of information, and freedom of assembly) cannot be properly realised without the internet. Third, the internet can protect other basic human interests. For example, the internet has been particularly effective in documenting and protesting unjustified police violence against minorities.²¹

As the internet has come to be seen more as another spacious arena in which the lives of individuals go on, rather than a secondary enabling tool, conceptions of online rights have continued to mature as well. A right to privacy online may now encompass freedom from surveillance, the right to anonymity, the right to use encryption, and rights of data protection, including control over personal data collection, retention, processing, disposal and disclosure.

As discussed above, there is now growing interest in using human rights to protect freedom from manipulation of opinion online, given internet platforms evolving capability to attract attention and influence behaviour. Recent discussions on the internet and human rights have begun to grapple with the potential uses of more powerful and more widely available artificial intelligence applications for that purpose²². These rights may be under different pressures in different countries, because of different levels of regulation and enforcement, and the roles taken by governments, but recent history suggests that techniques targeted at users in one country will in time be used in others.

4. Conclusions

The challenges and opportunities that the internet presents to democracy summarised briefly above can all be expected to evolve and spread further. The artificial intelligence tools in development could increase and accelerate many of the known uses of prediction and behaviour modification online. Increased automation of decision-making across governments could improve some aspects of delivery but reduce accountability and transparency in many areas.

²⁰ Reglitz, M., (2023). 'The socio-economic argument for the human right to internet access'. Politics, Philosophy & Economics. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1470594X231167597>

²¹ Reglitz, M. (2020). The human right to free internet access. Journal of Applied Philosophy. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/japp.12395>

²² Jones, K. (2023). AI governance and human rights. Chatham House. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/ai-governance-and-human-rights>

Digital tools that serve as novel manifestations of the state should attract ongoing scrutiny.²³ In online discussions, autogenerated statements and interactions could become overwhelming for platforms and users of them, absorbing time and energy, and sapping confidence in social exchanges. Online political processes could also be overwhelmed by autogenerated pseudonymous responses. New tools, most immediately Large Language Models, are likely to make it easier to create and spread credible disinformation. Accepting the importance of the internet means accepting the need to prevent abuses of it.

Providing internet access is one of the most urgent tasks of public institutions today. Being able to access and freely use the internet is now necessary for adequate opportunities to lead decent lives.²⁴ It follows that, as Reglitz points out, the internet is here to stay and so we must learn how to use it for the promotion of human rights. We must also learn how to restrict the threats that it gives rise to. The value that internet access has for human rights is so great that public authorities should properly regulate this new medium.

However, there is more to protecting democracy than the control and regulation of threats. Large Language Models may well also offer new and better access to information for some people, new ways to understand and represent views, and new tools to support deliberation. Artificial Intelligence could manage large scale political conversations in chat rooms, on social networking sites, and elsewhere. AI might then be used to identify common positions and summarise them, surface unusual arguments that seem compelling to those who have heard them and keep attacks and insults to a minimum.²⁵ The Metaverse might even support new ways to communicate presence online, with the benefits of more trust and social engagement.

Democrats ought to prioritise the development of better online tools to promote democracy and promote the use of them to realise more and better democratic deliberation. There is a pressing need for more action, and better funded action, to improve the design of internet tools for democracy. Using these tools carries risks of bias, omission and representation. Using technology applications for eliciting, organising and using people's views may always involve selection, modification and omission. Encouraging more and different people to engage in online deliberation is already an attempt to influence behaviour. Simone Chambers and John Gastil note that improving online deliberation processes, structure, participants, business models, influences, regulations, and logic are all key to ensuring a healthy digital public sphere. Public life is lived in part online and can involve many interactions of offline and online elements and forces. This can challenge theorists to keep conceptions of deliberative democracy up to date.²⁶ Linking this research with a better basis in

²³ Izdebski, K. Turashviliv, T, Harutyunyan, H. (2023). The digitalization of democracy. Available at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/NED_FORUM-The-Digitalization-of-Democracy-Essay-Collection-2.pdf

²⁴ Reglitz, M., (2023). 'The socio-economic argument for the human right to internet access'. Politics, Philosophy & Economics. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1470594X231167597>

²⁵ Scheiner, B. Farrell, H. Sanders, N, E. (2023). How AI could help democracy. Available at: <https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/ai-public-option.html>

²⁶ Chambers, S. Gastil, J. (2020). Deliberation, Democracy, and the Digital Landscape. Political Studies Association. 69(1). pp. 3-6. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0032321719901123#bibr3-0032321719901123>

the knowledge of what works for online deliberation should support development of better dedicated tools, and better guardrails for open platforms, including the majors.