



## FUTURE DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

This ongoing series from Technology for Global Security and the Center for a New American Security examines the elements and potential implications of digital threats to democracy over the next ten years.

# Digital Threats to Democracy: Comfortably Numb

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### **WHAT IS REALITY APATHY?**

Reality apathy is characterized by the perception that making a positive impact in the world is simply too hard. It is enabled and driven by the overload of negative content and false information present on digital platforms, which invokes feelings of numbness, disorientation, and indifference, eventually leading to a complete discounting of the world and the willingness to engage with it.

What is the first thing you do in the morning? Whether it be rolling over in bed to “snooze” the alarm one more time but instead getting sucked into Twitter and Facebook or plugging into your favorite podcast on your commute to work—most people utilize a digital platform for incorporating information gathering into their morning routine. Citizens today are inundated with negative and/or false information, due to a flood of freely available viral information and communications. Within the next ten years, a growing section of the population could encounter an overload of negative and potentially false information, driven by the virality that digital platforms enable, eventually leading to a comfortably numb reality.

### **WHAT'S THE POINT ANYMORE?**

As physical and digital life blur together, the virality of digital communications provides constant access and exposure to horrific information. The media industry competes to maintain consumer attention, which has established a 24/7 news cycle prioritizing sensationalist content—making each disaster seem worse than the last. In turn, the increased awareness of international crises without the resources to invoke change leads to a [learned helplessness](#). With digital platforms enabling a constant awareness of global humanitarian challenges and human suffering, how can individuals prioritize their limited time and tools to address them? The virality at which information and communication is diffused across digital platforms, combined with the constant presence of digital devices, means that we see everything but can actually act on very little.

Similarly, compassion fatigue results from viewing an excess of negative content, but being unable to help—leaving one feeling useless. Because news is now driven by what many have termed “[primarily extractive information economics](#),” there is a need for the industry to maintain people’s attention, usually by shocking consumers. As Elisa Gabbert [explains](#), “When war and famine are constant, they become boring—we’ve seen it all before. The only way to break through your audience’s boredom is to make each disaster feel worse than the last.”



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Intentionally false information (disinformation) and inadvertently misleading information (misinformation) produce and compound apathetic reality. Deepfake technology is becoming more robust, and the virality of communication enabled by social media platforms diffuses deepfakes widely and quickly. States' and lone actors' dis/misinformation campaigns drive a public perception of endemic political corruption, resulting in increased apathy during political cycles. As these online campaigns gain traction, users tend to re-share false and/or negative content that provokes emotional reactions like outrage. Whether this information is dispersed by inauthentic accounts or by unsuspecting users, the end result is similar. As Sarah Kreps and Miles McCain [describe it](#), "When false content comes to flood the internet, people may come to discount everything they read."

Information overload makes it difficult to identify salient facts. This overload is exacerbated by the tension between the democratic right to free speech and the utilization of speech platforms to distract and/or rally support for political competition, as it is often targeted at potential voters. An overflow of information can [leave citizens with](#) a "numb and disoriented" feeling as they "struggle to discern what is real in a sea of slant, fake, and fact." As a result, reality apathy sets in—leading to mistrust in media, public institutions, and elections themselves.

### *TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT*

Information flooding takes advantage of the democratic right to free speech and non-attributed content online, while capitalizing on the viral diffusion of negative and fake information across digital platforms. In the future, targeting citizens in democracies with overwhelming floods of information could threaten democratic participation and legitimacy. Consumers could become increasingly [apathetic](#) to targeted advertising and messaging, and an expert interviewed for this project noted that consumers could also become indifferent to industry abuse of power and authoritarian alignment. Other experts anticipated that democratic populations might give up on sorting between true and false content online and accept that their activism will not lead to social or humanitarian outcomes, which could decrease political mobilization, reduce voter turnout, and lead to a gradual decline in genuine public debate. Some interviewees even cited the potential for civil society to eventually lose the ability to deliberate, volunteer, and engage with social issues. While ominous, thinking about the plausible effects reality apathy could have on industry, government and civil society is necessary to prevent reality apathy from taking a hold of democracies.

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