

LOWY
INSTITUTE

Overcoming digital threats to democracy

POLICY BRIEF

LYDIA KHALIL

February 2024

LOWY INSTITUTE

The Lowy Institute is an independent policy think tank. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia — economic, political and strategic — and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia's international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate
- promote discussion of Australia's role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Policy Briefs are designed to address a particular, current policy issue and to suggest solutions. They are deliberately prescriptive, specifically addressing two questions: What is the problem? What should be done?

This report is part of the Lowy Institute's Digital Threats to Democracy Project, funded by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. Responsibility for the views, information, or advice expressed in this report is that of the author. The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lowy Institute or the Australian government.

Published 21 February 2024

31 Bligh Street
Sydney NSW 2000

[lowyinstitute.org](https://www.lowyinstitute.org)
+61 2 8238 9000

Version 2024-02-18.3127671

Contents

Key findings	4
Executive summary	5
What is the problem?	6
What can be done?	10
Deliberative democracy in practice	11
Applying deliberative democracy to the digital realm	13
Platform councils	13
Deliberative mini-publics to inform regulation	16
Platform design based on deliberative principles	17
Conclusion	19
Notes	20

Key findings

- The internet was once considered an open door to democracy and liberty. Today, it is seen as an agent of democratic erosion. Digital challenges to democracy include the scale and spread of disinformation and misinformation, the increase in polarisation and extremism that are facilitated and escalated online, and inadequate regulation.
- Digital platforms are increasingly perceived by the public as serving the needs and interests of the powerful rather than the public good. Average users have few means to influence key decisions and debates about how digital technologies are used and developed. The rules of the digital sphere — whether made by tech companies, regulators, or politicians — often lack public legitimacy.
- Applying deliberative democracy principles — where small but representative groups of people make decisions after deliberating on issues in depth — can help address the challenges of legitimacy and generate broadly acceptable solutions to the problems that bedevil online spaces and challenge democracy.

Executive summary

Many of the challenges that digital technologies present stem not only from what they can do, but how they are governed. Most of the digital platforms used in democracies are controlled by a handful of multinational corporations, colloquially known as “Big Tech”. The digital technologies they develop maximise the profit and interests of this handful of technology companies. But when power is concentrated in the hands of a few, there is little accountability to the public. When users do not properly understand terms of service, tracking, or privacy notices, consent cannot be fully or freely given. When terms of service are not consistently applied, there is inconsistent application of the law. And when governments enact regulation primarily based on partisan pressures and interests, the public interest is absent. All these elements combine to create a crisis of legitimacy.

This is where deliberative mechanisms could play a role. Deliberative mechanisms such as “platform councils” — forums made up of average digital users and tech experts — can help achieve a more legitimate consensus on the uses and governance of digital platforms. They would allow responsibility and risk around content moderation and user access to be shared among the technology companies developing and running digital platforms, the governments tasked with regulating them, and the people using them. Similar processes such as citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ panels, or consensus conferences can be convened to inform government regulation and legislation on AI and other emerging technologies posing complex challenges to democracy. Technocratic solutions and input are not enough. Ordinary citizens must be provided the opportunity to contribute to regulatory decisions. Where piloted, digital deliberative democracy has proven to be legitimate and popular. A majority of participants wanted tech companies to use this deliberative format as a way to make decisions in future.

What is the problem?

In the 1990s, the internet was considered an open door to democracy and liberty. Today, the internet is more likely to be considered an agent of democratic erosion¹ and a key factor in the consolidation of authoritarian regimes.²

To be sure, digital technologies have impacted democracy in many positive ways. E-democracy applications³ and other digital tools have helped increase transparency and responsiveness and made the delivery of government services more efficient. Political parties and elected officials can use digital tools to engage with constituents more easily. Increased scrutiny of government and the political class, made possible through digital technologies and computer-mediated communication, has increased accountability. For social movements and activists, the internet has become an indispensable tool to organise, raise awareness, and provide platforms for previously marginalised voices.

However, there is consensus among experts that the internet has contributed to democratic erosion. A recent systematic review of the global body of available research on digital communications platforms found that, in terms of political behaviour, the internet has had several negative effects for democracies and that these effects were more acutely felt in established democracies.⁴ The review also found that while use of digital media can increase citizen knowledge and boost low-level participation, it often damages trust in the political process and in democratic institutions such as parliaments, the judiciary, government departments, and the media. The review found an association between the use of digital media and increases in polarisation and the appeal of populism.

The internet has made the battle for attention more contested, creating an “attention economy”, where content that is highly polarising and arousing is often prioritised because it drives revenue to the digital platforms hosting that content.

A recent Pew Center poll similarly reveals that many tech experts assess that future digital disruption will hurt democracy. According to the survey summary, “about half predict that humans’ use of technology will weaken democracy between now and 2030

