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DEMOCRACY TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

— JEREMY CLIFFE

The early years of the internet were marked by a profound optimism about the liberating and democratizing potential of new digital technologies as tools for greater human connection and civic interaction. Yet over the subsequent decades that optimism has curdled into a skepticism—often well-founded—about their impact as the scourges of disinformation, polarization and fragmentation have taken hold on political systems around the world. Meanwhile that same period has revealed the failures of many conventional methods of democracy promotion, including ones using the top-down exercise of hard or soft power. This is what makes democracy-enhancing technologies essential: new applications of cutting-edge digital developments that once more harness these to the cause of open and pluralistic political systems, in manners widely illustrated through the Tech4Democracy Global Entrepreneurship Challenge.

“Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped with barbed wire. It wafts across the electrified, booby-trapped borders. [...] The Goliath of totalitarian control will rapidly be brought down by the David of the microchip.”

— RONALD REAGAN, 13 JUNE 1989

“We must shape the rules that will govern the advance of technologies and the norms of behavior in cyberspace, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, so they are used to lift people up, not used to pin them down.”

— JOE BIDEN, 19 FEBRUARY 2021

WHAT ARE DEMOCRACY-AFFIRMING TECHNOLOGIES?

More separates the above two quotes by US Presidents than time alone. The first was delivered in a speech in London five months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a time of growing confidence in the march of democratic systems of society and government. President Ronald Reagan’s faith in the “David of the microchip” spoke of the prevailing optimism about the role technology would play in that march as the computing revolution took off.

The second quote, made by President Joe Biden to the 2021 Munich Security Conference in the shadow of the January 6 storming of the Capitol, captures democracy’s struggles three decades on and the widespread concerns that the flourishing of new technologies in that period have, as the President put it, “pinned people down”. The relationship between democracy and technology has proven more conflictual than many hoped and expected at the end of the Cold War.



Yet things do not have to be this way. Technology is not some exogenous force imposed on humanity from on high. From the dawn of time to today it has always been human, and only as good and bad as the humans who created and used it, a truth that applies just as much to cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence (AI) today as it did to the very first stone tools at the dawn of humanity. Our distant ancestors could use their sharpened rocks to exclude, attack and oppress, or to hunt for food, build shelters and protect the community from predators. Likewise, whether the latest technology today harms or serves humanity is up to us.

And so it is with the democracy-technology nexus. As Dr Eric Lander, President Biden's Science Advisor, argued in December 2021:

"It's not a guarantee that any given technology will support democratic values. It takes constant vigilance, and constant commitment; we, the people, have to make sure that technology is developed responsibly and used responsibly. That is our solemn obligation."

He was speaking at the launch of the International Grand Challenges on Democracy-Affirming Technologies, of which this report is one part.

That solemn obligation is a collective one. It falls to policymakers and politicians, yes, but also to academics and technologists, business people and entrepreneurs, journalists and teachers, campaigners and ordinary citizens. The quest to recognize, promote, and advance "democracy-affirming technologies" belongs to all of us. We all have a responsibility to help reconcile technology and democracy—those formidable twin forces of global human advancement—and bring them back into alignment.

This responsibility calls for democracy-affirming technologies that, as Irene Blázquez-Navarro puts it in Foreword to this report, are "intentionally designed, developed, and deployed to actively promote and uphold a set of fundamental values, principles, and rights throughout their existence [including] the right to liberty and personal autonomy, the protection of privacy and private data, the principles of inclusion and equitable access, the dissemination of truthful information, fostering citizen tech critical thinking, the utilization of technology to enhance legislative bodies, ensuring participation in free elections, upholding the separation of powers, adhering to the principle of legality, and safeguarding the rule of law."

Before moving onto specific examples of these, it is worth briefly dwelling on the specific elements of this definition. Democracy-affirming technologies are "intentionally designed, developed, and deployed": they are in other words a function of deliberate efforts rooted in the agency of individual technologies, academics, thinkers, businesspeople, and policy-makers. They must "actively promote and uphold" the things listed: so these technologies must by definition demand and encourage from their providers and users behaviors consistent with the interests of those values, principles and rights. And Blázquez-Navarro stresses "throughout their existence": they must not be prone to manipulation or exploitation by forces opposed to those interests.

