Digital Threats to Democracy: Breaking News

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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.

UNDERSTANDING WEAKENED MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

Free and fair media is the backbone of a working democracy. Democracies with strong media institutions have media based on the principles of freedom of speech and expression, access equity, fair ownership, and individual privacy. However, in today's highly polarized environment, media institutions are weakening significantly in democracies across the globe. Weakened state institutions, coupled with the opportunities and challenges social media poses, have significantly undermined the media organizations that contribute to a thriving and functional democracy.

Looking to the next ten years, T4GS and CNAS identify the weakening of traditional media organizations due to limited funding, lack of trust, monopolization, and corruption as a key digital threat to democracies. The rise of reliance on social media as a news source further compounds this decline.
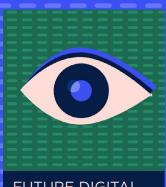
DRIVERS OF WEAKENED MEDIA INSTITUTIONS

Various indicators and drivers support the trend toward declining media institutions. For example, consumers rely on news from social media platforms due to the ease of connectivity that platforms provide, as well as the velocity and virality at which information flows through them. The research highlights that pre-existing user bias is reinforced by individual preferences for content that confirms preconceived opinions and biases and an advertising model that reinforces algorithmic bias. These algorithms likely further amplify the actions of computational propagandists, who purposefully erode public confidence in accurate online content and contribute to the spread of dis/misinformation. In the future, social media platforms will likely continue to maintain widespread popularity and serve as an alternative to mainstream media.

Traditional media institutions in the United States, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and other democracies will continue to face a decline in public trust fueled by deeply polarized societies and divided global movements, opaque media ownership, and corruption. Media moguls are monopolizing control of media by creating companies with distinctive agendas to push biased narratives and tailored messages to the public—corrupting media institutions from within. Another challenge traditional media faces is that their business model promotes advertising, while eliminating institutional knowledge and journalistic support.

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These issues are compounded by authoritarian and democratic leaders aligning themselves with a particular media institution and thus de-legitimizing other outlets. As Graham Brookie identifies:

> Not only the social media companies, but in institutions that we rely on for good information, whether that's the government or media organizations, we need to make sure that there is a business incentive across media that values objective information, that values informing people, rather than clicks.

DEMOCRACY SUFFERS WHEN MEDIA INSTITUTIONS ARE WEAKENED

History has demonstrated repeatedly that when media institutions are weakened, democracy suffers. Independent, free, and unbiased media will continue to be a key pillar of a functional democracy. When a society loses trust in the media and the public does not know where to find credible data and information, polarization increases. Further, other democratic institutions including freedom of religion and speech, economic opportunity, and the rule of law suffer.

As we look to the next ten years, weakened media institutions are likely to continue to fracture in democracies in nascent, emerging, and established democracies. Further, social media will continue to pose significant challenges to democracy. While there are great benefits for community, belonging, and connectivity, social media may continue to serve as a public square that shapes democracy in unpredictable ways moving forward. If unaddressed, we see two ongoing challenges:

1. Algorithmic bias overpowers the individual's ability for critical thinking, where the spread of dis/misinformation continues to thrive with a "hint of truth" in a sea of lies.
2. State and non-state actors use platforms to promote extremist and fringe ideologies that further fracture democracy.

HOPE FOR VIABLE MEDIA IN A POLITICIZED AND POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT

As individuals, societies, and global movements recognize the weakening of media institutions and complexities of social media, the public, governments, industry, and civil society institutions are beginning to rise to the challenge by coming together to support free and independent media. While this problem is multifaceted, individuals are "showing up" to exercise critical thinking, confront their biases, and do their part to limit the spread of dis/misinformation on social media. Continuing this effort will allow platforms to offer a public square for connection, virality of information, and community building. Finally, in this highly polarized environment, we are starting to come together to hear each other's perspectives and support one another, thereby serving as a foundation for a stronger media and a thriving democracy.

Vera Zakem is a Senior Technology and Policy Advisor with Technology for Global Security. She is a recognized leader, driving strategy at the intersection of global threats, policy, emerging technologies and innovation, and organizational strategy and operations.

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