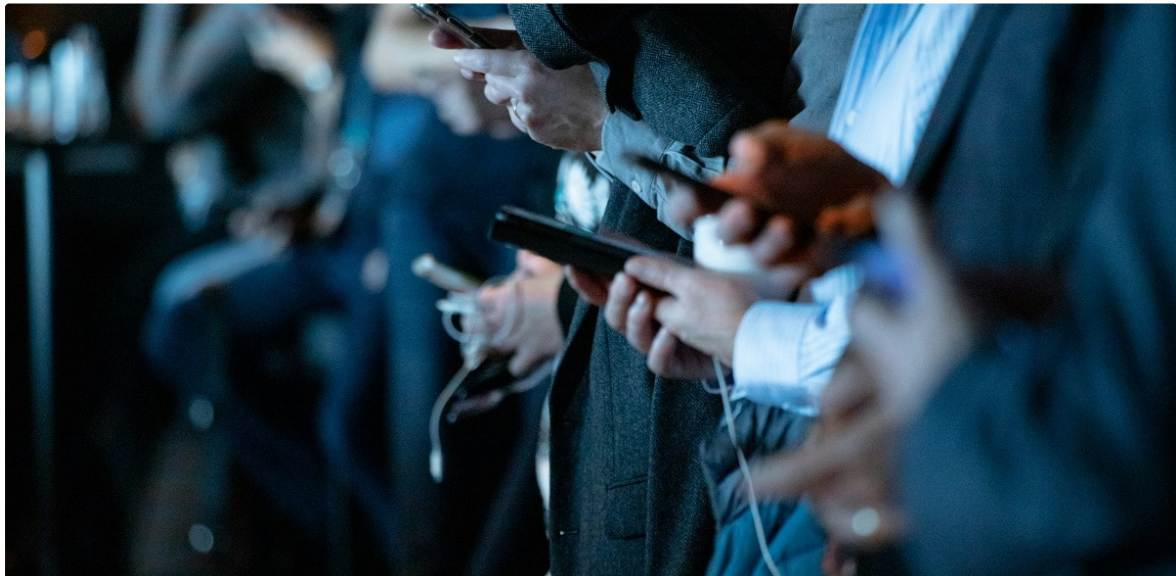
due to the speed and scope of reality distortion, the decline of journalism, and the impact of surveillance capitalism”. Even those who envisioned a more optimistic scenario highlighted many concerns about the impacts of digital technology on democracy.⁵ Those impacts stem from the affordances of digital platforms (the interaction of what one can do with the technology and what it does to us), the business model behind their deployment, and insufficient regulation of the industry.

Digital communication technologies have enabled the decentralisation and rapid increase of information and content production. This has radically transformed the information environment. In one sense, it has democratised access to information and the creation of knowledge. But digital technology has simultaneously fractured the public sphere, blunting some of these positive aspects.⁶

The public sphere was famously described by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas as public spaces where private people can freely and informally gather to discuss and articulate the needs of society and form public opinion.⁷ A healthy public sphere is integral to democracy because it mediates between state and society, both controlling and legitimising democratic government.⁸

When Habermas first articulated the concept, it was newspapers, television, and radio that served as the media of the public sphere. Now, it is social media and other types of computer-mediated forums. These new forms of digital media have splintered public communication and the spaces in which it takes place. This impacts the ability of democratic citizens to address challenges, and democratic societies to remain cohesive.

The internet has made the battle for attention more contested, creating an “attention economy”, where content that is highly polarising and arousing is often prioritised because it drives revenue to the digital platforms hosting that content. This has made the public sphere more cacophonous, limiting the ability of citizens to engage in productive dialogue.



Big Tech’s business models rely on the collection of personal information and its monetisation (Camilio Jimenez/Unsplash)

The internet has also enabled the spread of misinformation and disinformation at scale. This impacts citizens' ability to access accurate information, which is essential for deliberation and decision-making in democracies. Digital platforms that enable the rise in disinformation have muddied the information ecosystem. Disinformation has contributed to increased polarisation, reduced trust in government, and growth in extremism in democratic societies.⁹

Furthermore, digital technologies have led to the commodification of the public. Online, we are less citizens and more users or sources of data and content. Big Tech's business models rely on the collection of personal information and its monetisation, what Harvard Professor Shoshana Zuboff has termed "surveillance capitalism".¹⁰

This has produced several negative outcomes for democracy,¹¹ not the least being the depletion of individual autonomy. As we engage in more of the human experience online, tech companies have been able to capture and mine vast amounts of behavioural data. This is used to predictively sell us products and feed us personalised and targeted content.

We are thus perpetually distracted by digital technologies in ways that blunt individual agency and autonomy.¹² This erodes democracy because, without autonomy, we cannot make moral judgments and engage in the critical thinking necessary for a democratic society.¹³ There are few opt-out options on digital platforms aside from abstaining from their use altogether. This further constrains citizen participation as life increasingly moves online.

Surveillance capitalism also intersects with increased government surveillance. Mass surveillance was once the purview of authoritarian governments, but liberal democracies have also expanded their surveillance capacities on a massive scale.¹⁴ Digital surveillance has become normalised, defended as a means to ensure public safety, optimisation of services, and economic growth. However, this raises questions around privacy and incursions into civil liberties, which have not been adequately addressed.¹⁵

Foreign actors are increasingly engaging in disinformation campaigns, election interference, and other types of social media manipulation that have undermined social cohesion and trust in democratic systems.

These impacts were highlighted by Edward Snowden's leaks of documents that revealed government surveillance of US citizens, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal in which a private political consulting firm improperly accessed the personally identifiable information of tens of millions of Facebook users to build voter profiles. Most digital surveillance is more pervasive

and mundane, yet still poses risks to democracy. Artificial Intelligence (AI) will increase the capabilities of surveillance, allowing it to be conducted even more cheaply and inconspicuously.