Readers will notice that this definition breaks with assumptions of the values-neutrality of technology and the inevitability of its escaping the bounds of human agency. That is what makes the idea of democracy-enhancing technologies so radical and so necessary. It is also what dictates the next steps: to popularise the idea and provide and promote real-world examples. All of which brings us to the Tech4Democracy Global Entrepreneurship Challenge.

One of the International Grand Challenges launched by the White House and State Department in late 2021, the Tech4Democracy Global Entrepreneurship Challenge is a collaboration with IE University. It provides a rich seam of examples of technology-affirming technologies bringing the above definition to life.

The Challenge has comprised five continental Venture Days at which a shortlist of start-up and scale-up firms (drawn from hundreds of applicants) have pitched their innovations in fields such as responsible AI and machine learning, fighting misinformation, as well as advancing government transparency and the accessibility of government data and services.

The first Venture Day took place at IE University in Madrid on 28 June 2022, with New Zealand's then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern as keynote speaker. It was won by Citibeats (Spain), which uses ethical big data, natural language processing and machine learning to inform policymaking. Then the Challenge traveled to Bogotá on 10 October, where prizes went to EVoting (Chile), a startup using cryptography to secure in electronic voting systems, and Matters Lab (USA, Taiwan and Hong Kong), which has developed a Web3 social networking system that substitutes algorithms with human curation. Then it continued to Silicon Valley and Stanford University for the North American stage on 29 November and a keynote address by USAID administrator Samantha Power. Victory there went to Atlos (US), an open-source platform enabling investigators of human rights violations to catalogue and geo-locate eyewitness reports and draw on a community of peers to review them.

Early 2023 brought the two final Venture Days and the global final. On 2 March startups from India, Indonesia, Nepal and New Zealand competed in New Delhi, with victory in that Asia-Pacific round of the Challenge going to Right2Vote, an Indian mobile-based voting platform that allows organizations to create and manage their own elections. The fifth Venture Day in Cape Town on 7 March was won by Trustur, from FloodGates Limited (Ghana), which provides users with a verifiable and secure digital identity and promotes inclusion by simplifying access to government and other services.

The five finalists converged in Washington, DC, at an event on 28 March on the sidelines of President Biden's Summit for Democracy and addressed by US Acting National Cyber Director Kemba Walden. Assessing each democracy-affirming technology for its contributions democratic values, technological innovation, viability, scalability, and interest for potential investors, as well as the experience, knowledge, skills, and diversity of teams, the jury panel crowned EVoting from Chile the global champion for its remarkable innovations in the field of secure and trustworthy electronic voting.

The legacy of Tech4Democracy Global Entrepreneurship Challenge is a rich seam of examples of democracy-enhancing technologies in action; technologies that in the words of Tarun Chhabra, Senior Director for Technology and National Security on the US National Security Council, "advance the values of privacy, transparency, accountability, and access to information".

They are a living, vital rebuke to the fatalistic voices of despair about the relationship between democracy and technology—and a reminder that technology is ours to shape for the good of humanity, in a world where that reminder is urgently needed.



THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

At the end of the Cold War and the years immediately afterwards, that reality was widely taken for granted. It was a time of Western hubris. Not only had the US prevailed over its Soviet superpower rival, but the liberal democratic model seemed to be spreading around the globe. Central and Eastern European states once under Soviet control were turning to the West. Dictatorships had fallen, or were falling, in regions like Latin America and south-east Asia. Accelerating globalization promised surging growth and better living standards raising up all, with prosperity strengthening democracy and democracy in turn creating a yet-better environment for innovation and growth. As the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously wrote in 1992, the world appeared to have reached “the end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”².

This confidence was closely bound up with advances in consumer electronics and computing. The writer Evgeny Morozov has recalled how: “Technology, with its unique ability to fuel consumerist zeal—itsself seen as a threat to any authoritarian regime—as well as its prowess to awaken and mobilise the masses against their rulers, was thought to be the ultimate liberator”³. He even notes that Fukuyama entitled one of the chapter of his book “The Victory of the VCR”.

Utopian hopes drove the takeoff of the digital revolution in the 1990s and early 2000s. At a conference in New Mexico in 1996, civic activists, academics and teachers founded the International Association for Community Networking and adopted a series of principles for the internet age like “opposition to media concentration”, “support of diverse alternative and marginalized voices”, “access to government information”, and “commitment to strong democracy”⁴. The former US diplomat Mark Palmer in 2003 set out a plan for ousting the world’s 45 remaining dictators by 2025 by harnessing the internet as “a force multiplier for democracies and an expense multiplier for developers”⁵. Such visions rested on the assumption that it would democratize information, lower barriers within societies and provide new spaces for connection, accountability and cooperation that, it seemed, could only strengthen democracy.