Digital technologies have also provided opportunities for foreign malign actors to interfere in democratic societies.¹⁶ Foreign actors are increasingly engaging in disinformation campaigns, election interference, and other types of social media manipulation that have undermined social cohesion and trust in democratic systems.¹⁷

Inauthentic accounts and networks (known as “bots”) used for malign foreign influence are a concern, but more often, foreign information operations are infiltrating authentic political activism.¹⁸ This is not hacking or intruding but simply exploiting the infrastructure and affordances of digital platforms to interfere with the democratic public sphere.¹⁹ The increased digitisation of administrative and participatory processes has also exacerbated vulnerabilities to foreign interference.²⁰

Though there is a consensus about the challenges digital technologies have created for democratic societies,²¹ there is little agreement on what to do about them. The factors that contribute to the digital erosion of democracy are “wicked problems”, meaning they are ill-defined, in flux, and made up of many interdependent factors, each either lacking a solid solution or reliant on elusive political judgment for resolution. Not only are the solutions to wicked problems contested, the “problem” is different depending on one’s perspectives or interests. Potential solutions often involve weighing up competing values. This makes political action and the formulation of government policy to address such challenges difficult.

The current rules of the digital sphere, particularly for widely used platforms, have been driven by a combination of commercial imperatives, the values of the platform owners, government regulations, and to a lesser extent the input of experts. But this approach has been insufficient to address wicked problems because those making and enforcing the rules lack legitimacy.

The digital tools, regulations, and terms of service put in place to contain these problems are increasingly perceived by users as serving the needs and interests of the powerful rather than the public good.²² When power is concentrated in the hands of a few, as is the case with digital technology, there is little accountability to the public. When users do not properly understand terms of service, tracking, or privacy notices, consent cannot be fully or freely given.²³ When terms of service are not consistently applied, there is inconsistent application of the rule of law.²⁴ And when governments enact regulation primarily based on partisan pressures and interests, representation of the public interest is absent. All these elements combine to create a crisis of legitimacy.

What can be done?

When we think of democracy as a form of government or as a decision-making process, we often reflexively refer to either “representative” democracy — where citizens elect others to represent them to decide and implement policies, with the focus being on elections, polling, political parties, and candidates — or “participatory democracy” — where citizens engage directly in influencing the issues and policies that impact their lives, like participating in town halls, making petitions, or protesting to demand change. But there are other ways to conceptualise democratic participation.

Deliberative democracy is a theory of democracy that suggests that informed deliberation must occur before decision-making occurs and that decision-making should not merely be the result of the aggregate of citizens’ opinions, the majority view, or even the result of competition between different interests. Rather, deliberative democracy emphasises the *legitimacy* and *quality* of decision-making, which are achieved through public deliberation.²⁵

The newDemocracy Foundation defines the emphasis of deliberative democracy in this way:

...deliberative democrats have a specific view on the type of political participation they want citizens to be involved in — deliberation.

Deliberation requires that participants: (a) become well informed about the topic, (b) consider different perspectives, in order to (c) arrive at a public judgement (not opinion) about “what can we strongly agree on?”²⁶

Deliberative democracy advocates argue that it is a more robust form of democracy in that it leads to more informed public opinion and better decision making.²⁷ Deliberative processes are typically oriented to reach consensus, or at least supermajority agreement on a set of recommendations with room for acknowledging dissenting views.²⁸ Other decision-making or problem-solving mechanisms seek to *overcome* the challenges around competing values by using adversarial politics to “win the argument” or rely on technical or expert advice as a way to sidestep competing values or positions. Deliberative democracy, however, focuses on *uncovering* and *deliberately acknowledging* these competing values.²⁹ Even though full consensus may not be reached after deliberation, the process still produces legitimate outcomes because even those who hold opposing views have had an opportunity to be heard, creating trust in the process.

Deliberative democracy in practice

How does deliberative democracy work? How is it carried out in practice? And why is it used?

Processes based on deliberative democracy most often involve gathering a small but representative sample of citizens (usually about 40), providing them with a range of views and expertise on the issue at hand, and then facilitating deliberation to work towards a recommendation or decision.

Whereas participatory democracy seeks to involve as many people as possible, deliberative democracy recognises that it is difficult to have true deliberation in large groups. It seeks to overcome one of the main drawbacks of participatory and representative democracy, which is superficial engagement with the issues due to lack of time, information, or incentives.

Instead, deliberative democracy involves the creation of a representative “mini-public”.³⁰ These mini-publics have taken on many forms, including citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, and citizens’ assemblies.³¹ They are often formed using civic or democratic lotteries. Some deliberative democracy efforts and mini-publics are state-supported, while others are led by civil society; some are binding and others are consultative.

There are several real-world examples of deliberative mini-publics in action. Ireland is often highlighted as a country that has used deliberative democracy to great effect. Ireland’s use of citizens’ assemblies has produced major political decisions on contentious and difficult issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion. Ireland has held six citizens’ assemblies,³²

Ireland’s use of citizens’ assemblies has produced major political decisions on contentious and difficult issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

made up of a randomly selected representative sample of citizens, each presenting their recommendations to the broader citizenry for adoption through countrywide referendums, whereupon proposals have been enacted as constitutional reforms.³³

Another deliberative democracy innovation is participatory budgeting. First used in Brazil but now employed around the globe, including in Australia, various city districts have used citizens’ assemblies to determine how budget revenues are allocated. Participatory budgeting has been highlighted as a way

to improve government accountability, ensure more equitable public spending, and better reflect the needs of the poor and marginalised.³⁴

In the United States, “deliberative polling” was invented by James Fishkin in the 1990s. In contrast to traditional polls, which can only represent the public’s surface-level impressions, deliberative polling involves gathering a representative sample of those who took a traditional poll to be further briefed on the issues and deliberate for several days among themselves. They are then re-pollled on the issues with the idea that the latter results would be more representative of public opinion if the broader public had the same opportunity to engage deeply with the issue at hand.³⁵ Deliberative polling has since been applied around the world.

The German-speaking community of Belgium has instituted a permanent deliberative democracy mechanism by creating a Citizens Council, enacted in 2019 by parliamentary vote and developed to complement the elected chamber. It is the first citizens’ assembly to be enshrined in legislation. Made up of 24 members who hold their seat for 1.5 years, it can propose policy recommendations either on its own initiative or at the request of parliament. The Council is composed of randomly selected representative citizens who, as a group, make policy recommendations that the Parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium is required to respond to or enact.³⁶

In 2020, Victoria amended its Local Government Act and mandated that local councils engage in “deliberative engagement practices” to inform their strategic planning.

Other forms of deliberative democracy include “citizens’ panels”. Canada was one of the first countries to establish such standing reference panels, again made up of a randomly selected representative sample of citizens to provide input on planning and transportation issues for their cities.

More recently in Australia, citizens’ assemblies and citizens’ panels have been established across states to inform local council decisions and programs. In 2020, Victoria amended its Local Government Act and mandated that local councils engage in “deliberative engagement practices” to inform their strategic planning.³⁷ There are many more examples of deliberative democracy around the world, and public deliberation is increasingly being promoted as a way to grapple with the multifaceted challenges to democracy.³⁸

Applying deliberative democracy to the digital realm

In many ways, time-intensive deliberations, which are at the heart of deliberative democracy, are at odds with the online culture of superficial mass engagement, ironic discourse, and the disruptor ethos of Silicon Valley. However, proponents of deliberative democracy argue that its principles and techniques are well suited to grappling with the complex and often competing dynamics relating to online spaces and their governance³⁹ Solutions to the digital challenges to democracy have been not only been frustrated by a lack of regulation but by a lack of consensus.

Applying deliberative democracy to the digital realm can help to not only develop new regulations or legislation on contentious issues around technology, but also establish and socialise norms of behaviour and engagement on digital platforms. Deliberative processes can help overcome issues of legitimacy and lack of trust in the intentions and motivations of regulation and rule-setting by tech companies and legislatures. They also provide a means to incorporate and reflect the digital user experience, as they offer mechanisms for ordinary citizens who are directly impacted to contribute to the regulatory processes of government and the management decisions of tech companies.

Applying deliberative processes and principles to the digital realm can take many forms. Following are three examples.

Platform councils

As more communication migrates online, particularly to social media, digital platforms have become the de facto public square of democratic societies. However, a small number of multinational companies essentially control access to and engagement in this public square. As private, commercial enterprises, digital communications platforms all have terms of service and community guidelines that specify what can and cannot be done or said on their platforms.

Who is allowed to use these platforms and *what* kind of content they are allowed to post has naturally become highly politicised and contentious. It has never been satisfactory that a handful of tech CEOs can set the rules and norms for so much of the world's communication and expression. Attempts by governments (heavily influenced by partisan pressures) to define and regulate "disinformation" or extreme or harmful speech through law, which these private

companies will then have to reflect, have also been fraught and problematic, as regulation of disinformation in the name of online safety runs into democratic rights such as freedom of expression.⁴⁰

This is where platform councils could play a role in better reflecting citizens' views. They could provide a means by which responsibility and risk around content and user access are shared among the technology companies developing and running these platforms, the governments tasked with regulating them, and the people using them.⁴¹ Sharing these responsibilities and risks through deliberative mechanisms such as platform councils could help mitigate concerns around the politicisation of decisions and achieve a more legitimate consensus on competing rights.



As more communication migrates online, particularly to social media, digital platforms have become the de facto public square of democratic societies (Julian Christ/Unsplash)

What are platform councils? A relatively new concept based in human rights law and deliberative democracy, platform councils are modelled on press councils present in many jurisdictions around the world. Essentially, they are forums made up of average digital users and tech experts that convene regularly to help shape the rules of a particular platform and engage in precedent-setting decisions around content moderation and de-platforming, or the removal and banning of a registered user. Ideally, platform councils should be independent of both government and commercial interests. They are established through an inclusive and transparent process, their members are broadly representative and democratically assembled, and their work and deliberation are fully transparent.⁴²

Models for platform councils vary in their makeup and selection processes, jurisdiction (national versus global), responsibilities, and whether decisions are binding or advisory. Proposals for social media councils were first developed by non-governmental organisations such as Article 19, Global Partners Digital, and Stanford’s Global Digital Policy Incubator (GDPI), and are supported by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression.⁴³

Platform councils can make decisions on contestable content moderation or de-platforming. While platform terms of service explicitly prohibit illegal behaviour, there are grey areas that terms of service do not cover. There could be content and behaviour that is allowed online but is nevertheless potentially harmful to democracy or the public discourse. For example, content challenging the legitimacy of election outcomes when they have already been verified is often not banned. The #StopTheSteal campaign in the United States after the 2020 presidential elections contributed to the violence of the 6 January insurrection and threatened a core tenet of democracy: the peaceful transfer of power.⁴⁴ While content and users can be removed based on violations of terms of service, sometimes these rules are applied inconsistently and in a manner that violates human rights principles and freedom of expression.