Since then technology’s sophistication has advanced beyond the wildest dreams of the web-utopians; its exponential growth generally conforming to “Moore’s law”, the rule of thumb that states that the number of transistors on a dense integrated circuit doubles about every two years. Yet had their optimism been borne out, this would have been accompanied by a similar surge in the global fortunes of democracy. We would all be living in a democratic utopia. If anything, however, the opposite has happened.

The “strongman” style of leadership has taken hold in many major democratic states. Democratic societies are becoming more fractious and divided. The democratic model looks less functional, more fragile, and arguably less appealing. Most indices of global democracy show its rise peaking in the mid-2000s before dropping after the Great Recession of 2008. The American think-tank Freedom House produces an annual report listing the countries where democracy improved over the past year and those where it deteriorated. The last time more countries saw improvements than did deteriorations was 2005. Every year since then the world’s countries have been, in aggregate, in democratic decline⁶. Likewise, The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index fell in 2021 to the lowest level since its inception in 2006.⁷

Part of the explanation is geopolitical. Among the economies that have risen most since the Great Recession are a number of non-democracies, most notably China. It has thus come to represent an alternative model of state and society for other states, particularly in the developing world, and in certain cases (Myanmar, Venezuela, Angola) a sponsor of other autocracies.

The greatest geopolitical ally to authoritarianism has been not Chinese power, however, but the growing power of instability and chaos in a “G-Zero world” (to borrow a phrase from the American political scientist Ian Bremmer) in which no one country or even group of countries can establish order. Examples like Russia’s attacks on Georgia and Ukraine, Iran’s sponsorship of foreign militias, the atrocities of the Syrian, Yemeni, and Tigray wars, and the persecution of the Rohingya in Bangladesh all illustrate this “Age of Impunity” (that term coined by David Miliband, President of the International Rescue

Committee⁸) and how it is innately damaging to the often-fragile democracies of the countries concerned.

Yet important though such external factors have been, many of the threats to democracy originate within democratic societies themselves.

Democracy is not just about casting one's ballot in an election. It is also a dense eco-system of institutions and practices. Power must be contained by checks and balances, the rule of law, and norms concerning its use. Information must be free and debates pluralistic.

The Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue⁹ that the two most fundamental pillars of democracy are mutual toleration (“the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals”) and forbearance (“the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives”). This eco-system of institutions and practices has been weakened in recent years.

In America, for example, politics has become unhealthily polarized. Polling by Pew Research¹⁰ charted the shift between 1994 and 2014. Where at the start of that period there was substantial ideological overlap between Democrats and Republicans, by the end of it 92% of Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican. Partisanship had intensified into mutual demonization: 36% of Republicans saw the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being by 2014 (up from 17% two decades before) and 27% of Democrats felt that way about the Republican Party (up from 16%). The gap has widened significantly beyond 2014, to the point where today some two-thirds of Republican voters do not recognize President Biden’s legitimate election in 2020.¹¹

Prominent though the fractures in US democracy are, they are far from unique. From India to Brazil, from the Philippines to Poland, democracies are not failing suddenly but being eroded gradually under what the political scientists Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsburg have called “constitutional regression”¹². A study of over 4.8 million respondents in 160 countries by the Centre on the Future of Democracy at Cambridge University found that “across the globe, younger generations have become steadily more dissatisfied with democracy—not only in absolute terms, but also relative to older cohorts at comparable stages of life.”¹³

One major explanation for these shifts is that the globalization unleashed around the end of the Cold War has lifted living standards in much of the world but has disproportionately benefited those at the top, producing a degree of economic polarization (and often spatial polarization: the elite lives apart from the rest) that is dangerous to democracy. Another explanation is that collective institutions from religious bodies, political parties and trade unions to clubs, societies and mass newspaper readership have given way, to greater and lesser degrees, to fragmentation and individualism. Some elements of this are positive, implying greater personal freedoms and choice. But it also heightens the risk of polarization, declining mutual trust, and culture wars that collectively put the toleration and mutual forbearance at the heart of democracy at risk.