Social media companies’ processes around establishing and enforcing their terms of service are often opaque, arbitrary, and lacking in due process. Platform councils could better involve the user, whose voice is commonly missing. In doing so, platform councils could bring greater transparency and consistency to the inner workings of tech companies, making them more accountable to their users.⁴⁵

Meta’s Oversight Board is one example of how some social media platforms are starting to implement this idea. In 2018, Meta (then Facebook) signalled its intent to create a separate body to help it make decisions around online speech and safety. After multiple rounds of global consultations to refine the concept, the company established the Oversight Board in 2020. Akin to an independent high court, it consists of at least 11 and up to 40 global experts whose purpose is to consider appeals and make precedent-setting decisions on content moderation and de-platforming. It can also offer policy advice and guidance.⁴⁶

The Oversight Board has been criticised for its sluggishness and the limitations of its remit. It is also not quite a deliberative mechanism model, as it only includes experts and not average users.⁴⁷ However, Meta has used deliberative mechanisms to inform the development of its “Metaverse” — a virtual reality space where people can interact with each other in a computer-generated environment. Small representative groups across 32 countries and 19 languages were selected to deliberate on how it should be developed. A majority of participants — 82 per cent — wanted tech companies to use this deliberative format as a way to make decisions into the future.⁴⁸

Deliberative mini-publics to inform regulation

While platform councils can be used to inform platform governance, similar deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' panels, or consensus conferences can be convened to inform government regulation and legislation. In the 1980s, the Danish Board of Technology launched "consensus conferences" where scientific experts and citizens gathered to help set regulations for new and emerging technologies.⁴⁹ They continue to be in use and have since been adopted in other EU countries, as well as in New Zealand, the United States, and beyond. As the digital and technological challenges to democracy increase, calls to use similar deliberative processes to set regulation have only grown as they can better capture the diverse experiences and preferences of the wider public, and thereby legitimise future regulation.⁵⁰

Nowhere are deliberative processes more applicable than in the realm of artificial intelligence. Yoshua Bengio, one of the world's leading experts on artificial intelligence, has warned that if not properly regulated, artificial intelligence:

*... could give unprecedented power to those who control it, whether individuals, corporations, or governments, threatening democracy and geopolitical stability ... In the extreme, a few individuals controlling superhuman AIs would accrue a level of power never before seen in human history, a blatant contradiction with the very principle of democracy and a major threat to it.*⁵¹

It will take active design choices and a great deal of political will for AI to serve democratic purposes. Technocratic solutions and input are not enough. Ordinary citizens must be provided the opportunity to contribute to the regulatory decisions around AI. Using deliberative processes to inform AI regulation would offer a path towards this goal.

Many companies, such as Meta, Google DeepMind, OpenAI, and Anthropic, that are developing AI technologies, particularly generative AI, have begun exploring ways to use deliberative democracy principles and mechanisms to inform their work.⁵² This effort is an important counterbalance to capitalist imperatives and impulses driving AI development and deployment.⁵³

It can also be a two-way proposition. Not only can deliberative processes inform better and more legitimate AI regulation, but AI can also help power citizens' assemblies, panels, and other consensus mapping projects.⁵⁴ Pol.is is one such tool.⁵⁵ Developed in the United States but used globally, its machine learning technology is used to map people's views on a topic and identify areas of consensus.

AI is already being used to optimise engagement on social media platforms by using recommender systems to make predictions about which posts are more

likely to generate engagement and then prioritising them in information feeds. But these recommender systems can also be used to develop “bridge-based” rankings to prioritise content that receives more positive feedback from those who would typically disagree, creating different incentives for online content creation and engagement.⁵⁶

Harvard public-interest technologist Bruce Scheier argues that AI will inevitably impact democracy, often in positive and novel ways. This includes by serving as “moderator, mediator, and consensus builder”, making deliberative processes more accessible and efficient. AI can also assist in sense making by synthesising and summarising diverse citizen input and educating citizens on complex issues, all of which can aid deliberative and participatory democratic processes.⁵⁷

Taiwan, a small and innovative democracy with a highly engaged and tech-literate citizenry, is an example of a country that has incorporated a combination of deliberative and participatory mechanisms in its policymaking processes.⁵⁸ Through the thought leadership of its first digital minister Audrey Tang and the development of the vTaiwan platform, the country has incorporated Pol.is to map out a “rough consensus” of the general public to help inform policy decisions.

Australia, too, has been experimenting with digital deliberative town halls. Research has shown them to be effective communication channels between constituents and representatives, improving representation and yielding more legitimate decisions.⁵⁹ In fact, deliberative processes have been found to be useful for engendering confidence in democratic mechanisms among populations that are the *most* distrustful of, disengaged from, and dissatisfied with government. Polling shows stronger support for citizens’ assemblies among the *less* politically engaged, the *more* politically dissatisfied, and those who hold negative views of representative democracy and political elites.⁶⁰

Taiwan, a small and innovative democracy with a highly engaged and tech-literate citizenry, is an example of a country that has incorporated a combination of deliberative and participatory mechanisms in its policymaking processes.

Platform design based on deliberative principles

The internet is a place for a multitude of voices — a limitless space for anyone to join and interact. In theory, this makes it an ideal place for the creation of collective knowledge, which can be used to advance the greater good. Yet, in practice, the digital sphere is more often a space that merely offers reaction or opinion, not deliberation, understanding, or the expansion of our collective intelligence.

The way some platforms are designed has contributed to the fracturing and coarsening of public debate. In addition to the spread of mal-information and disinformation at scale, recommender algorithms⁶¹ can limit citizens' exposure to diverse viewpoints and narrow the opportunity to engage productively with them. This impacts citizens' ability to access accurate information, essential for deliberation and decision-making in democracies.

The digital environment has also decreased the "epistemic" quality of information,⁶² in other words, how we know what we know. We increasingly form beliefs and come to conclusions through information we receive from sources such as search engines, social media platforms, and online forums, without understanding how they work or where that information comes from. Finding ways in which online communications platforms — our de facto public square — can overcome these obstacles will be critical for democratic safeguarding.

Regulating or incentivising digital design based on deliberative democratic principles can help address these challenges. The quality of the digital public square is highly dependent on platform *design*, which can either encourage useful interactions that support democracy or do the opposite.⁶³

To illustrate the type of platform design beneficial to democracy, it is useful to look at Wikipedia, the world's largest online reference site that anyone can edit. Wikipedia encourages citizen engagement and does so in ways that improve the epistemic quality of the content, increasing exposure to diverse information and viewpoints.

Wikipedia has emerged as a space where self-governance and decision-making around entries are grounded in civil deliberation that seeks consensus, a key feature of deliberative democracy.⁶⁴ Wikipedia is also a good example of how an online space can use deliberative democracy principles to deal with problem behaviour or settle disputes.

The quality of the digital public square is highly dependent on platform design, which can either encourage useful interactions that support democracy or do the opposite.

One study that examined Wikipedia also found that the platform's design and governance contributed positively to users' knowledge and discourse because it was deliberative in nature. Even though Wikipedia remains susceptible to the malign posting of false information, is dependent on a small percentage of highly engaged editors,

and has a reputation for not always being accurate, the study found that its collaborative editing model increased diversity, mitigated bias, promoted legitimacy, and generally enhanced collective understanding. Its deliberative model also produced positive contributions to democratic processes.⁶⁵ Other wikis and forums that are developed collaboratively by a community of users can pay similar democratic dividends.

Conclusion

The challenges to democracy in the digital space are myriad, and the solutions all involve complex trade-offs and present their own limitations on democratic rights and civil liberties. Consideration of solutions involves weighing up competing values and rights (i.e. freedom vs equality, security vs liberty, privacy vs transparency or fair use).

There is increasing awareness of digital threats to democracy, and less complacency about online harms. There is also greater buy-in for deliberative democracy principles among both the general public and elected decision-makers. There is a realisation that deliberative democracy can help address the weaknesses of representative democracy and the crisis of legitimacy facing democratic decision-making. Some even argue that the world is entering a “new wave” of deliberative democracy.⁶⁶

But while deliberative democracy is gaining acceptance, adoption of its principles in the digital sphere still faces hurdles. The primary challenge is the economic logic driving the development of digital technologies, which does not factor in the protection of democracy, or indeed the protection of other social and public goods. In fact, it undermines them. Yet there are incentives that may push companies and governments to embrace deliberative democracy principles. They include: reputation; the need to spread risk for major decisions; consideration of competing values; the need to increase the legitimacy of decision-making; and to work around the slow pace of government regulation to ensure both competitiveness and safety.

Deliberative democracy is a model that can help citizens, governments, and tech companies work through competing values and trade-offs in a way that increases the legitimacy of decisions. Incorporating the principles and practices of deliberative democracy in policy formulation, decision-making, and platform design will produce better ways of addressing the digital challenges to democracy.

Notes

- 1 Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Concerns about Democracy in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center, 21 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>.
- 2 Adrian Shahbaz, “Rise of Digital Authoritarianism”, *Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism*, Freedom House, Report, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.
- 3 E-democracy is defined as the use of information and communications technology to increase and enhance citizen participation in democracy and increase government efficiency and transparency.
- 4 Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, Lisa Oswald, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ralph Hertwig, “A Systematic Review of Worldwide Causal and Correlational Evidence on Digital Media and Democracy”, *Nature Human Behaviour*, Volume 7, 2023, 74–101, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>.
- 5 Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Concerns about Democracy in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center, 21 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>.
- 6 Axel Bruns, “From ‘the’ Public Sphere to a Network of Publics: Towards an Empirically Founded Model of Contemporary Public Communication Spaces”, *Communication Theory*, Volume 33, Issue 2–3, May–August 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad007>.
- 7 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962.
- 8 “Habermas’ Public Sphere”, Part II, Chapter 17, in *Media Studies 101: A Creative Commons Textbook*, (Victoria, BC: BC Open Textbook Collection, 2018), 42–44, http://solr.bccampus.ca:8001/bcc/file/e700f1ca-aadb-481c-a30f-180cbf2eb80c/1/Media-Studies-101-1540433146._print.pdf.
- 9 W Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions”, *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 33, Issue 2, April 2018, 122–139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>.
- 10 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (Profile Books, 2019).
- 11 Nathalie Maréchal, “The Future of Platform Power: Fixing the Business Model”, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 32, Issue 3, July 2021, 157–62, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-future-of-platform-power-fixing-the-business-model/>.
- 12 James Williams, “Democracy Distracted”, *RSA Journal*, Volume 163, No. 4 (5572), 2017–18, 26–31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26798368>.