Nonetheless, technology is arguably a more fundamental explanation than either economic or social polarization. For one thing, it is a root cause of both. At the top of the income scale the internet revolution has increased the income premium associated with high levels of education; at the bottom of the income scale it has meant the automation of many manual and less-skilled jobs. And the internet revolution has also driven the shift to a more fragmented and individualistic society. If communal spaces are in decline, be they cafés or clubhouses or sites of worship, that is in no small part due to the switch from offline interactions and pastimes to online ones.

That might not be so detrimental to democracy if, as the techno-optimists had hoped, new online communal spaces enabled civil and healthy civic encounters with a range of fellow citizens. All too-often, however, the shift online has arrayed citizens into echo chambers of like-minded opinion and pushed them farther from the compromising and open-minded spirit of a robust democracy towards ever-more intractable attitudes. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement drive users towards more and more extreme content to maintain their attention: one study of 72 million comments on about two million online videos between May and July 2019 found users routinely migrating from milder “alt-lite” content towards more hardline “alt-right” content.¹⁴

Another, related form of polarization concerns facts themselves, without a commonly accepted basis for which constructive democratic debate is impossible. Speaking at the Venture Day in Madrid, then-Prime Minister Ardern (citing former German chancellor Angela Merkel) noted that where once people would see something on the nightly TV news and discuss it around the water cooler at work the next day, now they get their news online and the water cooler discussion concerns whether it is real or not. “If people are fiercely of the view that fiction is fact or fact is fiction, it is incredibly hard as leaders to build consensus in that environment,” she said. The Covid-19 pandemic brought alarming new illustrations of how quickly disinformation can now spread online, as myths and conspiracy theories about safe vaccines rippled around the world and undermined public health efforts.¹⁵

The technological explanation for democratic decline also concerns the quote at the start of this chapter. President Reagan’s assertion that the “David of the microchip” would defeat the “Goliath of totalitarian control” has in places proven correct (consider how social media has sustained the ongoing protests in Iran even in the absence of a leader or figurehead). But at least as often, and arguably more often, Goliath has been able to co-opt David for his own purposes. “Digital technology has also reinforced rather than undermined the hold on power of many non-democratic regimes”, wrote the political scientist David Runciman in 2018, citing such examples as Ethiopia and Venezuela:

“Far from being a decisive weapon in the hands of freedom fighters, it has become an essential tool for keeping tracks on them.”¹⁶

What, then, is to be done? Unfortunately, major international examples of how *not* to defend and advance democracy are more abundant than those of how to do so successfully. One product of the “end of history” hubris of the end of the Cold War was the belief that hard power could be used to topple tyranny and thus create the room for democracy to emerge. Such thinking was discredited by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and although the West’s support for Ukraine in defending itself against Russia’s full-scale invasion does show the place for hard power in defending democracy, a crucial distinction there is that Kyiv’s allies are supporting a sovereign democratic government rather than seeking to summon up democratic spirits in states where they do not yet command legitimacy.

An alternative to hard-power democracy promotion is of course the use of soft-power; funding political education initiatives and free media outlets, training election officials and supporting initiatives to boost participation. But the effectiveness of this approach is open to question. The Yale University political scientist Sarah Bush has written¹⁷ of research in Jordan in 2012, during which she attended a training workshop for the country’s weak political parties run by an international

NGO worker named Rana. “On the day of the workshop, several men showed up that were not on Rana’s participation list. The men sat quietly throughout the workshop, taking notes and observing... [T]he other participants became uncomfortable.” The men were from the Mukhabarat, Jordan’s omnipresent intelligence agency. Bush’s anecdote illustrates the limits of attempting to seed democratic norms from above in systems otherwise at odds with them.

Another mistake is treating the supporters of authoritarian politicians or causes as the enemy. In a world in which democracy can feel ever-more embattled, and where the forces of authoritarianism often seem to reinforce each other, this them-and-us mindset is understandable. But it is usually not a constructive foundation for the mutual toleration and forbearance that a resilient democracy requires. As the journalist Anand Giridharadas recently put it¹⁸, the pro-democracy movement needs to meet people where they are. He advocates “more space in movements for people who don’t fully get it, who don’t use the right terms, but their hearts are in the right place [and] are suspicious or nervous about some of the ideas they hear from portions of the pro-democracy side”. The problem, he adds, is that: “We’re often more interested as a movement in policing their entry, rather than saying, ‘Come on in.’”