- 13 John Laidler, “High Tech is Watching You”, *The Harvard Gazette*, 4 March 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy/>.
- 14 Peter Königs, “Government Surveillance, Privacy, and Legitimacy”, *Philosophy and Technology*, Volume 35, No. 8, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00503-9>.
- 15 Michaela Padden, “The Transformation of Surveillance in the Digitalisation Discourse of the OECD: A Brief Genealogy”, *Internet Policy Review*, Volume 12, No. 3, 2023, <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/transformation-of-surveillance-in-digitalisation-discourse>.
- 16 Lydia Khalil, *Digital Threats to Democracy Dialogue Summary Report*, Lowy Institute, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 1 June 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/digital-threats-democracy-dialogue-summary-report>.
- 17 Samantha Bradshaw, Hannah Bailey, and Philip N. Howard, *Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Social Media Manipulation*, Oxford Programme on Democracy and Technology, (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2021), <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/industrialized-disinformation/>.
- 18 Rene Diresta, “How Bots Ruined Clicktivism”, *WIRED*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/how-bots-ruined-clicktivism/>.
- 19 Lydia Khalil, *Digital Threats to Democracy Dialogue Summary Report*, Lowy Institute, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 1 June 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/digital-threats-democracy-dialogue-summary-report>.
- 20 Melissa-Ellen Dowling, “Foreign Interference and Digital Democracy: Is Digital Era Governance Putting Australia at Risk?”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 57, No. 2, January 2022, 113–128, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10361146.2021.2023093>.
- 21 Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Concerns about Democracy in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center, 21 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>.
- 22 Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Concerns about Democracy in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center, 21 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>.
- 23 Neil Richards and Woodrow Hartzog, “The Pathologies of Digital Consent”, *Washington University Law Review*, Volume 96, Issue 6, 2019, https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol96/iss6/11.
- 24 Nicolas Suzor, “Digital Constitutionalism: Using the Rule of Law to Evaluate the Legitimacy of Governance by Platforms”, *Social Media and Society*, July–September 2018, 1–11, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305118787812>.
- 25 Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Concerns about Democracy in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center, 21 February 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>.

- 26 Lyn Carson and Stephen Elstub, “Comparing Participatory and Deliberative Democracy”, newDemocracy, Research and Development Note, 21 February 2019, <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RD-Note-Comparing-Participatory-and-Deliberative-Democracy.pdf>.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Martin Carcasson and Leah Sprain, “Key Aspects of the Deliberative Democracy Movement”, *Public Sector Digest*, Summer 2010, www.libarts.colostate.edu/cpd/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/01/carcasson-key-aspects-of-deliberative-democracy.pdf.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Lyn Carson and Stephen Elstub, “Comparing Participatory and Deliberative Democracy”, newDemocracy Research and Development Note, 21 February 2019, <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RD-Note-Comparing-Participatory-and-Deliberative-Democracy.pdf>.
- 31 Nicole Curato, et al, *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features*, (Bristol University Press, 2021).
- 32 “The Citizens’ Assembly”, <https://citizensassembly.ie/overview-previous-assemblies/>.
- 33 Dimitri Courant, “Citizens’ Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an ‘Irish Model’ for Deliberative Democracy”, *Frontiers in Political Science*, Vol. 2, 8 January 2021, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2020.591983/full>.
- 34 Celina Souza, “Participatory Budgeting in Brazilian Cities: Limits and Possibilities in Building Democratic Institutions”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1 April 2001, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/drivers_urb_change/urb_governance/pdf_part_b_udg/IIED_Souza_Budgeting_Brazil.pdf.
- 35 “What is Deliberative Polling?”, Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab, <https://deliberation.stanford.edu/what-deliberative-pollingr>.
- 36 “German-Speaking Community of Belgium Becomes World’s First Region with Permanent Citizen Participation Drafted by Lot”, Foundation for Future Generations, 26 February 2019, https://www.futuregenerations.be/files/documents/news/20190226_dgpermanent_citizensassembly_pressrelease.pdf.
- 37 “Local Government Act of 2020”, Victoria State Government, <https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/council-governance/local-government-act-2020>.
- 38 Casey Newton, “To Build Trust, Platforms Should Try a Little Democracy”, *Platformer*, 15 June 2022, <https://www.platformer.news/p/to-build-trust-platforms-should-try>.
- 39 Simone Chambers and John Gastil (eds), “Special Issue: Deliberative Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere”, *Political Studies*, Vol. 69, Issue 1, February 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/psxa/69/1>.
- 40 Jason Pielemeier, “Disentangling Disinformation: What Makes Regulating Disinformation So Difficult”, *Utah Law Review*, Vol. 2020, No. 4, July 2020, <https://dc.law.utah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1266&context=ulr>.