These examples of what not to do provide a framework for future efforts at promoting democracy: the focus should be on using soft power within societies rather than hard power over whole societies, on bottom-up methods of encouraging democracy rather than top-down impositions, and on the underestimated art of persuasion rather than a them-and-us approach. All of which makes a compelling case for democracy-enhancing technologies, which meet each one of these points. Today’s technologies set the framework for societal and individual behavior. They codify the norms and standards of civic life. They are the arena in which persuasion takes place. And that is without getting into the realm of tomorrow’s technologies; of how developments like genuinely humanlike AI and robotics, lifelike virtual reality in the metaverse, and brain-computer interfaces will intensify all of these.

It is remarkable that the notion of democracy-enhancing technologies has until recently remained so under-explored where other less effective methods of democracy promotion have been allowed to consume such resources. Now is surely the moment to make up for lost time.



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

The pace of global democracy's deterioration in recent years, and challenges arrayed against it, can make for a daunting outlook. But there are grounds for optimism. The year 2022 was in many respects a good year for the cause. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine elicited a resilience from the Ukrainian people, in defence of their democratic sovereignty, that Vladimir Putin and others clearly had not anticipated. It also prompted the US and its allies to pull together and support Ukraine in its fight, again to a greater degree than might have been expected. Democracies around the world have defied the gloomier predictions about the impact of knock-on shocks to energy and other prices. One does not need to subscribe to the "End of History" hubris of the early 1990s to see how all this contradicts the fatalistic narrative of democracies hopelessly divided and unresponsive in the face of the authoritarian challenge.

On multiple fronts the strongman model has showed its weaknesses lately. Russia's military failures in Ukraine were clearly a product of poorly motivated troops, lacking accountability in the Kremlin, and a brittle system of power whose fragility was further revealed by the apparent coup attempt staged by mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in June. China's authoritarian system proved its failings as the government's dogmatic Zero Covid strategy failed and crumbled, and now faces major demographic challenges and rising youth unemployment. Those failures have set back the country's economic rise and removed some (if not yet all) of the shine from its

model in the eyes of the world. In Turkey, over-centralized leadership and the ensuing ill-judged monetary policies have led to economic instability and put Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the back foot politically—as his relatively narrow reelection in May showed.

The reverse side of these failures is an argument about the enduring strengths of the democratic model. When it works as it should, it allows talents to rise, holds the powerful accountable, and ejects them when they are no longer effective or wanted. It ensures multiple perspectives are heeded in collective decision-making. It can correct its course. Internationally it amounts to collaboration based not just on raw interests, but values too. When they work like that, democracies can be cohesive at home and responsible global citizens abroad.

In those truths lie the makings of a strategy for democratic fightback, one built on foundation of confidence in the democratic system and ideal, in societies that are open, pluralistic, and collaborative. Such a fightback means better access to information, more (and more civil) encounters between different points of view, open and responsive government, stronger individual rights, a culture of both enlightened skepticism and mutual respect, and one of mutual toleration and forbearance that always leaves room for the possibility that one is wrong and one's opponent is right. It means encouraging structures that reduce barriers and enable people to congregate, exchange and ideally reach and execute informed decisions as a society. A healthy democracy is a river, fluid and dynamic and constantly refreshed with new nutrients, not a stagnant pond.

The Global Entrepreneurship Challenge has modelled the sorts of technologies, and technological applications, that support this strategy—and provided a reminder that the verve and originality out there is up to the scale of the task, if only it can be harnessed. It shows that democracy-enhancing technologies can and must be at the heart of the democratic fightback, creating a digital eco-system that is friendly to democracy not because it has been imposed from above but because it has grown up organically through the choices and habits of citizens, and encouraged the better angels of human nature to prevail. All technology is human. Democracy-enhancing technology makes a virtue of that.



CONCLUSION

The alienation of technology from the cause of democracy is not inevitable: technology has always been a human construct, its moral quality a function of the humans who create and use it. Nor is the “democratic recession” of the past years inevitable. The past year especially has shown that while democracies can have their weaknesses, autocracies—with their concentrations of power and poor ability to course-correct—have significant vulnerabilities too. These twin realities should ward us off fatalism. Things can be fixed.

Democracy-enhancing technologies, drawing on the broadest possible scope of human agency and originality, can be a major part of the solution in reconciling once more those twin forces of human forces and turning the tide on illiberalism and authoritarianism.

ENDNOTES

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