- 41 Matthias C. Kettermann and Martin Fertman, “Platform-Proofing Democracy”, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, May 2021, <https://shop.freiheit.org/#!/Publikation/1084>.
- 42 “Social Media Councils: One Piece of the Content Moderation Puzzle”, Article 19, 12 October 2021, <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A19-SMC.pdf>.
- 43 David Kaye, UN General Assembly, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression”, United Nations, A/HRC/38/35, 6 April 2018, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/38/35.
- 44 Atlantic Council DFRLab, “#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection”, *Just Security*, 10 February 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.
- 45 Heidi Tworek, “Social Media Councils” in *Models for Platform Governance: A CIGI Essay Series*, (Waterloo, Canada: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2019), 97–102, https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/Platform-gov-WEB_VERSION.pdf#page=100
- 46 Oversight Board, <https://www.oversightboard.com>.
- 47 David Wong and Luciano Floridi, “Meta’s Oversight Board: A Review and Critical Assessment”, *Minds and Machines*, Vol. 33, June 2023, 261–284, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11023-022-09613-x>.
- 48 Aviv Ovadya, “Meta Ran a Giant Experiment in Governance. Now It’s Turning to AI”, *Wired*, 10 July 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/meta-ran-a-giant-experiment-in-governance-now-its-turning-to-ai/>.
- 49 John S. Dryzek and Aviezer Tucker, “Deliberative Innovation to Different Effect: Consensus Conferences in Denmark, France, and the United States”, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 68, No. 5, September–October 2008, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25145674>.
- 50 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.
- 51 Yoshua Bengio, “AI and Catastrophic Risk”, *Journal of Democracy*, September 2023, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/ai-and-catastrophic-risk/#author>.
- 52 Aviv Ovadya, “Meta Ran a Giant Experiment in Governance. Now It’s Turning to AI”, *Wired*, 10 July 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/meta-ran-a-giant-experiment-in-governance-now-its-turning-to-ai/>.
- 53 Kevin Roose, “AI Belongs to the Capitalists Now”, *The New York Times*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/22/technology/openai-board-capitalists.html>.
- 54 Alex Parsons, “Digital Tools for Citizens Assemblies”, mySociety Research, 27 June 2019, <https://research.mysociety.org/publications/digital-tools-citizens-assemblies>.
- 55 Pol.is, “Input Crowd, Output Meaning”, <https://pol.is/home>.

- 56 Luke Thornburn and Aviv Ovadya, “How to Redesign Social Media Algorithms to Bridge Divides”, *The Conversation*, 28 October 2023, <https://theconversation.com/how-to-redesign-social-media-algorithms-to-bridge-divides-216321>.
- 57 Bruce Schneier, “Ten Ways AI Will Change Democracy”, Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, 6 November 2023, https://ash.harvard.edu/ten-ways-ai-will-change-democracy?admin_panel=1.
- 58 Audrey Tang, “A Strong Democracy Is a Digital Democracy”, *The New York Times*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/opinion/taiwan-digital-democracy.html>.
- 59 Nardine Alnemr, et al, “Advancing Deliberative Reform in a Parliamentary System: Prospects for Recursive Representation”, *European Political Science Review*, 25 October 2023, 1–18, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-political-science-review/article/advancing-deliberative-reform-in-a-parliamentary-system-prospects-for-recursive-representation/84D967605CBC23BA5D61C0DAF9388A5B>.
- 60 Jean-Benoit Pilet, et al, “Public Support for Deliberative Citizens’ Assemblies through Sortition: Evidence from 15 Countries”, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 28 May 2022, <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1475-6765.12541>.
- 61 Australian Government, E-Safety Commissioner, “Recommender Systems and Algorithms – Position Statement”, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/tech-trends-and-challenges/recommender-systems-and-algorithms>.
- 62 Boaz Miller and Isaac Record, “Justified Belief in a Digital Age: On the Epistemic Implications of Secret Internet Technologies”, *Episteme*, Vol. 10, Special Issue 2, June 2013, 117–134, <https://philarchive.org/archive/MILJBI>.
- 63 Katharine Dommett and Peter J. Verovšek, “Promoting Democracy in the Digital Public Sphere: Applying Theoretical Ideals to Online Political Communication”, *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, Vol. 28, Issue 4, 16 September 2021.
- 64 Laura Black et al, “‘Wikipedia is Not a Democracy’: Deliberation and Policy-Making in an Online Community”, (paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, Montreal, Canada, 21 May 2008), <https://www.cs.cornell.edu/~danco/research/papers/democracy-black-ica2008.pdf>.
- 65 Nathaniel J. Klemp and Andrew T. Forcehimes, “From Town-Halls to Wikis: Exploring Wikipedia’s Implications for Deliberative Democracy”, *Journal for Deliberative Democracy*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 20 September 2010, <https://delibdemjournal.org/article/id/380/>.
- 66 Claudia Chwalisz, “A New Wave of Deliberative Democracy”, Carnegie Europe, 26 November 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/26/new-wave-of-deliberative-democracy-pub-80422>.

About the author



Lydia Khalil

Lydia Khalil is a Research Fellow on Transnational Challenges at the Lowy Institute. She manages the Digital Threats to Democracy Project.

Lydia has spent her career focusing on the intersection between governance, technology and security. She has a broad range of policy, research and private sector experience and has a professional background in international relations, national security and strategic intelligence analysis, with a particular focus on terrorism and other forms of political violence.

Lydia is also an Senior Research Fellow at Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute, where she is the co-convenor of the Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network. Lydia is a research member of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) where she leads the Crisis Points project on the intersection of disasters, extremism and disinformation. She serves as an editorial board member of the academic journal *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

Lydia has held previous appointments as an international affairs fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Macquarie University. She has previously served as an adviser with the US Department of Defense and as a senior policy and intelligence adviser to the Boston Police Department. She has also worked as a senior counter-terrorism and intelligence analyst for the New York Police Department.

Lydia is a frequent media commentator and has published widely in both popular and academic publications on her areas of expertise. She holds a BA in International Relations from Boston College and a Master's in International Security from Georgetown University.

She is the author of the book *Rise of the Extreme Right: The New Global Extremism and the Threat to Democracy* (Penguin, 2022).

LOWY INSTITUTE